

# London Opera Centre

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If your taxi driver has grey hair ask for the old Troxy Cinema, Stepney, then sit back and listen to memories of one of the largest cine variety theatres of the thirties. Younger drivers need to be asked for "The London Opera Centre, Commercial Road"—the building's function from 1963 until next year.

On my first taxi ride I considered my new appointment as lighting consultant on all the Centre's productions and tutor to the stage management course—taking over from the editor. The first test came at Christmas 1975 with the first known London production of the 17th century opera "Alceste" by Lully.

Among the restrictions imposed by theatres on those who work within, lack of space must be very common, but at the Centre it is the opposite which becomes a problem, for the auditorium has been turned into one of the largest performing areas in England, 100-ft deep and 100-ft at its widest point with 60-ft to the roof.

These staggering dimensions are achieved by continuing the stage (still with grid, three revolves, orchestra and organ lift) over the stalls to the edge of the circle where a wall turns the rear stalls into Covent Garden's specialist paint shop—so big that full cloths can easily be spread out on the floor.

The audience is usually confined to the front circle since the rear is now wardrobe and lecture theatre accommodation, but there are still 600 seats.

I was the only member of the production team who had not previously worked in this cavern and their confidence was to sustain me over those dreadful moments when you really wonder if all those neat little drawings are actually going to do anything they're supposed to.

The sets were by David Myerscough-Jones, a senior BBC designer, and they made excellent use of the vast space. Undoubtedly a television background freed the designs from the possible inhibitions that a theatre designer might have suffered. They simply took the form of steps, ramps and rostra but covering an area 80 ft by 80 ft and reaching up to 15 ft from stage level, descending also below. It was a magical area, vast one moment and intimate the next and a tremendous lighting challenge physically as well as artistically. The director was the venerable Billy Chappel whose previous production, "The Fairy Queen", was lit by the editor\*. Billy directed from the

\**Fairy Queen* used the full 100-ft of depth from stage backwall to circle front which gave some splendid entrances. I also lit one of the Centre's earlier productions—a 1965 Gluck/Milhaud double bill for which we put the orchestra in the pit, the scenery on the centre of the three revolves and the audience where you would expect to find them. The London Opera Centre is certainly an adaptable opera house. The conventional apparatus of the operatic stage is undoubtedly essential for a permanent repertoire opera company, but for festivals or other "one-offs" give me a big space and some scaffolding—Ed.

stage itself—the journey "out front" taking 20 minutes—and thus only really saw the lighting at dress rehearsal; fortunately he liked what he saw.

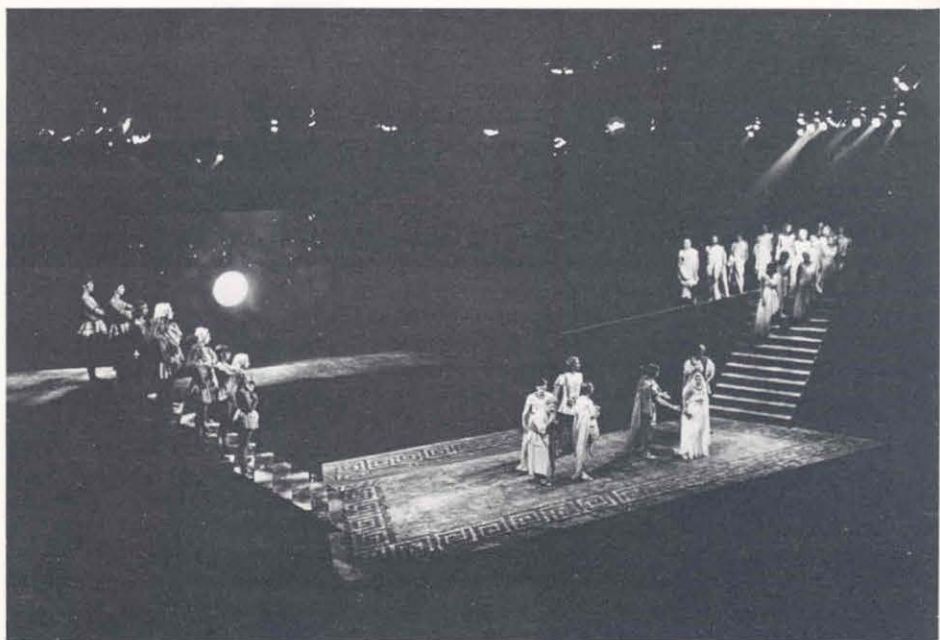
He kept the brief very simple. There was to be a backlit battle, some ships and a river, plenty of gobos, a moon and stars and a hell

scene and a storm for good measure. Just about every basic effect in the catalogue and I used all of them with glee.

At first the sheer size was daunting but the methodical one-spot-at-a-time planning soon cut the area down to size. Lighting was easier than I thought—simply because all



The London Opera Centre as used for rehearsals. One opera set on the auditorium floor and another behind the proscenium.



Alceste. (Photographs Reg Wilson)