



LEFT: The vast fan-shaped auditorium at the Caracalla Baths

1.0 a.m. often the finishing time—enjoying their opera in this leisurely way. For they have had their one to three hours' nap during the late afternoon siesta time, when every living thing tries to snooze off in the heat of the day; a wonderful habit made possible by the adjustment of working hours to a summer schedule.

Sandwiched between two massive columns of crumbling apricot-coloured rock is the 18,000 square-foot stage which Rome boasts is the world's largest. Its 10 per cent upward slope from the orchestra allows a perfect view even to the very back customers.

Across the stage, where once fat senators tethered their chariots, now ride teams of horses. I counted twelve in the parade scene of *Nabucco*. In *Aida*, a real camel or two lope along the Nile, while bullocks graze on its banks. Depending on the opera, any number and kind of animals trot happily in and out. Medieval soldiers, holding flaming torches, storm make-believe castles and bastions. In many of the operas, literally thousands of "crowd" players support the star performers.

Spectacle is the byword for the Caracalla Opera, and if sometimes the prima donna princesses are not so sylph-like, and the voices apt to be less perfect than during the regular winter season, one lets that pass in the excitement of the fabulous settings.

Each year, realistic scenes are more and more ambitiously depicted. In the Nile scene of *Aida*, for instance, one would swear that moonlit water is lapping at *Aida's* barge as it glides down the river. The Hades scene in Boito's *Mephistopheles* is terrifyingly real when Satan descends into hell in an enormous mushroom of smoke and flame. In the same opera, a glowing crucifix lights up the sky in a mysterious, luminous haze as, in the last scene, dawn breaks over the world, and good triumphs over evil.

One's heart pounds as the waves reach such fury in *La Gioconda* that the shipload of "badmen" is wrecked and disappears into the boiling sea. Waterfalls (continued on next page)

## Opera on World's Largest Stage

BY SYLVIA McLAREN

A FEW days after leaving Wellington in chilly winter weather, I found myself in Rome, sitting beneath the stars in one of the most romantic outdoor entertainment settings in Europe. It was the opening night of the 1954 summer opera season in Rome's huge starlit amphitheatre, set among the ancient ruins of the Baths of Caracalla. A warm breeze ruffled the tips of the tall cypresses, etched against the skyline. A great yellow moon rose over the crumbling ruins.

All was excitement and bustle in the auditorium until the curtain rose to reveal the glittering first scene of King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, in the seldom-played Verdi opera *Nabucco* ("Nebuchadnezzar"). The thrilling baritone voice of Tito Gobbi in the title role rose into the deep blue Italian night, and Caterina Mancini as Abigail stormed into the temple seeking her warrior lover.

The Baths of Caracalla opera is well known to many New Zealanders. Since 1937, each summer, except for the war years, has seen the extension of the Rome Opera House winter season to this romantic Third Century setting, where about 40 performances are staged from June to August.

Early in the summer, dozens of workmen are busy transforming the cool, dignified ruins of the Emperor Caracalla's baths (which may be visited all year round for historical and archaeological interest for 1/- a tour) into a vast fan-shaped auditorium seating 10,000. The design may be very different from the huge collection of marble and alabaster bathhouses, gymnasia, sporting clubs and social premises, where once the spoiled peacocks of ancient Rome amused themselves. Yet

now, seventeen centuries later, one can still detect the same passion for pleasure, leisurely taken, as present-day Romans savour their three to four hours of opera, interspersed with long intervals.

The open-air auditorium is cleverly lighted to deepen the rich foliage of the "umbrella" pine trees, and play up the soft hues of the fragrant, giant oleander bushes that line the walks and refreshment areas, where thatched-roof pavilions offer a great variety of refreshment. Tiny cups of pitch-black, potent Italian "expresso" coffee are served, as well as wine, any liquor you can name, iced-beer, tea, ice-creams, soft drinks, hot dogs, popcorn, and delicious Neapolitan "pizzetta" (small open-faced pies of anchovies, tomatoes and melted cheese) "hotted up" while you wait.

Ah, while you wait... for plenty of time is a Roman tradition. Between acts, in the three or four intervals which are liable to last from fifteen to thirty minutes, there is much social activity. The Romans love to gossip with friends while idling near the cool fountains and the vineclad peristyles beside the refreshment booths. They may heatedly discuss the last aria admiring (very pointedly) at the same time, the bare-shouldered women passing by in the

latest summer styles. Or one may watch goldfish in their glass tank set upon an ancient chunk of Corinthian column. It's all part of the evening's enjoyment. The Romans are well prepared to spend from the opening time of 9.0 p.m. until after

★ THE Egyptian army, horse and foot, crowds the vast Roman stage in "*Aida*." Radames (standing in chariot) is played by Mario Del Monaco, who will be heard in the same role in the YC link broadcast of the opera on August 22

