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
What makes a great designer? In Maria Björnson’s case it is hard not to think that the blood of her forbears 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, Bjørn Björnson, and a young Romanian, Mia Pindan. Björnson was the grandson of the Nobel laureate, the dramatist Bjørnstjerne Björnson, a friend of Ibsen, and founder of the National Theatre of Norway. Pindan 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. Björnson, 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 a home life for Maria on the numerous occasions when Mia was away either because of illness or 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 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 choose 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 raised 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 eventually led to life-size drawings, of young female ‘friends’. These were seen by artist friends of Elizabeth Ratu’s husband who had...
a contemporary art gallery in London. Thanks to suggestions from Cecil Collins, Victor Pasmore 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 Kolta, 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 Kolta, “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 Blair, 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, *Kat’a Kabanova*, for the Wexford Festival, was co-designed with Sue Blake. 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
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 Gurnier staircase. But in time, thanks to an inspired beach dominated by a huge wrecked galleon. It was this production which lodged victim of love of glamour".

The international success of Phantom made Maria rich beyond her wildest dreams, but the move from pauper to millionaire 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 Byzantium-fort glamour A wall of acid 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 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. "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 unbending intelligence she brought to...
The Tempest

During the last act, after the arrival of the prescribed 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 Houpe, Griseldis 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, clearly-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 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”.

every...
The Tempest

From the House of the Dead
From the House of the Dead

set models and construction
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, in 1982, bears the signature of a director long associated with the theatre of Janáček: Isabella Vesco. Maria Björnson, on the opening night in Palermo, the opera was staged in its original language with surtitles in Italian. Maria Björnson 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 repositionings, rotations, and above all, with its mutating colours, is a great scenic invention. Today we find Ms. Björnson, 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 Metelchům domu) was the last opera by the great Moravian composer Leos Janáček, who began composing it in 1926, based on a novel by fellow Moravian Václav Janáček (1868-62) by Drury Dostreyevka, knowing that this would prove to be his last musical composition. ‘This is an opera of dark drama, without a story-line, without leading characters, built on a galaxy of characters, the only thing they have in common is the fact of living the same condition of oppression in a certain place of the dead (penal colony).’ From the House of the Dead was staged after the death of its composer, premiered in 1950 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 act.”

Even though the opera is considered by many in theatricality, Giovanni Battista Piranesi: “Le Carceri” (Prisons), whose illustrations have inspired countless film sets. This set by Maria Björnson 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 clothes and make the camp livable. They are marked by a dramatic tone, of the genius, of an extraordinary cross-section of lives, without a story-line, without leading characters that are staged without an interval. Ms. Björnson creates an autonomous space for each one of these autobiographical tales. The highest performance level and those intermediate levels become platforms upon which different characters narrate their stories, each different from the rest, thus Ms. Björnson creates a realist cross-section of an incarcerated hell. Ms. Björnson’s stage design works on a variety of levels and brings to mind the constructivist scenic machinery that was based on this principle so effectively staged on the stage, also allowing for an interesting movement of the detainees (repeated three times) over the entire production that, rather like a procession, keeps moving progressively 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 Björnson’s stage design.
and I began our work on Janáček’s operas with a production of *Káťa 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 *Káťa*. 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 Rake’s 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 *Káťa* 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 Roux. The outcome of this was an invitation from the Welsh National Opera to do a production of *Jenůfa*, 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 *Jenůfa* had been done at Covent Garden under Kubelík, 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. *Jenůfa* 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 Friedl 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
Mariá Björnson
rectilinear cyclorama of sky blue – its shape following natural world. The whole was surrounded by a
circle in a certain way by doing a rather better version 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 scarlet 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 avant-garde 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 but 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 features 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 Janáček and Mahler, 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.

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The final two productions of the cycle were undoubtedly our best work, both original as designs and in 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 “impressed” 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 the idea very much to exploit the notion of the accumulated debris of a life stretched out over this extended period, 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 scarlet 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 avant-garde 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 but 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 features 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 Janáček and Mahler, 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.

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Queen of Spades

Measure for Measure
Die Valkyrie
Hamlet
I have been asked if I would contribute something to this magazine, from a technical point of view, about working with Maria Bjornson. 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 Brompтон 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 show 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...
An 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 theater.

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 Opéra 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
I first met Maria in 1977 in the Wardrobe Manager’s Office at English National Opera where I was a very junior boy. Our friendship was cemented 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 we were in the right lines, and we did many shows together including Phantom of the Opera.

Maria did the most wonderful drawings which told the story of every character and did very clever things with the stage’s and her vision and she always got the best from people but did not suffer fools and was unforgiving of time - we did many shows together including Phantom of the Opera.

Maria as I do, “we were all in it together”!

I remember being right in the thick of it, with scenery malfunctioning, writers missing scenes, and big fluffy pillow. I was having a laugh with her set assistant, of course I was back at work in the morning.

We were both sitting in the stalls late one night, particularly tired and stressed, and Maria said “there, there...” as to the minute...? We had our disagreements and our Maria sent us home one evening from a technical rehearsal as it was too stressful. She was very sensitive to what she wanted and her signature “Critzy Critzy” fine black braid and ever hopeful of some refreshment!

