www.thescenographer.com

Publisher Harman Publishing Ltd. - 1-5 Lillie Road, London SW6 1TX, UK Editor-in-chief/Art Director Paolo Felici Graphic Design Paolo Biagini - www.studiobiagini.com Contributors Santi Centineo, Martyn Hayes, Cameron Mackintosh, Adam Pollock, David Pountney, Isabella Vesco, Sue Willmington, Francesca Zambello Special Contributors Michael Lee, Olivia Temple (The Maria Bjørnson Archive - Redcase Ltd) Really Useful Group Ltd, Cameron Mackintosh Ltd DISTRIBUTION Europe Central Books - www.centralbooks.com USA - CANADA Disticor Magazine Distribution Services - www.disticor.com
Subscriptions subcription@thescenographer.com ©2002 The Scenographer Magazine (All rights reserved) Printed in Great Britain XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
All artistic material published is the sole property of the authors cited. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

4
Adam Pollock
The Life of an Artist

26
Isabella Vesco
From the House of the Dead

27
David Pountney
Maria Bjørnson at work on Janáček

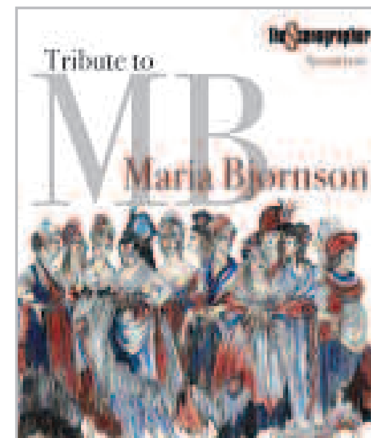
42
Martin Hayes
Working with Maria
on staging the original Phantom

48
Santi Centineo
The Macbeth of the Cube

58
Francesca Zambello
Maria Bjørnson's
last work and lasting legacy

theScenographer

October 2009
Special Issue
Tribute to Maria Bjørnson



Toussaint L'Ouvertoure
sketches by Maria Bjørnson

The Maria Bjørnson Archive is delighted to be involved in this special Tribute

The Maria Bjørnson Archive
17 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4QH

Maria's designs, sketches, research materials, cuttings library, models and reference works together with a newly established History of Costume Archive, can be consulted by appointment.

Monday to Friday 10.30-5.00
Tel +44 (0)20 7242 2231
www.mariabjornson.com
redlionsquare17@yahoo.co.uk

A personal tribute from *Cameron Mackintosh*

Occasionally in life a thought comes into one's head as if by magic and the result is something quite extraordinary. That was how Maria came to design *Phantom*. Almost immediately after Andrew Lloyd Webber mentioned the idea of doing a musical of Gaston Leroux's novel I felt that she was the only person who could bring this extravagantly theatrical story to life and make audiences believe in it. Uniquely, in my experience, Maria started to think about the world she was going to create even before Andrew had written the score and though the show is one of the most glamorous and beautiful ever staged it is also elegantly simple in its execution. We had wonderful fun working together thinking of how to make the grandiose traditions of 19th-century opera both engaging and real without sending it up.

Everyone who has worked with Maria has fallen under her spell and been amazed by her devotion and attention to detail. Even the first tryout of *Phantom*'s first act in Andrew's church at Sydmonton was complete with a real chandelier despite the stage being the size of a postage stamp. She cared as much about the entire production as her own work and unlike many original creative teams of long-running shows regularly went back to make sure that the show looked as good as it did on the opening night. I was lucky enough to work with Maria a second time on Stephen Sondheim's legendary Follies where, on the fairly constricted stage of the Shaftesbury Theatre, she once again conjured up the fabulous magic of a bygone theatrical era.

One cannot say of many people that they are irreplaceable but Maria is. There has been no-one like her and there is unlikely to be again. Her creations will live on forever, as will the memories of those of us who have been lucky enough to know her.

Cameron Mackintosh

MARIA BJØRNSON

The Life of an Artist

Adam Pollock

Where does it start? What makes a great designer? How much is it to do with genes and how much to do with upbringing? How much is it to do with luck, meeting the right person at the right time?

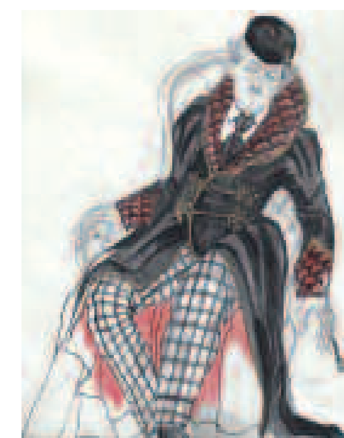
What makes a great designer?
In Maria Bjørnson's case it is hard not to think that the blood of her forebears and one particular relationship loaded the dice to fall the way they did. This brave and fascinating woman was born mildly epileptic with a cleft palate, and a stammer. Worse, she was illegitimate (a cruel social stigma in 1949), the child of a brief union between a rich Norwegian, Bjorn Bjørnson, and a young Romanian, Mia Prodan.

Bjørnson was the grandson of the Nobel laureate, the dramatist Bjornstjerne Bjørnson, a friend of Ibsen, and founder of the National Theatre of Norway. Prodan came from a family of Bucharest intellectuals, her uncle being the director of the Romanian National Theatre. Her life was riven by the war and its aftermath. Forced to work as a translator when her country was under Nazi occupation, she was posted to Denmark. From there she fled to Sweden, suspected of anti-Nazi sympathies. Thence she tramped through the snow to Norway, listed as 'counter-revolutionary' by now Communist Romania.

By 1948, she was stateless, but got to Paris hoping to study at the Sorbonne. Bjørnson, whose family had sheltered her in Oslo, followed her there, saying he had left his wife to marry Mia. She was in love with him and the inevitable happened. When she became pregnant he abandoned her. Penniless and suffering from TB, she somehow got to England with the baby Maria and begged help from the one Romanian she knew there, Ion Ratiu.

Ratiu was married to Elizabeth Pilkington, of the famous glassmaking family. She immediately gave shelter to the refugees, arranging for Mia to go to hospital where she remained for many months. In the years that followed Elizabeth Ratiu provided a home and home life for Maria on the numerous occasions when Mia was away either because of illness or later to earn a living abroad. But even when she was 'at home', she was usually not there at night, at first because she worked as a cleaning woman at the BBC and later, when her capabilities were discovered, broadcasting to Romania on the World Service. These disappearances of her mother marked Maria for life. She would rather work through the night than go to an empty bedroom.

The Gambler



The Gambler

The mother's strength of character, her fighting to survive and fierce ruthlessness modelled the child. Despite a desperate lack of money, Mia made sure that her child was shown as much of the cultural world as possible, adding to what she encountered with the wealthy Ratiu family. In the 'fifties it was still possible to go to the 'Gods' for a few shillings. Children got into most galleries for free. And Mia soon found Maria a willing disciple. When she had a day off she would sit Maria on the table and say, "Now we can either go to the sea or visit a museum". Maria would always chose the museum. But though she lived physically in England, the world that Mia brought her up in was what was then called 'continental'. Their first language was French.

Their lodgings overflowed with Romanian magazines. Their favourite café was one filled with Polish refugees. In a world restricted by poverty the Middle European mother reared a Middle European daughter. Maria would say that though her outside seemed cool and Norwegian, her inside burned Latin Romanian. She never saw herself as British though, after years of being stateless, she eventually did get a British passport. When Trevor Nunn asked her to design *Peter Grimes* she refused because the opera was 'too English', set in a world with which she had no affinity. Many only children invent their own fictional friend, but Maria clung to this fantasy until she was a teenager. The pencils and paper that Mia used to put by her bedside when she left her alone at night eventually led to life-size drawings, of young female 'friends'. These were seen by artist friends of Elizabeth Ratiu's brother who had

