

CONTINUING his progress report on the Welsh National Opera preparations for the Trojans, IFAN PAYNE meets producer Tim Albery.

# Images to inspire the three Ts produce mammoth new opera

JUST OFF a busy north London street there is a short, quiet cul-de-sac. There, in an ordinary neo-Georgian terrace house which looks like every other neo-Georgian terraced house, Tim Albery and his design duo have cluttered the ground floor with photographs, images and stage models for a mammoth new opera production.

Tim Albery is the producer for the new production of the Berlioz opera *The Trojans* which is being jointly presented by Welsh National Opera, Opera North and Scottish Opera. Anthony MacDonald and Tom Cairns are the stage designers who are working with him. Although he is perhaps best known for his productions at the ICI in London, Tim Albery recently staged *A Midsummer Marriage* for Opera North to considerable acclaim.

The three T's, Tim, Tom and Tony, seem particularly at ease working together as a production team.

But maybe on that particular early spring day they were on their best behaviour for this visitor.

Tom MacDonald lives upstairs in the house and the tenant of the ground floor has moved out so the team are also renting what would be the large living and dining room were it not for the clutter of photographs, folders, models and papers covering the otherwise bare walls and floorboards.

The walls have become gigantic pinboards for photographs, coloured prints, postcards of paintings and dozens of photocopies of pictures. However this staging of *The Trojans* turns out, its production will clearly not have been possible without a plentiful supply of 10p's for the photocopying machines.

In the middle of the floor stands the carcass of a scale model of the Leeds Opera House stage, while on a rickety table lie piles of drawings and blue folders labelled "Act 1," "Act 2" . . . "3" . . . and so on . . . each filled with pictures torn from magazines and photocopies of pictures — all images used as stimuli in the development of the concepts for the staging of Berlioz's masterpiece.

"Here," says Albery encompassing the folders and the walls with a sweep of his arm, "are images. A random selection of people. Pictures of walls and the debris of war . . ."

Every producer and his or her design team starts developing an opera production from a different premise. Some will start with the music, some with the characters, some with the dramatic relationships contained in the opera. The approach of this design team to *The Trojans* is, at least on the surface, very much a visual one. The initial overriding concern seems to be with the spatial quality of the staging.

Yet at first glance the images collected so far relate neither to

the notion of a classical Greek tragedy nor to the 2nd French Empire of Napoleon III in which Berlioz lived.

Rather, the images culled from a myriad sources have to do with emotional attitude, atmosphere and spatial relationships.

The thought is triggered by the fact that, belying its romanticism, the construction of *The Trojans* is old fashioned for its time, harkening back to the recitative and aria form of the classical era. It is, as Tim Albery points out, a series of set pieces, and one of his tasks is to knit the scenes together so that they flow along in response to the dramatic necessities of the action.

Here are parallels in the working methods of Berlioz. He could compose scenes and arias at will, in any part of the opera, and his letters make clear that he did indeed compose various bits and pieces as the mood and the muse took him.

As Albery says, that is exactly the way his team works. "We say, 'Oh, I love that bit,' and, 'It feels like this,' and, 'I don't know a thing about that bit yet but don't worry about it maybe later on we'll know more about it.'"

Albery returns often to the importance of children in the production. "We are going to have as many children as we can persuade the managements to allow."

This comment brings up the issue of the co-operative nature of

the whole enterprise. Many producers have enough problems dealing with one management. Tim Albery has to deal with three opera companies and the many different theatres in which the opera will be performed.

There is also the difficulty of having to build a production around three different casts which doubtless will also change from season to season.

"In Leeds and Scotland it's easier to influence the cast, but in Wales it's harder because they've made a lot of decisions a lot earlier."

The team have already seen many of the singers perform who have been chosen for roles in *The Trojans*, so they are very much aware of them. But still the problems are considerable.

"We have to be ready to tear up and change what we have done to adapt to the changing casts."

But, as Albery points out, there is one other, more stable, element in the casting: "Of course, the chorus is one of the biggest characters in the opera."

The production team has already decided to use members to the chorus on stage, even though there is no written part for it, in Act 4 which includes the Royal Hunt and the set ballets, since it is aiming at creating a sense of the chorus as ever present on stage for the whole opera.

But because of the variety of

casts there could be a tendency to approach the production from an abstract, or inanimate, point of view rather than build it around particular personalities

But Tom Cairns doesn't like the notion of it being an abstraction. He is thinking of a parallel to the Trojan war that was contemporaneous with the writing of the opera,

"It's not going to be that identifiable, visually. But at the same time you should not think that you are lost in some flat, nineteen sixties space."

Whatever the final form which the staging takes, the schedule is daunting.

The team have now presented its initial concepts to the three opera administrations.

The three of them will take the reactions to their presentation and develop and refine the concepts and represent the whole staging in detail, in June, using a larger model at a scale of 1:25.

Herein lies another problem. They have to build three such models to represent the three theatres in which the production will open, and the staging has to work equally well in all three.

The New Theatre in Cardiff, will be one of the smallest theatres in which the opera will be staged.

Rehearsals with the cast start in Leeds in the middle of August. ● Next producer Tim Albery plans his rehearsals.

Western Mail 17.5.86