We scoured the Antique markets together and Maria once persuaded me to buy a large screen as the backdrop to the boat, real doves on the rooftop, mechanical rats for the lair – we dubbed the scenery and engineering to drapes, from ornate mechanism, the travelling and tilting bridge platform, and worked out how we could squeeze the entire set into the Victorian confines of Her Majesty’s Theatre.

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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 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 Bjornson – to whom this volume is dedicated - demonstrating a design maturity that can only be praised for its rare visual impact. 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 origins of this dram a, revived a num ber of tim es while in the banquet scene all those present, from  the usurpers to the throne to their slavish courtiers, are dressed in yellow. B ut 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 w all of the cube drops blood, a prelude to the slaughtering of Banquo, the couple’s second brutal murder, while in the banquet scene all those present from the usurers to the throne to their slaves courtiers, are dressed in yellow. In the first rotation reveals that which for the director is its other face, the direct emanation of the demonic elem ent incarnated by the witches: Lady Macbeth. On this side, hitherto concealed, the cube appears like a cave, its interior a vivid red. In the fourth act, the cube appears in a very interesting alignment - divested of its rear 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 concentric crow ns that em anate from  the cavity of the cube; a photo of the set model remains as evidence. In the third act, a huge bloomed 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 Howlett), which is sensual, even erotic. This is how  Vick wants to portray the witches and the costumes designed by Maria Bjornson in a very soft electric blue, capable of intensifying the lighting, passing from dark, almost black, tones to very luminous effects. In the beginning of the first act, the cube appears in all its pow erfulness like a totem with cemented w rites. A first rotation reveals that which for the director is its other face, the direct emanation of the demonic elem ent incarnated by the witches: Lady Macbeth. In the second act, the cube appears in all its pow erful light like a storm around which the witches perform their rites. 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Les contes d’Hoffman
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

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 was never 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 given was 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 if 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.  ■
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

Dan Grieveson Composer/Writer Mozart Director Francesca Zambello Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

Katia Kabanova 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

Dan Grieveson 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 3rd October 2006 Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber Director Harold Prince

2005 The Little Prince Director Francesca Zambello Theatre/Location Metropolitan, NY/Vilnius

The Turn of the Screw Composer/Writer Berlioz Director Francesca Zambello Theatre/Location Metropolitan, NY/Vilnius

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

Kiss & Fall Of Mahagonny Composer/Writer Kurt Weill Director G. Vick Anthony Page Theatre/London Glyndebourne

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof Composer/Writer T. Williams Director Anthony Page Theatre/London Wyndham, 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/London Barbican

1994 Don Giovanni Composer/Writer Mozart Director Dalia Stasevska Theatre/Location Rrottentag Mozcas mi Chisolo, Italy

Sleeping Beauty Composer/Writer Tchaikovsky

Director Edge Moshinsky Theatre/Location English National Opera

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

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

Phèdre 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 25th January 1998

Macbeth Composer/Writer G. Verdi Director Graham Vick Theatre/London Lyric, Shaftesbury

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

1995 Assassins Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber Director Graham Vick Theatre/Location Wiesbaden, Paris

The Phantom Of The Opera Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber Director Harold Prince Theatre/London Sadler’s Wells

The Marriage Of Figaro Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare Director Nick Hytner Theatre/Location The Opera House

From the House Of The Dead 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

Triumph Of Love Composer/Writer Widekind Director Ian MacDiarmid Theatre/Location Almeida, London

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

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

Measure For Measure Composer/Writer W. Shakespeare Director Ian MacDiarmid Theatre/ Location English National Opera

Carmen Composer/Writer K. Weill Director Ian MacDival Theatre/Location Almeida, London

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

1986 CreditedComposer/Writer Strindberg Director Ian MacDival Theatre/Location English National Opera

1985 The Lovely Rose Composer/Writer Strindberg Director Ian MacDival Theatre/Location Almeida, London

Tales Of Hoffmann Composer/Writer Janáček Director Jonathan Kent Theatre/London Almeida, London

The Marriage Of Figaro Composer/Writer Mozart Director Nicholas Hytner Theatre/Location Glyndebourne

The Phantom Of The Opera Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber Director Harold Prince Theatre/Location London & Broadway

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

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

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

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 Tokyo (Japanese Tour), Tokyo

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

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

Aspects Of Love Composer/Writer J. Weil Director John Schlesinger Theatre/Location Sony, Las Vegas

The Marriage Of Figaro Composer/Writer Mozart Director Graham Vick Theatre/Location Royal Opera House

The Phantom Of The Opera Composer/Writer Lloyd Webber Director David Pountney Theatre/London Lyric, Shaftesbury

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

The Marriage Of Figaro Composer/Writer Mozart Director Nick Hytner Theatre/Location London
Downstairs And Light
Composer/Writer Stockhausen
Director Mike Bogdanov
Theatre/Location Royal Opera House
Camille
Composer/Writer Pam Gems
Director Ron Daniels
Theatre/Loc...
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