The Threepenny Opera

Toussaint l'Ouverture

a contemporary art gallery in London. Thanks to suggestions from Cecil Collins, Victor Passmore and Ceri Richards, Maria was sent first to the Byam Shaw School of Art and thence to the Central School of Art, then the best college for would - be scenographers.
At Central her teacher was the famous designer, Ralph Koltai, another Middle European. This was her first encounter with a real man of theatre. Among the many lessons he taught her she mentions learning that "scene changes are among the most satisfying things you can do in the theatre. They are often what sets the mood. How you arrive from one scene to another makes a huge impact". This idea was to bear fruit in *The Cunning Little Vixen*. "The thing about Maria," says Koltai, " is that she was not an innovator, but that she could do anything". There is a truth in this. Nevertheless her sets for *Donnerstag* at the Royal Opera House and *Macbeth* at La Scala, examples of this ability, seem to stand outside her preference for heightened naturalistic design. In 1971, she went to the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow. This was then a celebrated powerhouse where the particularly strong visual side was run by Philip Prowse who enrolled Maria after seeing her final showing of costume designs at Central. This was, as she said, "a wonderful chance". Working in a 'rep company' where one show quickly follows another means learning to re-use old flats and recycle old costumes, discovering how to make the right compromises and fight against the wrong ones. Above all it teaches you, in a way no design school can, your dependence not only on costume makers and scene painters (roles you may be filling yourself), but also fly men, LX technicians, and even stage doormen. Maria thought such an apprenticeship was the best way of getting started in design "though it can be lonely at the beginning". This neediness for friends was present all her life, but working in the theatre is a glue which holds people together and, for the lost soul, provides an instant like-minded family in which everyone is a vital cog. This is something that Maria recognised and enjoyed. Even when she was world famous she never pulled rank or became grand. There could be battles, rows and tears but these were there only for the sake of the show. She expected people to give their last drop of blood just as she did, but she always respected the givers so that they gave it gladly.
One of her favourite costume makers put it perfectly "She was totally un-snobbish and worked in utter humility". At the Citz she was lucky to be working together with Sue Blane, a friend from Central. "We bounced ideas off each other, which gave us the confidence to make mistakes and find our way." In these collaborations Sue tended to work more on the sets and Maria on the costumes. In time her style of drawing changed. Some of the very early designs have a 'giant' feel about them, filling the page like the teenager 'friends'. But slowly more characterful figures emerge. Those for *The Threepenny Opera* are lyrically drawn, conjuring up a whole world, rather than being simple costume designs. The drawings for *The Gambler* and *Hoffman* characters, in 1830 costume (Maria's favourite period) have an air of Daumier about them. But later, with the invention of the photocopier, just as success and pressures began to mount she started to collage faces onto her designs, often so well integrated that they look as if they have been drawn. She amused herself casting famous performers in the roles - Terence Stamp as Schlemil in *Tales of Hoffman* at the Opera House, or Gary Cooper in *Mahagonny*. But, as she said regretfully, her drawing slowly got "tighter and tighter". By the time she came to design *The Phantom of the Opera* lyrical drawing had vanished, though this did not affect the imaginative quality of what appeared in stage.

While at the Citz she met David Pountney, the young director working at Scottish Opera, also based in Glasgow. So began a relationship which was to produce over 25 productions, including the famous Janáček cycle for Welsh National Opera, though the first of these, *Kàt'a Kabanovà*, for the Wexford Festival, was co-designed with Sue Blane. Maria, however, was the driving force behind the set. For the first time the affinity of the Middle European designer with the Middle European composer became apparent.

All the Janáček collaborations were superb and some feel that *From the House of the Dead*, set literally in the ruins of a huge mansion, was the finest, but *The Cunning Little Vixen* was the most loved, and the most revived. This opera sparked with Maria's warm love of humanity, as well as her child-like sense of fun. Pountney told her that the opera was a "slice of life" and the rolling hillside Maria designed was exactly that. She called it "a slab". The transition from season to season was seamless. An animal crossed the stage dropping leaves from a carrier bag for autumn and the white silk that had covered the stage for winter was pulled below stage by moles for the arrival of spring.

In this production the humans were dressed in grey, while the animals were in colour. Maria decided she didn't want the birds to fly because this had been done so often. "I thought, why not put them in armchairs in the air so that they look like humans. The armchairs would be green with antimacassars, and have bags around where the birds kept their knitting." Pountney says these early shows had no grand intellectual ideas driving them: "We were simply doing it as young people and anyhow Maria was not a conceptualist". Graham Vick agrees: "She didn't dream on her own, but once the structure was in place she felt released and produced marvels". Hal Prince's brief to her for *Phantom* was simple: 'a black conjurer's box so that everything comes from nowhere'. After the visual cornucopia few of the audience notice that, at the end of the show, the cast take their bows in an empty black box. The box came from Prince, but the marvels it contained were all Bjørnson. She certainly thrived creating the grand spectacle often needed for opera, but was equally at home in straight theatre. However, although she was friends with many, she didn't always enjoy working with actors and found intellectual discussion with them difficult, perhaps feeling unequal because of her rather nasal voice due to her cleft palate. She was known to explode: "I hate actors. I never want to work with them again". The problem was that, unlike singers, actors usually have very definite ideas as to what their character would or would not wear, something which didn't go down well with someone to whom every last stitch of her design was sacrosanct. However it was a straight play which led to the show which would make her world famous. Her magical designs for *The Tempest* at Stratford

The Cunning Little Vixen

on Avon showed Prospero's island as a rocky beach dominated by a huge wrecked galleon. It was this production which lodged in the impresario, Cameron Mackintosh's mind. So when *The Phantom of the Opera* came along he felt that "Maria was the only person who could bring this extravagantly theatrical story to life". 'Extravagant' (in the best sense of the word) and 'theatrical' are two adjectives often associated with Maria. Vick agrees "She loved the sawdust and greasepaint aspect of theatre and was a victim of love of glamour". *Phantom*, which Maria started designing before there was a script, posed lots of problems, particularly because Her Majesty's Theatre has a shallow stage without enough room for the Garnier staircase. But in time, thanks to an inspired technical crew, this was achieved and peopled with dummies as the cast was too small for the spectacular effect Maria wanted for the masquerade sequence. The Opéra was, naturally, the main inspiration, with its lake in the basement. "What I loved was the big circular descent that was like going into the subconscious. I started with a straight staircase. From there I got the idea of the lantern with striations in it and from there we got the idea of the striations as a way of lighting the whole thing." The glamorous sinister set for the lake had another beginning. "I had seen a picture of Venice that had reflections in the water and that is where I got the idea of the candles." Maria, like many designers, was inspired by other artists (Munch and Escher for *Kàt'a*, Ingres for *Camille*). Perhaps the picture she remembered was actually the beginning of the Venice sequence in the Powell and Pressburger *Tales of Hoffman*, designed by Heine Heckroth. Part of the allure of the *Phantom* sets lies in how they draw the audience into them. Maria said that a set should always have a dynamic of its own, even without actors in it. "It mustn't just sit there like an empty box."

The international success of *Phantom* made Maria rich beyond her wildest dreams, but the move from pauper to millionairess was something she found hard to deal with. She never wanted to live a smart or glamorous life. It was glamour of a different sort that Graham Vick wanted for *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in Florence by Weill and Brecht. Italy had been suffering under its many leftwing local authorities from over-exposure to heavy-handed production of works by the playwright. Vick thought of a new slant that would appeal to the Maggio audience... Brecht plus the Bjørnson-forte glamour. A wall of acrid tenement blocks, filled with grim repetitive existences, gave way to the desert where the new city was founded , dominated by a vast cactus which burst into an orgy of bright green neon when *Mahagonny* became a place 'where you can do anything you like'. Round the cactus exploded a hideous technicolour eyeful of unrestrained contemporary consumerism, a riot of glamorous vulgarity.

There is a story about the cactus which gives a good indication of how driven this designer could be. She was going out for a meal with her friend, Ali Walker, who went to pick her up in her car at her house. There she found one of Maria's assistants inadequately modelling up the cactus. After the meal Ali dropped Maria back at her house. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" asked Maria. So they sat in the studio drinking coffee while Maria glared at the cactus. Eventually she said: "Its dreadful. I tell you what. Let's do it ourselves". The model cactus was finally finished at five in the morning.

Peter Brook talks about an ideal balance in the theatre. "In the theatre, if you are universal you risk being bland, and if you are specific you risk being too narrow. The trick is to bring in the human species without losing what makes it more than specific." This balance was something Maria always achieved, but particularly in *Mahagonny* where every one of the huge cast had a life of his or her own. The male chorus were dressed from a mountain of old Oxfam clothes, but the girls looking for the next whisky bar had every last bra strap designed and made for them. Allan Watkins, one of the few male costume supervisors she worked with, points out that Maria often took more trouble over women's costumes than over men's. As a woman she always felt 'second' and 'up against' male directors. In 1994, she experimented co-directing as well as designing a *Don Giovanni* with Dalia Ibelhauptaite and when she died she was working on three productions with another woman director, Francesca Zambello.

Classical ballet was an entirely new departure for Maria and *The Sleeping Beauty* is its greatest challenge. Her designs had a St Petersburg grandeur about them. But, and it was a big 'but', sets which would have been fine for an opera were not so for a ballet by Petipa. Anthony Dowell, the director of the Royal Ballet said: "I was a bit surprised when I saw the model but decided to go with it". This was a mistake. The set for the prologue was a dark explosion of Borrominiesque architecture which overwhelmed the dancers. It was almost as if Carabosse's curse had fallen on the christening before she arrived. There was nothing vertical anywhere and the strong diagonals of the set fought against the dancers' line. In this case Maria needed a strong guide in a discipline with which she was unfamiliar. The costumes however were gorgeous, appropriately inspired by Berain. In particular, the designs for the extra fairy story guests at Aurora's wedding tell us a lot about Maria's passionate research and the unbending intelligence she brought to

The Tempest

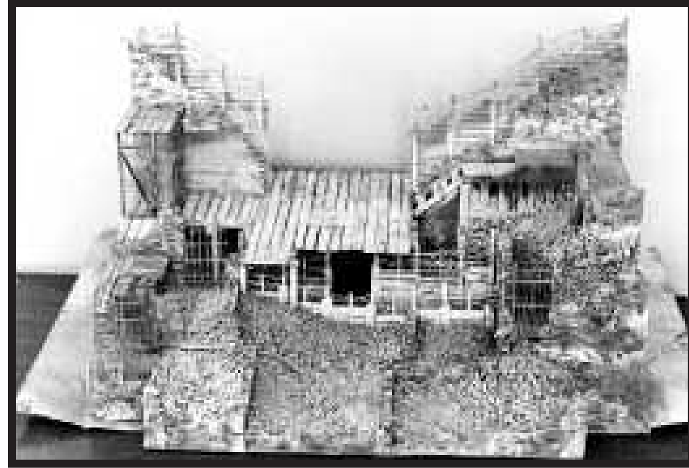
everything. During the last act, after the arrival of the proscribed characters from children's books, there is a mazurka for eight couples often danced by nameless courtiers. Maria decided that here was a chance for other fairy story figures to come to the party. She even provided them a grandstand to sit on once they had danced. She investigated which of them would be familiar to nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy. They mainly came from Perrault: Riquet de la Hoope, Grìseldis and the Marquis de Salusses, Peau d'Ane, and so on. Few designers would have worked so hard and so thoroughly on something so peripheral, with reference to stories that few of the audience would know.

