
Scaling back a super-size opera

The 1987 Houston Grand Opera world premiere of director Peter Sellars's "Nixon in China" featured life-size set pieces and scenes straight from news footage, but Scott Edmiston's approach will be more theatrical than realistic, he says. One difference already discernible: Opera Boston's budget of \$220,000 is roughly a fifth of the original's, adjusted for inflation.



ACT 1, SCENE 1 A lasting Sellars image was President and Mrs. Nixon's exiting a full-size replica of the Spirit of '76. "We didn't feel the need to do a realistic airplane onstage," Edmiston says. His production will evoke the aircraft with shadows thrown by Chinese rod puppets. "You don't stick your hands in them. They're more like cutouts on poles."

SOURCES: Carole Chamow, Kurt Howard, Scott Edmiston, Opera Boston; Brian Mitchell, Houston Grand Opera



ACT 2, SCENE 2 The Nixons attend a performance of "Red Detachment of Women," a Beijing opera created by Madame Mao. Sellars asked Mark Morris to choreograph it; Prometheus Dance of Cambridge will perform here, "recreating many of the original elements of the ballet," Edmiston says. A bit of inflation: Morris used eight dancers; this version will have 11.



1987 PHOTOS/JIM CALDWELL, HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

ACT 3 The opera's central characters spend the last night of the Nixons' visit alone with their thoughts. Sellars set them in a dormitory; Edmiston abstracts them into "a theatrical limbo. They're not in a specific location. Each character has [his or her] own small stage and lighting, isolated from each other."

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