

British Stages

BY DAVID FINGLETON

Opera as large-scale, lavish mass entertainment seems to have become the vogue in Britain. Following Egyptian entrepreneur Fawzi Mitwali's highly ambitious and surprisingly successful presentation of Verdi's *Aida* on the site of the Temple of Luxor in Egypt in May 1987, British pop impresario, Harvey Goldsmith, staged that same opera in London's vast Earls Court Stadium in the summer of 88 to audiences of 14,000 a night. I found this an altogether less satisfactory production of *Aida* in an unimaginative staging with lamentable sound. Nevertheless it sold out, so this year, from 5 - 11 June, Mr. Goldsmith and Mark McCormack of Classical Productions decided to use Earls Court again and to present Bizet's *Carmen*. But, learning from

last year's experience, he changed the theatrical format and decided to present *Carmen* in the round, even though that meant reducing his seating capacity to a mere 12,000 per performance.

To this end, he engaged talented young British director, Steven Pimlott, highly experienced opera designer, Stefanos Lazaridis, and top lighting man, David Hersey. This team was remarkably successful. With tiered and cushioned seats all around a huge circular stage area which supported a set measuring over 61 meters end to end and 30 meters side to side, there was, surprisingly, none of the feeling of remoteness, nor the poor sightlines, found in last year's *Aida*.

Pimlott and Lazaridis, with predictably meticulous and impressive lighting by

Hersey, had devised a staging of considerable intelligence and flair. The circular stage evoked a bull-fighting ring which, appropriately enough was used just for that — without the bulls — in the final act. Around this was a revolving outer stage, most strikingly used for paseados by the populace of Seville, walking in order to appear standing still. In Act III, the suspended rope stairway, swooping from the furthest corner of the roof down to the smuggler's mountain hideout on stage, made a brilliant coup de théâtre, and time and again there were similarly successful theatrical effects.

The sound, however, remained a problem. The noise that emanated from the loudspeakers way above our heads was crude and constricted. There was no

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■ The spring 1989 production of *The Ring* at the New York Metropolitan Opera (left), designed by Gunther Schneider-Siemssen and lit by Gil Wechsler, was operatic design at its best.

● The *Ring* (à gauche) produit par le New York Metropolitan Opera au printemps 1989, décors de Gunther Schneider-Siemssen et éclairages de Gil Wechsler, reste comme l'un des meilleurs décors du genre.

▼ Der vollständige *Ring* (links) in New Yorks Metropolitan Opera, wurde bei Gunther Schneider-Siemssen ausgestattet, mit Licht-Design bei Gil Wechsler. Die Inszenierung war ein hervorragendes Beispiel für Opernausstattung.