The strength in her work came from a rigorous intellect, clear-sightedly analyzing a text or immersing herself in a score to get to the heart of it. As she wrote: "People think it's liberating to be able to do anything, but it's not. You have to find the dynamic from the text, not a fantasy idea you have. What you're trying to do is to hone yourself down, to reduce and reduce until you discover exactly what you're trying to resolve. Designing is about finding out what the problems are by asking the right questions. From these you move to the visuals". One of her great qualities was mixing fantasy and reality. She was never about pure escapism. Her mental toughness gave a bravery and daring to her work, full of that fighting energy she had learnt from her mother. She sacrificed everything to this, even refusing to take medication for her mild epilepsy, with fatal results because she had heard that this dulls the senses and she was afraid her work would suffer. Like many people working in the theatre she was terrified of not doing well.
As well as spectacular grandeur and grown-up sensual glamour, her work also showed love for the charm of dreamy childhood, mirroring perhaps what she had so longed for when young. But there is also a keen unsentimental eye for fun and the foibles of mankind. There is often wit, sometimes irony, but her work never lacked humanity and always enhanced a truth that touched so many. As she said: "I am absolutely certain who I am doing it for. I am doing it for the audience". ■

The Tempest

From the House of the Dead

From the House of the Dead

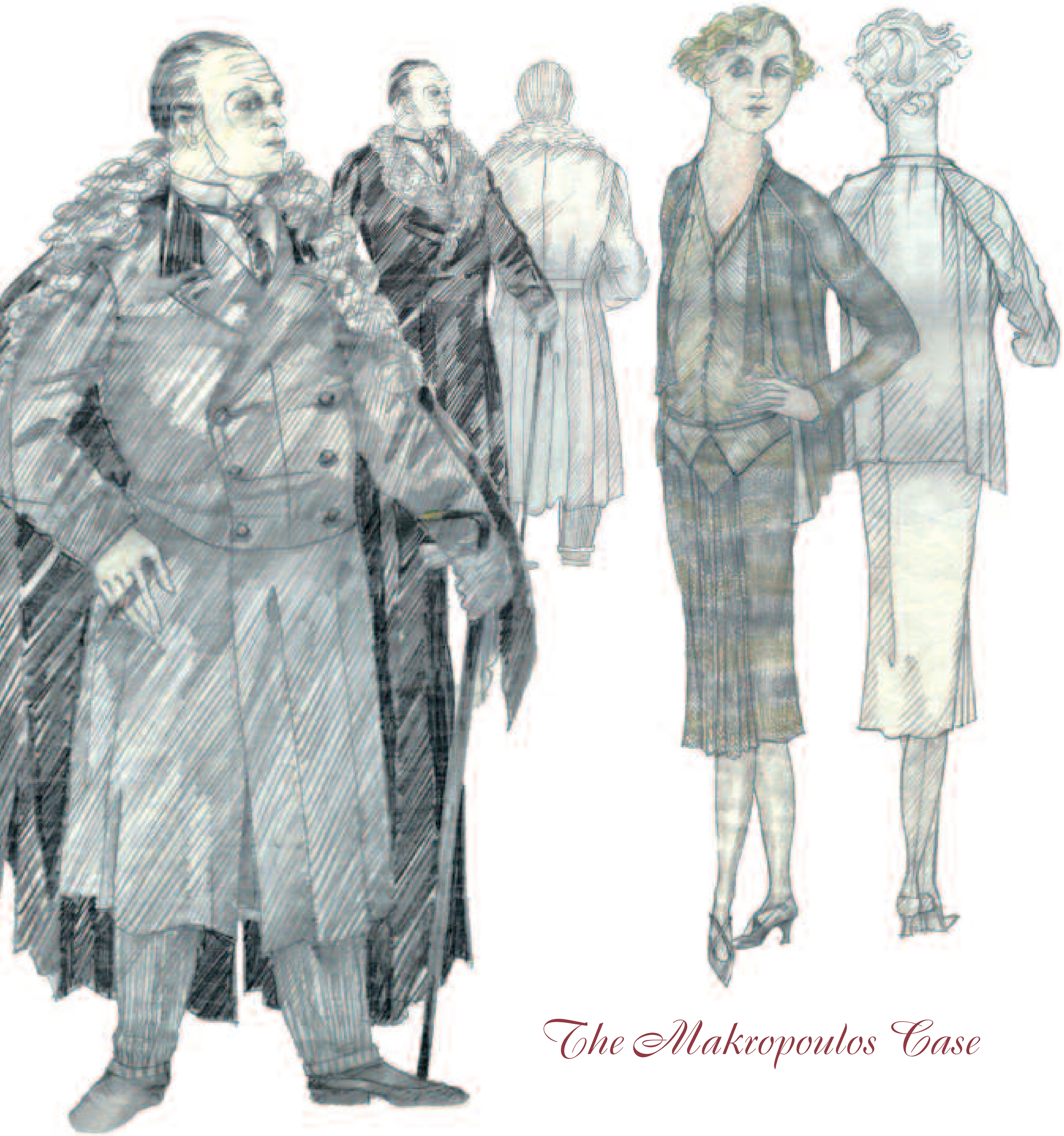


set models and construction

Isabella Vesco

An eagle at the theatre
From the House of the Dead

The production that was staged at the Teatro Massimo, and for the first time in Italy, bears the signature of a director long associated with the theatre of Janáček while the set and costumes are by the acclaimed scenographer, Maria Bjørnson. On the opening night in Palermo, the opera was staged in its original language with surtitles in Italian.
Maria Bjørnson is considered to be among the most inspired British stage and costume designers also highly acclaimed in Italy. At La Scala in Milan, in 1997, she designed an extraordinary *Macbeth* directed by Graham Vick; director and scenographer, in this case, created a clearly symbolic construction, a six-metre hollow cube, that represents a palace but also a prison of emotions. The famous cube, with its repositioning, rotations, and above all, with its mutating colours, is a great scenic invention.
Today we find Ms. Bjørnson, six years after her demise, at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo with a production that was originally staged in 1982 at the Welsh National Opera in Cardiff; the opera is directed by David Pountney, a veteran of the theatre of Janáček.
From the House of the Dead (Z Mrtvého domu) was the last opera by the great Moravian composer Leoš Janáček, who began composing it in 1926, based on the draft of a "prison diary" Notes *From the House of the Dead* (1860-62) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, knowing that this would prove to be his last musical composition. "This is an opera of dark drama, which is causing me much labour. I have the impression of descending ever lower, down to the furthest depths of the most miserable states of humanity. And it burdens me", wrote Janáček in November of 1927.
This is a dark, tragic opera, an allegory on 'freedom denied' steeped in the oppressive atmosphere of a forced labour camp, an opera that plays largely on the enigma of the crime and on the martyrdom inherent in deportation and imprisonment; a pièce without a story-line, without leading characters, built on a gallery of characters, the only thing they have in common is the fact of living the same condition of oppression in a Siberian *catorga* (penal colony).
From the House of the Dead was staged after the death of its composer, premiered in 1930 in Brno.
The director, David Pountney defines it as "a collective opera", [...] a microcosm of lives pieced together by the composer in a cinematic style, frames cut and spliced in a show that [...] keeps an organic unity because each cell forms a part of and develops the action".
Even though the opera is considered by many to be dramaturgically atonal, with no one character given predominance over the others, all of whom are considered 'equal', the pièce, not following a precise narrative structure, begins with the arrival of a new prisoner, Aleksandr Petrovi Gorjančikov, and concludes with his liberation. Even so, Gorjančikov is just one of the many detainees, no different from the rest.
There are four main storylines that characterize the entire opera: two regard the violence of dictatorial power, the others concern two murders – crimes of passion.
In order to better understand the stage design that Maria Bjørnson created for *From the House of the Dead* it helps to summarize the settings and the moods of the three acts that are staged without an interval. Ms. Bjørnson represented the Siberian prison hell by using the theatre's stage for one set. She designed a set that remained unchanged from beginning to end: the variations in time, place and mood are expressed solely in terms of the lighting effects. The prison camp is conceived as partially ruined while only the upper level is almost always separate, where only the prison guards patrol, which has a flat and continuous surface on which to tramp while the space used chiefly for the detainees is on different levels, uneven and converging centre-stage, vaguely resembling a pit. Everything is immersed in an almost constant brownish grey hue (apart from the odd moment in the second act). This fragmented space, with its shafts, stairways and side decks on various levels vividly bring to mind the etchings, marked by a dramatic tone, of the genius, of theatricality, Giovanni Battista Piranesi: "Le Carceri" (Prisons), whose illustrations have inspired countless film sets.
This set by Maria Bjørnson has an expressionist slant rather than a realistic representation, but the spatial similarities with Piranesi's prisons are undeniable; in fact like Piranesi's imagined prisons this scenic architecture gives the impression of a large space, but is actually a rather cramped environment because although it succeeds in creating a whole series of spaces these spaces are actually very small, momentary and rather disconnected.
The first act takes place at dawn on a winter's day, in a work camp close to the River Irtysch. The prisoners labour, they fight, they wash themselves then play with an injured eagle. The entire act revolves around the arrival of the new prisoner, Gorjančikov. The season changes and so does the time of day: we are now in springtime and it is midday.
Easter is celebrated and the prisoners put on a play. In the 'play within a play' the inmates stage *Don Giovanni* and the story of a pretty miller's wife. Key to this act is the *divertissement* of the stories that the prisoners stage in their own production.
The last act, a nocturnal scene, takes place in the prison hospital, in an atmosphere that reeks of oppression and claustrophobia. The final scene takes place in the prison courtyard, where we had witnessed Gorjančikov's arrival, only now he is being set free and in the name of freedom the eagle of the first act is also set free. The prisoners celebrate his new-found liberty with song but they are soon brought to order.
This real eagle, tortured by the inmates in the first act and which takes to flight towards freedom at the end of the opera, is a strong symbolic and idealistic element: "Libertà! Bene estremo!".
A realist cross-section of an incarcerated hell composed of breached walls, of wooden partitions, of grilles, of shafts and tunnels characterizes the scenic box projected by the scenography so as to create a multiplicity of levels on the stage: from the lowest level rendered uneven by the presence of rocks both left and right. By way of stairs or ramps one passes to an intermediate level and from this point further up, to the highest level of the drama.
The lowest acting level and those intermediate levels become platforms upon which different characters narrate their stories, each different from the rest, thus Ms. Bjørnson creates an autonomous space for each one of these autobiographical tales.
The highest performance level, centrally positioned, distinctly echoes that of the Spanish *corrales*, though with the addition of a trap door from which the 'actors/detainees' enter and exit. In fact, it is on this level that we see the two pantomimes that the prisoners put on in celebration and these are a parody of their life and their desperation.
The external sides of this 'box within a box' take on the appearance of a fusion of different construction materials (bricks, wood, iron) of an ancient city, pulled together in an inextricable tangle of symbols. The scenery depicts cramped underground passages with ladders, trap doors, etc.
The set design works on a variety of levels and brings to mind the constructivist scenic machinery that was based on this principle so as to be able to contain more performers on the stage, also allowing for an interesting movement of the detainees (repeated three times) over the entire production that, rather like a procession, keep moving from right to left, from above towards below over the entire set.
The static condition of prison life so clearly referenced in Janáček's libretto is represented through a different language in Maria Bjørnson's stage design. ■


The Makropoulos Case

Maria Bjørnson
at work on Janáček

a cycle of 5 productions produced by
Welsh National Opera and Scottish Opera

David Pountney

Maria and I began our work on Janáček's operas with a production of *Kát'a Kabanová* for the Wexford Festival in 1972, which was one of the first professional engagements for either of us. Maria designed it in collaboration with Sue Blane as she and Sue were at that time working as the design assistants for Philip Prowse at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, which was just beginning its legendary era under Giles Havergal and Philip. I had joined Scottish Opera, also in Glasgow, as production assistant in 1970. I had known Janáček's operas from listening to old and battered Supraphon records from the Hornsey Library since the mid 1960s, so it was a great stroke of luck when the Wexford Festival invited me to stage *Kàt'a*. I had met Maria through Ralph Koltai, her teacher at the Central School of Art and Design, with whom I had done a production of *The Rakes Progress*. Our first meeting was quite a legendary occasion. Unbeknownst to me, Ralph had used one of his students to "ghost" the costumes for *Rakes Progress*. I had seen them in London and asked for one or two changes, and Ralph had then posted the amended designs to me in Glasgow. I had just opened the package and proudly spread the designs out on the sitting room floor when the bell rang, and there were two young ladies who had arrived to see Keith Hack, the production assistant at the Citizens Theatre, who was sharing my flat. As it was well before noon, Keith was still fast asleep, so I invited the two girls in for a coffee. This was Maria and Sue. Maria walked into the sitting room and let out a shriek of recognition in her very unmistakeable voice: "My drawings!" This was a suitably dramatic way to begin a very fruitful and sometimes stormy relationship!

The *Kàt'a* designs were extremely simple, evocative and poetic. In any case, the stage at the Wexford Festival Theatre was tiny and the budget likewise. Maria and Sue pitched it exactly right and the production was a huge success, aided by some very patient and sympathetic Czech singers and a wonderful conductor, Albert Rosen. The outcome of this was an invitation from the Welsh National Opera to do a production of *Jenufa*, and I was able to use this invitation to persuade Scottish Opera to come in on the production as a joint venture, and to extend this to a cycle of Janáček operas. Janáček had by this point been introduced to the Sadlers Wells Opera by Norman Tucker and Charles Mackerras, and *Jenufa* had been done at Covent Garden under Kubelik, but the courage shown by Peter Hemmings at Scottish Opera and Brian McMaster at Welsh National Opera in sanctioning a Janáček cycle for two provincial opera companies should not be underestimated.

Maria and I were at this point very young and inexperienced, and you could definitely see that we developed through the cycle. *Jenufa* had a striking, somewhat expressionist design, with a sharply raked diagonal wooden slatted stage mirrored by a wooden slatted ceiling piece set at a contrasting angle. The mill wheel in Act 1 stood alone, and there were other essential elements – a door, a staircase, that made up a dynamic composition without needing specifically naturalistic motivation. The production was very physical with a lot of dynamic movement making use of the slanted set, and clearly showed its influence in the work of Felsenstein and his pupils, Götz Friedrich and Joachim Herz, at the Komische Oper in Berlin, whose work I had studied after leaving Cambridge.

Our next project was *The Makropoulos Case*, and this was a more adventurous design but carried off with great assurance by Maria. The three Acts were all set on a triangular raked stage bounded by two high walls made of angled strata of bricks of varying shapes and sizes – a kind of archaeological metaphor reflecting the

compacted historical experience of the protagonist who by the beginning of the opera is over 300 years old! The idea was very much to exploit the notion of the accumulated debris of a life stretched out over this extended period, and the first act in the lawyer's office was a marvellously atmospheric assembly of desks and books that soared up to the top of the set with dusty, funereal clerks marooned precariously among the mountains of books and files. There was important scope for lighting through the gaps in the bricks, also reflecting the considerable use Janáček makes of off-stage musical effects – choruses and fanfares evoking Emilia Marty's origins at the court of the Emperor Rudolf. Maria also contributed very precisely restrained but evocative 1920s costumes.

Funnily enough, the opera we had the most difficulty with was *Kàt'a*, perhaps precisely because we had done it successfully in Wexford, and when we came to do it again as part of the WNO/Scottish Opera cycle, not really enough time had elapsed for us to generate an entirely fresh concept. In any case, *Kàt'a*'s rhythm of alternating a claustrophobic interior with a liberated exterior is a notorious design problem, not to mention the evocation of the river which is the work's symbolic core. Here Maria provided a characteristically eloquent solution, a cyclorama with a sweeping slash of black and silver. Maria would later do another production of *Kàt'a* with Trevor Nunn at the Royal Opera House, but I don't think that worked any better either, getting stuck, rather too literally, in the mud, and I also attempted with only partial success a *Kàt'a* à la Munch with Roger Butlin in Australia. Neither of us ever quite recaptured the innocent effectiveness of our Wexford production again, though I did complete the circle in a certain way by doing a rather better version with Ralph Koltai, the originator of my relationship with Maria, in Venice in the 1990s.

The final two productions of the cycle were undoubtedly our best work, both original as designs and bringing across complex narratives with clarity and imagination. *The Cunning Little Vixen* we conceived as a kind of slice of nature, literally as if one cut out a block of landscape with a pastry cutter. This slice of nature must of course have as natural and curvaceous surface as possible, and Maria picked up the patchwork quality of landscape by using a patchwork of soft and hard materials. Underneath this landscape, the humans were "imprisoned" in a rigid, rectilinear box, and their environment as well as their clothes was defined by an all pervading grey, as against the vivid colours of the natural world. The whole was surrounded by a rectilinear cyclorama of sky blue – its shape following that of the "pastry cutter" but with a curving bottom edge that followed the contour of the landscape, and included a very important gap for side lighting. There were a series of branches representing trees at different points in the seasons, and the birds sat in chairs among the trees, as if in their living rooms – one of many delightful and witty touches to this design. We actually decided to impose a sequence of the seasons onto the work, which is not actually part of its original structure, but which of course helps with the whole cyclical theme of the opera. The change between summer and autumn was reflected in the different colours of the scatter cushions that Maria strewed over the surface, and the whole stage was covered with a white sheet for Winter, which provided everybody's favourite moment when the snow miraculously "melted" down a trap door, and Spring arrived represented by colourful paper parasols masquerading as flowers. The costumes fully reflected Maria's sense of wit and fantasy, deftly mingling references to the work's 1920s origins with brilliant shorthand ideas to evoke the different animals and insects. The whole was a virtuoso piece of design which is still as fresh today as it was in 1976. It was revived once again, in Tel Aviv, in the spring of 2008.

The final instalment was *From the House of the Dead* for which Maria created a complex standing structure, literally a "house" with many different rooms that had filled with the mud and debris of prison life, and almost seemed like the segment of a First World War trench complex. A platform was provided at the centre for the soldiers and the guards, and a trap door in its centre turned it into a little "Goethe Bühne" for the plays in Act 2. Maria paid enormous attention to the wigs and make-up, doing accurate research on the strange, deformed haircuts that the prisoners were compelled to have, and the tattoos that were branded on their shaved skulls. The paradox of *House of the Dead* is that although it is a claustrophobic closed world, the stories of the convicts constantly bring the violence and cruelty of the outside world into focus, and once again this set, in a way completing the ideas that ran through *Jenufa* and *Makropoulos*, had a transparent quality that allowed the light of the outside world to shine in and through it. This was another completely successful production which is still alive: I revived it, in Palermo, in October 2008.

More or less around the time that we completed the cycle, Maria and I both moved in different directions, but I am sure she would agree that whatever else we went on to achieve, this Janáček cycle was an uniquely satisfying and creative collaboration. Sadly, we were just about to resume our working relationship when she very unexpectedly died. ■

The Makropoulos Case

Queen of Spades

Measure for Measure

Jenufa

Die Valkyrie

Hamlet

Carmen

The Phantom of the Opera

Working with Maria on staging the original *Phantom*

Martyn Hayes

Martyn Hayes was the Production Manager on the original London production of The Phantom of the Opera. *More recently he has been the Executive Producer of the musical* Dirty Dancing.

I have been asked if I would contribute something to this magazine, from a technical point of view, about working with Maria Bjørnson. Where to start? I first worked with her when I was the Production Manager on the opera *Toussaint* at the English National Opera. Maria had come up with a stunningly original design and it incorporated various large, and very irregular, scaffolding towers on wheels that had to be manhandled around the stage constantly throughout the action. I arranged for some local building scaffolders to come in, and we started constructing these towers from Maria's scale models of them. To begin with, the scaffolders were completely bemused about the whole exercise (*what exactly d'you want darling?*) and what was being asked of them (*"an opera?"*) - but Maria's complete lack of any pretence with them, and her infectious sense of humour and fun, won them round completely, and very soon they were saying *"but wouldn't it look more interesting if we set this pole at this angle?"*.

A couple of years later; we worked together again when I was the Production Manager on *The Phantom of the Opera*. I still feel incredibly privileged that I was one of the very first people, other than Maria's assistant Jonathan Allen, to see the *entire* show. Maria asked me, very early on, to come to her small basement flat in West Brompton to see the model of her design. Everything was perfectly and beautifully modelled-up, and she took me through the show in order: the opening auction scene - when the chandelier is plugged in and then flies out to its hanging position as the opera house comes back to life before your eyes. The journey from Christine's dressing room - through the mirror, down the tilting ramps and into the boat, and then via all the lifting candles and candelabra to the Phantom's lair. On and on the model showing went: managers' office, different opera scenes, the roof of the opera house, the masquerade ball, the mausoleum, etc. Everything *completely* worked out, with cut-outs of the actors in their on-stage positions, every scene change described, every prop in place - and surrounding her, across all her walls, every costume drawing with accompanying material swatches, and the whole show story-boarded out from

A personal tribute from *Hal Prince*

Can it be 25 years ago that I met Maria Bjørnson?

I had agreed to direct *Phantom of the Opera*, and Cameron Mackintosh recommended five designers for the job. He sent a sampling of photos of their recent productions: all were qualified.

One stood out. Considering the assignment – a flamboyant Victorian melodrama – it must seem strange that I was especially impressed with a single-set design – almost minimalist – of an Ibsen play. A rectangle, wooden louvers, beautiful furniture, architecturally spare: an inviting space to tell a powerful story. I chose Maria from a huge photo, which I assumed had originally been framed in front of a theatre.

We spoke over the phone and arranged to meet in London. I chose to stop over in Paris, and arranged for the Assistant Manager of the Paris Opéra at the Garnier to give me a tour. We covered all ten floors – five from the stage to the lake below, and five to the roof, and I met with Maria with those impressions in store.

Of the four major set pieces, one is an elaborate proscenium. It illustrates Lust – women in the throes of orgasm, savaged by men. Primitive and contradictory, as these caryatids were both escaping and succumbing with pleasure, and their attackers were brutal. All of this I describe because audiences get that message subliminally, because it is diluted – acting as a picture frame, and focusing you on what the stage contained, which was beautiful, selective, and informative, also minimalist.

Then there are three “cod” operas, which fill the stage with color.

The show opens with an auction, which contains no music and is limited to dialogue, and actually is more of a funeral than a realistic auction. It is followed by Maria’s first coup de théâtre. A full-stage set, magnificent drapes, followed by canvas drops rise from the floor to create *Hannibal*, a lightly satirical version of the Paris Opéra production of *Aida*.

The second, near the end of the first act, is comic – faux Mozart, in the style of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Called *Il Muto* in our production, it is complete with pretty pink scenery and the cast in heavy white and black makeup, wearing elaborate wigs and beautiful costumes.

The third of the operas, in Act Two, is a new version of *Don Juan* – created by Andrew and the librettist as a twelve-tone opera, indicating that the Phantom’s composing is decades ahead of Schönberg and Stockhausen.

For the rest of the musical, Maria chose to leave out many visual details. Intrinsically, it is a black enamel box with bits of gilt and few exquisite props – a desk, a fragmented dressing room, and little else – and the roof of the Paris Opera House with the skyline of the city upstage. You are compelled to fill in the blanks, and each person in the audience sees it differently. There are no doors, just an entrance upstage in a blank wall. You provide the details, you provide the missing wallpaper, you even provide the elaborate sweeping Garnier staircase, which is merely unpolished wooden slats.

Maria’s costumes (over 500 of them) are as much the scenery as the scenery itself.

After almost 18 months, as the deadline approached to show the finished production to Cameron and Andrew, I had yet to see any costumes. Maria assured me that she could design 25 a day. And she did – elaborate, detailed, and ravishing.

The entire experience was exhilarating – energetic and professional and devoid of any disagreement. I loved every minute of the collaboration, and regret that we never managed to work together again. She often was designing for Covent Garden or elsewhere.

Oh, and one more thing: I will always be grateful to Maria for introducing me to her neighborhood favorite ritual: Sunday buffet at the Bombay Brasserie. I return there every time I’m in London. I wish she were here to reminisce about those fleeting 25 years.

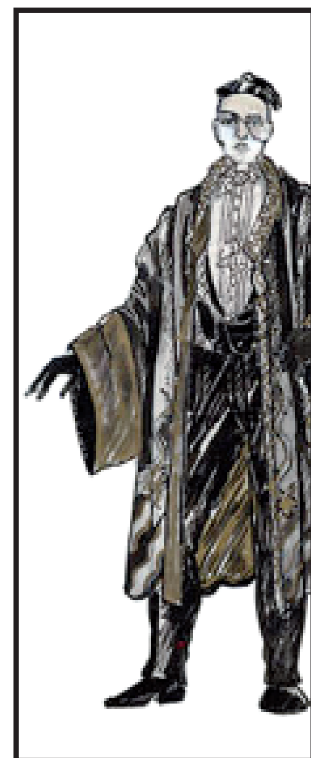
Hal Prince

The Phantom of the Opera

beginning to end. Going through the model took well over four hours – but it was four hours where you just knew that you were a very early witness to something that was going to be incredibly special and excited to think that you could play a part in it.
The truly staggering thing was that pretty much that entire model showing was what was presented on stage some nine months later - with hardly an alteration. It had been that well realised and thought through. That is why I say that I was one of the very first people to see the entire show. My only real recollection of anything not making it to the stage, from the model, was that there were a number of animals that were cut (a white mechanical rotating horse in which the Phantom led Christine down to the boat, real doves on the rooftop, mechanical rats for the lair – we dubbed the show *The Phantom of the Menagerie*) - albeit that the monkey and the elephant stayed in!
Maria also had very clear ideas as to exactly which contractors she wanted to work with and who would build what – from large pieces of scenery and engineering to drapes, from ornate carvings to small hand-props. She stored great loyalty in contractors who had proved themselves to be sensitive to what she wanted and who shared her artistic vision, where second-best was nowhere near good enough and where you constantly strived for perfection, and who also came up with the goods on time - and who did so with a smile on their face and a sense of humour. Terry Murphy, Peter Everett, and Stephen Pyle, deserve a special mention here.
I remember walking away from her model showing feeling blown away and somewhat daunted, knowing what a huge challenge it was to do all that she wanted with the money and the time we had available – and realising that everything she wanted was absolutely vital to her complete way of visually interpreting the story. I've worked with designers who you sense have intentionally added a "gratuitous" scenic element or two in order that they could later generously (and tearfully!) "offer it up" as a cut, when the set was over budget and cuts were required - but not with Maria, where everything she had designed was intrinsic and justified.
The most thrilling and demanding thing to me about theatre is the adrenaline rush you get from the fact that the deadline you have to

Sue Willmington
costume designer

I first met Maria in 1977 in the Wardrobe Manager's Office at English National Opera where I was a very junior buyer.
Our friendship was cemented there until our last phone call a few days before she died.
I was put in charge of a huge Opera, Toussaint *which was to receive its world premiere at E.N.O. I was inexperienced but Maria made sure I soon got the hang of it, we continued to do many shows together including* Phantom, Follies *and* Aspects of Love.
Maria did the most wonderful drawings which told the story of every character and did very clear working drawings for all the costumiers and she always got the best from people but did not suffer fools, there were a few uncomfortable moments but there was always humor and we often laughed till we cried.
Maria came fabric shopping whenever she had time away from the set and she worked very quickly often designing in the early morning then fabric shopping with me and seeing costumiers till well into the evening. My car was Christened the Braid-Mobile on Phantom as we went to costumiers houses looking at garments and placing the braid and ever hopeful of some refreshment!
We scoured the Antique markets together and Maria once persuaded me to buy a large screen as she liked the braid, we cut it off in a side street and I even managed to sell back the now bare screen. Maria was always determined to get the work done well and in the British cottage industry of many talented people she always made time for everyone. We even fitted a prototype of a full suit of amour in a crowded café in Soho, the waitresses were not amused and we did not return there for a few months.
We have had our disagreements and once Maria sent me home one evening from a technical rehearsal as I was having a laugh with her set assistant, of course I was back at work in the morning.
Maria's costumes were special, she had a talent for using unusual fabrics and layering them and then adding some gorgeous piece of antique fabric and her signature "Critzy Critzy" fine black knobby trim as an outline to the shapes of the garment. The silhouette was very important to her and the S-Bend shape in the period clothes, she would ask the director to get the artist to turn round so we could see the whole outfit.
I know many costumiers have fond memories of Maria as I do, "we were all in it together"!



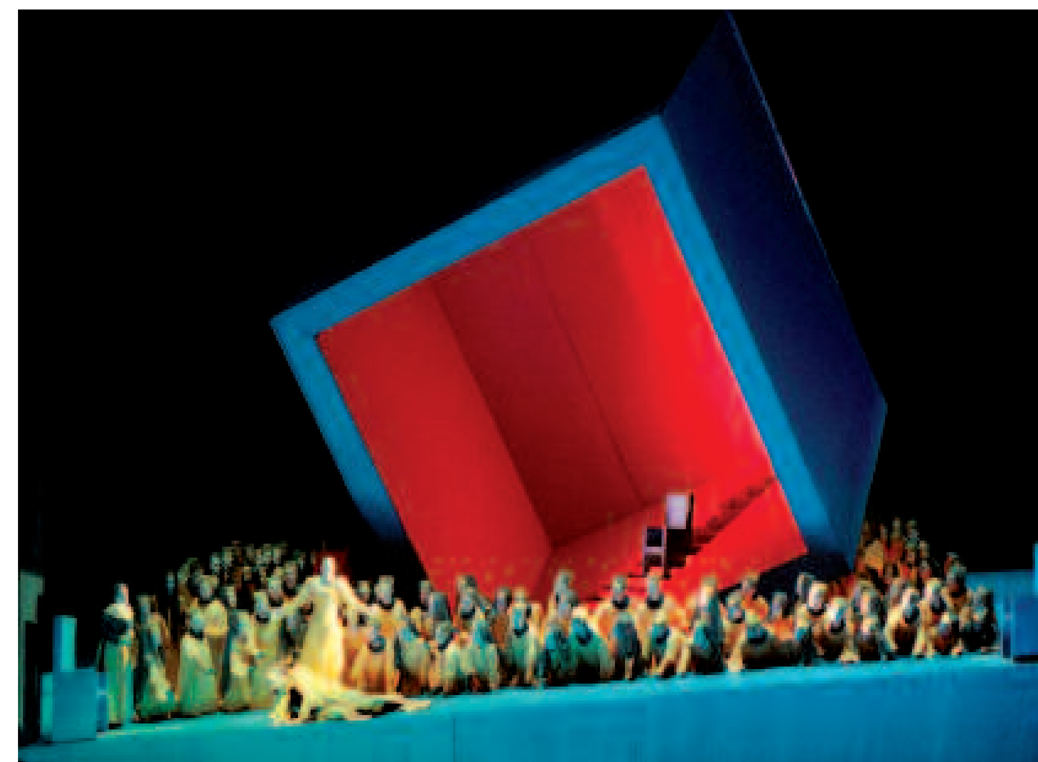
work to is to the *minute*. The alarm is set, the clock is ticking, and the bell will ring at the precise minute when on the first preview, the curtain *must* rise and the audience must see, and *smoothly working*, all that you've just looked at in model form – and *how* it actually all works hasn't even been realised yet. What other art-form (or much else for that matter) works to so precise a deadline (and from so far out) – as to the minute...?
To this end, we were fortunate and privileged to work with probably two of the best theatrical design engineers and, for want of a better term "design realisers" in Mike Barnett and Will Bowen. Between Mike and Will, they quickly cracked the chandelier safety process and its mechanism, the travelling and tilting bridge platform, and worked out how we could squeeze that enormous set into the Victorian confines of Her Majesty's Theatre.
My chief recollection of actually putting the show into the theatre was of extraordinary long hours (particularly as we got closer to opening), and of Maria *always* being there – first person in the morning to the last one at night – and being incredibly supportive, funny, and doing everything with great charm and humility. I remember being right in the thick of it, with scenery malfunctioning, re-writes meaning quicker scene changes, (and even the sprinkler system going off and putting all of our basement motors under water – just when we thought we were getting ahead!), and Maria always just looking back at me with a wry smile as though to say *"this isn't real life though is it?"*
We were both sitting in the stalls late one night, particularly tired and stressed, and Maria said that she wanted to start a company called the "There, There" company. She explained that you could call this company anytime, day or night, and a group of women in white coats would arrive, wheeling a large wooden four-poster bed. The bed would have pristine white linen sheets and big fluffy pillows. The women would carry you into the bed and onto the fluffy pillows, where they would gently stroke your brow and say *"there, there..."*.
That's where I always like to see Maria now, in that pristine white linen-sheeted bed, on those big fluffy pillows, with a lady in white gently stroking her brow saying *"there, there..."*. ■

The Macbeth of the Cube

Santi Centineo

It has become known as the "*Macbeth* of the cube" par excellence, undoubtedly one of the most talked about productions in recent years at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan.
Primarily because the superb 1975 staging of *Macbeth* at the Teatro alla Scala by Claudio Abbado, Giorgio Strehler and Luciano Damiani (revived in 1979 and in 1985) was such a memorable production. Secondly, because the directing, the sets and the costumes of this new production, first staged in 1997, by a directorial-design duo not yet so very famous in Italy though already very well known overseas, was so eagerly received. Conducted by Riccardo Muti, advocate of a strong musical and figurative tradition, he is joined by the British director Graham Vick, having a solid repertoire in staging Shakespeare and opera productions, formerly Director of Productions at Scottish Opera and at Glyndebourne Opera, currently Artistic Director of Birmingham Opera Company. The set and costumes were designed by Maria Bjørnson – to whom this volume is dedicated - demonstrating a design maturity that can only be praised for its rare visual import.
These lines above all bear witness to the origins of this production: I was in fact already two months into a postgraduate course at the Accademia Teatro alla Scala. This is not about a simple delving into the past or an attempt to mythicize the staging of this drama, revived a number of times with the most recent being in the spring of 2008; this is much more about what happens backstage, about that extremely fascinating part of the process of creating a show that, witnessed by few, represents that special moment: the culmination of the combined skills of an army of professionals that contribute to its all coming together and the show is brought to life.
For this production Vick asks Bjørnson to design a monolithic element, a single granitic multipurpose volume that with simple and minimal modifications could assume different values and meanings. Therefore this was not about an extravagant, decorative set design, much in the great Italian tradition, but an architectonic space that is synthetic, visually simple and conceptually complex.
In consultation with the director, Maria designed a set that evoked perpetual night, an existential darkness that only at the finale is rent by a rising sun created by lighting designer Matthew Richardson. In this created atmosphere, powerful revolving machinery in the form of a blue cube embedded at an angle on a double downward sloping platform, through continuous repositioning evokes the complex alternation of the opera's internal and external drama.
Supported by a truss of heavy tonnage, its interior accessible and containing the apparatus for the apparitions of the third act, the cube is an enigmatic, menacing, oppressive object. It is covered in a plastic material of a very soft electric blue, capable of intensifying the lighting, passing from dark, almost black, tones to very luminous effects.
At the beginning of the first act, the cube appears in all its powerfulness like a totem around which the witches perform their rites. A first rotation reveals that which for the director is its other face, the direct emanation of the demonic element incarnated by the witches: Lady Macbeth. On this side, hitherto concealed, the cube appears like a cave, its interior a vivid red. A further complete rotation reveals the lifeless body of King Duncan in a golden tunic, drenched in blood.
In the second act the rear wall of the cube drips blood, a prelude to the slaying of Banquo, the couple's second brutal murder, while in the banquet scene all those present, from the usurpers to the throne to their slavish courtiers, are dressed in yellow. But the noble rank aspired to by the assassination of the sovereign is unattainable: Maria clothes them not in bright gold but in a dull shade of yellow, signifying an upstart's attempt to assume a noble title earned for military prowess, a quality so very different from the behaviour of a social climber, something of a paradox in Macbeth (who arrives at murder) but also evident in the populace. These people will be entrenched in a 'ditch' on the stage, symbolic of their own incapacity to move autonomously. How much relevance there still is in Shakespeare and how skilfully director and designer have worked the text and narrated it!

In the third act, a huge bloodied hand of a disturbing phosphorescent colour, painted on a curtain scrim, gradually dissolves to reveal the infernal witches' Sabbath. The witches dance one of the most interesting contemporary choreographies seen in recent years (choreographer Ron Howell), which is sensual, even erotic.
This is how Vick wants to portray the witches and the costumes designed by Maria support this interpretation: shiny blue sheath dresses of a stretch fabric that clings to the sinuous form of the dancers. The successive rotations of the cube show in turn the apparitions; an automatic throne on which sits a crowned infant; a huge human embryo that floats in its amniotic fluid; then Banquo's progeny, as per libretto.
Here Vick eliminates one of the play's three apparitions. It involved seven concentric crowns that emanate from the cavity of the cube; a photo of the set model remains as evidence.
In the fourth act, the cube appears in a very interesting alignment: divested of its rear it is almost a skeleton, within its frame slip the remains of a cruel dominion collapsing beneath its own weight while, rotating, it resembles the bow of a ship, from which Macduff rises like a figurehead to incite his oppressed people. Daybreak appears and with it the purifying rites of Malcolm consecrate the death of the tyrant as an auspicious regaining of freedom.
The staging of *Macbeth* at La Scala on the whole is symptomatic of a very important fact relative to the basic requirement of a good stage design, namely the relationship between director and stage designer (in this case also costume designer). In this stage production Maria Bjørnson knew how to rise to the challenge of the director's requirements with great humility, and with calm demeanour, leaving it to others to grab the limelight. For some classical music lovers this is Muti's *Macbeth*, for others, impressed by the visual aspect, it was Graham Vick's *Macbeth*. And this is undoubtedly true. Today, remembering this great stage designer who died before her time, we might add that it was also Verdi's *Macbeth*, for whom Maria Bjørnson had the privilege to serve the music and design the scenery. ■



Macbeth

Les contes d'Hoffman

Les contes d'Hoffman

Les contes d'Hoffman

Der Rosenkavalier

Maria Bjørnson's last work and lasting legacy

One evening I will hear a call
that opens a corner in the sky,
and if heaven is made of stars,
then I will be able to choose my star,
and this star will be the one
from which le Petit Prince is calling me.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Francesca Zambello

I often think of Maria when I look at the night skies and remember this quote by the author of *The Little Prince*. Maria had completed the designs for *The Little Prince* at the time of her death. She inspired many people and I am lucky to have been one of them.

There never was a dividing line between what she and I did. *The Little Prince* is really her last design, and she was completely obsessed by this project. Working on this was so much fun for her because she loved the original work by Saint-Exupéry, and she loved the music and the libretto. She showed an amazing ability to become like a child, to enter into a child's world. There's a wonderful sense of fantasy in her designs for *The Little Prince*.

When we started our designer and director collaborative work, we began with the source material, as one usually does. The biggest question was how to find a way to respect the graphic artwork of Saint-Exupéry, while finding a theatrical language and giving a three dimensional sense to the world he creates. As we examined his work we realized how his creatures are often floating in free space. We knew we had to ground our story, yet keep the lightness and simplicity of the drawings. After all, we would have opera singers becoming everything from baobabs to planets.

We also had several practical things we were working with. The show had to have a short load-in/set-up, be able to play in a small theatre, be reasonably priced... all those usual sorts of things opera companies want you to

do! Other givens were the cast: we had to re-use eight adults quickly to play a variety of characters, as well as a children's chorus of twenty-four. Only the Prince and the Pilot were always themselves. I knew Maria could create the fantastical creatures, but our challenge was how to create the world to hold them in. We played with ideas in the model box and knew we needed one unifying location. We discarded several ideas and finally settled on two

primary elements, the airplane and the Sahara Desert, since they were solidly realistic and would allow everything else that is fantastical to stand in contrast to them. The Little Prince and the Pilot and the airplane in the desert would be surrounded by a portal with shutters that opened to allow the chorus to comment on the action and also to open onto the planets and the strange beings described by the Little Prince as he tells of his travels. Thus the fantasy world of the Prince encircled the realistic world of the Pilot. Slowly in the design and the opera the two worlds merge.

Once we settled on the desert for our basis set, we shaped the dunes so they could be performing areas, covered in carpets to allow the cast to play on the sand easily. The plane was based on the real plane that Saint-Exupéry flew. In the first act, the Pilot has crashed the plane in the desert, where he is discovered by the Little Prince. As the piece goes more and more into the adventures of the Prince the importance of earthbound things becomes less important. We then decided the plane would be only a small cut-out in the second act as the Pilot enters more and more the imagination of the Prince.

The costumes required a fair amount of experimentation. All the costumes were based on Saint-Exupéry's drawings, but also always allowed the audience to see clearly the actor inside of them. We devised a language of pajamas for the kids and the adults when they were not a character. This theme evolved from the opening scene of the opera, where the Pilot is telling a story – as it were, a "bedtime story" – which became the basis for the kids' costumes. This meant we never had to define them more as they played stars, planets, asteroids and a kind of Greek chorus.

Sadly, Maria never saw the show, yet I believe her spirit thrives in it every time it is performed. The work has been very popular in the USA and abroad, it has been televised in the USA and UK. It has touched the lives of thousands of children who have never been to or seen an opera before. A large part of their delight comes from the world Maria created. The theater has lost one of its brightest lights. ■

Portrait of Maria Bjørnson by Yolanda Sonnabend

theatre and opera

Maria Bjørnson PRODUCTIONS

2009 (December)
Der Rosenkavalier (costumes)
Composer/Writer R. Strauss
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

2008
Macbeth
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Graham Vick
Theatre/Location La Scala, Milan

Tales Of Hoffman
Composer/Writer Offenbach
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

From the House Of The Dead
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Teatro Massimo, Palermo

Cunning Little Vixen
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Tel Aviv

Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

Kàt'a Kabanovà
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

Der Rosenkavalier (costumes)
Composer/Writer R. Strauss
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

2007
The Little Prince
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Metropolitan, NY/Vilnius

Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

2006
The Phantom Of The Opera celebrated 20 years in London's West End on 9th October 2006
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Venetian, Las Vegas

2003
The Little Prince
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Metropolitan, NY/Vilnius

The Trojans
Composer/Writer Berlioz
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Metropolitan, New York

Cunning Little Vixen
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location La Scala, Milan

2001/02
The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Madrid, Stuttgart

Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Francesca Zambello
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

2000/01
Rise & Fall Of Mahagonny
Composer/Writer Kurt Weill
Director G. Vick Anthony Page
Theatre/Location Genoa

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof
Composer/Writer T. Williams
Director Anthony Page
Theatre/Location Lyric, Shaftesbury

1999/2000
Tales Of Hoffman
Composer/Writer Offenbach
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

The Cherry Orchard
Composer/Writer A. Chekov
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Antwerp, Copenhagen, Mexico

Ernani
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Elijah Moshinsky
Theatre/Location English National Opera

Der Rosenkavalier (costumes)
Composer/Writer R. Strauss
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

1998/99
Plenty
Composer/Writer David Hare
Director Jonathan Kent
Theatre/Location Almeida, London

Phedre
Composer/Writer Racine
Director Jonathan Kent
Theatre/Location Almeida, London

Britannicus
Composer/Writer Racine
Director Jonathan Kent
Theatre/Location Almeida, London

1997/98
The Phantom Of The Opera celebrated 10 years on Broadway on 26th January 1998

Macbeth
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Graham Vick
Theatre/Location La Scala, Milan

1996/97
The Phantom Of The Opera celebrated 10 years in London's West End on 9th October 1996

1995
Rise & Fall Of Mahagonny
Composer/Writer Kurt Weill
Director Graham Vick
Theatre/Location Bastille, Paris

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Basel

1994
Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Dalia Ibelhauptaite
Theatre/Location Batignano Musica nel Chiostro, Italy

Sleeping Beauty
Composer/Writer Tchaikovsky
Director Antony Dowell
Theatre/Location The Royal Ballet

Kàt'a Kabanovà
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

1993
The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Manchester (UK Tour), Holland

1991/92
The Lulu Plays
Composer/Writer Wedekind
Director Ian McDiarmid
Theatre/Location Almeida, London

Così Fan Tutte
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/Location Glyndebourne

The Blue Angel
Composer/Writer Pam Gems
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/ Royal Shakespeare Co. & West End

Measure For Measure
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Ian McDiarmid
Theatre/ Royal Shakespeare Co. & Young Vic

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Seattle

1989/90
Aspects of Love
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Trevor Nunn
Theatre/Location Prince of Wales Theatre, London & Broadway

Rise & Fall Of Mahagonny
Composer/Writer Kurt Weill
Director Graham Vick
Theatre/Location Teatro Verdi Maggio Musicale, Florence

The Marriage Of Figaro
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director Nick Hytner
Theatre/Location Grand Opera, Geneva

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Toronto (Canadian Tour), Stockholm, Melbourne, Hamburg, Chicago

1988
Cunning Little Vixen
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera

1987
Queen Of Spades
Composer/Writer Tchaikovsky
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera

From the House Of The Dead
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Follies
Composer/Writer Sondheim
Director Mike Ockrent
Theatre/Location The Shaftesbury Theatre, London

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Toronto Majestic Theatre, NY

1986
Creditors
Composer/Writer Strindberg
Director Ian MacDiarmid
Theatre/Location Almeida, London

The Phantom Of The Opera
Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber
Director Harold Prince
Theatre/Location Her Majesty's Theatre, London

Carmen
Composer/Writer Bizet
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera

1985
The Lonely Road
Composer/Writer Strindberg
Director Ian MacDiarmid
Theatre/Location The Old Vic, London

Donnerstag Aus Licht
Composer/Writer Stockhausen
Director Mike Bogdanov
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

Camille
Composer/Writer Pam Gems
Director Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location Comedy Theatre, London

1984
Turn Of The Screw
Composer/Writer Britten
Director Nick Hytner
Theatre/Location Kent Touring Opera

Camille
Composer/Writer Pam Gems
Director Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location The Other Place, Royal Shakespeare Company

Der Rosenkavalier (costumes)
Composer/Writer R. Strauss
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House & TV

Hamlet
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location Main House, Royal Shakespeare Company

1983
The Gambler
Composer/Writer Prokofiev
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera

Cunning Little Vixen
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera & TV

Die Valkyrie
Composer/Writer R. Wagner
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera

1982
Jenufa
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Canadian Opera Company

Kàt'a Kabanovà
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera & TV

Werther
Composer/Writer Massenet
Director Steven Pimlott
Theatre/Location Opera North

The Tempest
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Steven Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location Main House, Royal Shakespeare Company
House Of The Dead
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director Steven Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera

1981
A Midsummer's Night Dream
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Steven Ron Daniels
Theatre/Location Main House, Royal Shakespeare Company
The Cherry Orchard
Composer/Writer A. Chekov
Director Patrick Garland
Theatre/Location Chichester Festival

Jenufa
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Houston Grand Opera

Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Opera North

Queen Of Spades
Composer/Writer Tchaikovsky
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location De Nederlandse Operastichting

1980
Kàt'a Kabanovà
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Sydney Opera House

Cunning Little Vixen
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera & TV

Tales Of Hoffman
Composer/Writer Offenbach
Director John Schlesinger
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House & TV

1979
Rigoletto
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Patrick Libby
Theatre/Location Opera North

Ernani
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Elijah Moshinsky
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera

Don Giovanni
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Kàt'a Kabanovà
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

1978
The Way Of The World
Composer/Writer Congreve
Director John Barton
Theatre/Location Aldwych, Royal Shakespeare Co.

The Bartered Bride (costumes)
Composer/Writer Smetena
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Seraglio (costumes)
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Vieux Carre (costumes)
Composer/Writer Tennessee Williams
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Piccadilly Theatre

Hansel And Gretel
Composer/Writer Humperdink
Director Peter Ebert
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Die Meistersinger Von Nurnberg
Composer/Writer Wagner
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Sydney Opera House

The Makropulos Case
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera & TV

Jenufa
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/ Scottish Opera & Houston grand Opera

1977
Hedda Gabler
Composer/Writer Ibsen
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Duke Of York's Theatre

Toussaint L'Ouverture
Composer/Writer David Ward
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English National Opera
1976
Sons Of Light
Composer/Writer Rudman
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Newcastle

Il Trovatore
Composer/Writer G. Verdi
Director Julian Hope
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera

School For Scandal
Composer/Writer Sheridan
Director Phil Partridge
Theatre/Location Watford Palace Theatre

Die Meistersinger Von Nurnberg
Composer/R. Wagner
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

1975
Queen Of Spades
Composer/Writer Tchaikovsky
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Kassel, Germany

The Golden Cockerel (costumes)
Composer/Writer Rimsky-Korsakov
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Jenufa
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Welsh National Opera

1974
The Magic Flute (costumes)
Composer/Writer Mozart
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

Holst's Double Bill
Composer/Writer Holst
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English Opera Group

Measure For Measure
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Main House, Royal Shakespeare Company

La Rondine
Composer/Writer G. Puccini
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location English Opera Group

Tanhauser (costumes)
Composer/Writer R. Wagner
Director Michael Gelliot
Theatre/Location Sydney Opera House

Wozzeck (costumes)
Composer/Writer Berg
Director Michael Gelliot
Theatre/Location De Nederlandse Operstichting

Anthony And Cleopatra (costumes)
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Tony Richardson
Theatre/Location Bankside Globe

1973
The Gambler
Composer/Writer Prokofiev
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Wexford Festival

1972
Kàt'a Kabanovà (with Sue Blane)
Composer/Writer Janáček
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Wexford Festival

The Rake's Progress
Composer/Writer I. Stravinsky
Director David Pountney
Theatre/Location Scottish Opera

The Crucible
Composer/Writer A. Miller
Director Stephen Dartnell
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Jungle Of The Cities
Composer/Writer B. Brecht
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Puss In Boots (with Sue Blane)
Director Giles Havergal
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

The Threepenny Opera
Composer/Writer Breaut & Weill
Director Richard Stroud
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Timon Of Athens
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

King Lear
Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare
Director Stephen Dartnell
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

1971
Life Of Galileo (with Sue Blane)
Composer/Writer B. Brecht
Director Keith Hack
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Three Sisters
Composer/Writer A. Checov
Director Giles Havergal
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Cinderella (with Sue Blane)
Director Giles Havergal
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

Tiny Alice
Composer/Writer Albee
Director Robert David MacDonald
Theatre/Location Glasgow Citizens Theatre

1969
Scapino (costumes)
Composer/Writer C. Goldoni
Director Frank Dunlop
Theatre/ Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, London

Photographers' Credits

p. 4 “Maria Bjørnson” © Laurie Lewis
p. 5-6-7 *The Gambler* © Donald Southern
p. 15 *Toussaint L'Ouverture* © Donald Southern
p. 16-17 *The Cunning Little Vixen* colour print © Donald Southern
p. 16-17 *The Cunning Little Vixen* b/w prints © Welsh National Opera
p. 20-21 *The Tempest* ©Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
p. 24-25 *From the House of the Dead* © Welsh National Opera
p. 26-27 *From the House of the Dead* Teatro Massimo © Franco Lannino
p. 31 *The Makropoulos Case* © English National Opera
p. 32 *Queen of Spades* © English National Opera
p. 33 *Measure for Measure* © Nobby Clark
p. 34-35 *Jenufa* © Welsh National Opera
p. 36 *Die Valkyrie* colour print © Jonathan Greet / Maria Bjørnson Archive
p. 36-37 *Die Valkyrie* b/w prints © Donald Southern
p. 38-39 *Hamlet* ©Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
p. 41 *Carmen* © English National Opera
p. 42 *Phantom of the Opera* set model © Maria Bjørnson Archive
p. 43, 45, 47 *Phantom of the Opera* colour photos © Clive Barda / ArenaPAL
p. 49-51 *Macbeth* © Teatro alla Scala, Milan
p. 52-53 *Les Contes D'Hoffmann* © Clive Barda / ArenaPAL
p.56-57 *Der Rosenkavelier* © Clive Barda / ArenaPAL
p. 59 *The Little Prince* © Richard Feldman
p. 64 “Maria Bjørnson” © Clive Barda / ArenaPAL

The publishers wish to thank

Olivia & Robert Temple
Redcase Ltd. / Maria Bjørnson Archive

Sir Cameron Mackintosh
Cameron Mackintosh Ltd.

Lord Lloyd-Webber
The Really Useful Group

for their generous contribution

Special thanks to

Adam Pollock

Michael Lee
Maria Bjørnson Archive

Our grateful thanks to

Rachel White, Julia Creed, ROH Archive;
Clare Colvin, *Archivist*, ENO;
Sylvia Morris, Helen Hargest of
The Shakespeare Centre Library & Archive;
Darryl Jenner, *Senior Press Officer*, WNO

for their invaluable assistance in gathering
additional photographic material