Power, glory of 'Orlando' emerge anew

By Richard Dyer
Globe Staff

The American Repertory Theatre's production of Handel's "Orlando," currently at the Loeb Drama Center, is a unique venture in the artistic life of the city and of the country. The run of more than 30 performances is probably longer than the entire performance history of the work since its premiere in 1733. The production is not in the context of a musical but of a theatrical season, and it is winning the support of people you never see at the opera. The performances are the result of an extensive rehearsal schedule that has permitted a thoroughness of preparation unheard of in the world of American opera: the length of the run will mean that most of the musicians involved will have performed "Orlando" more often than anything in their careers, with benefit both to it and to themselves. And the opera is being seen and heard in a theater of appropriate size and technical resources -- the Loeb brings the audience into a unique relationship with the performers and the music.

But none of these is the reason that this "Orlando" seems lastingly important. Certain theatrical productions become a part of the history of art, because they change our way of looking at things, listening to them and thinking about them. "Orlando" takes a place in that proud company, not because it is, perfect, for it is not, but because it attempts so much and so triumphantly succeeds in the most difficult things that it attempts. What conductor Craig Smith and director Peter Sollich and their colleagues have done is re-establish for today's American audiences the validity and communicative power of baroque opera, a form of art that had been pronounced dead even within the lifetime of one of its greatest creators, George Frideric Handel.

Handel's operas, and there are more than three dozen of them, offer almost impossible obstacles. To begin with, they depend on a type of vocal virtuosity that is even less common in our day than it was in the composer's. Furthermore principal roles in all of Handel's operas were written for a surgically altered species of singer, the castrato, that is now extinct. The plots of the operas are convoluted and constructed according to obsolete strictures of stagercraft -- each character must have an entrance aria; each character must have the stage after each of his arias. The scenic demands are often extraordinary; Handel's audiences expected lavish spectacle, magic effects, fire-breathing dragons and chattering crows coursing into the sky. And while the characters of Handel's opera are drawn from history and from literature that were entirely familiar to audiences of his time, they are strangers to most of us today.

Furthermore the operas unfold on a time-scale remote from most contemporary expectations of art; the "action" includes and disappears with the suddenness of the accidents of real life, while the emotional intensities awakened by such action can be spun across an aria lasting ten minutes. Furthermore each of Handel's principal singers, and their publics, expected a series of 5 or 6 such arias, composed to expose all their vocal, emotional and dramatic capabilties. And most of these arias are in the da capo form, which means that the singer repeats the principal section of an aria with ornamentation and commentary of his own after a contrasting central section, in effect doubling the length of time allotted to the ex-ORLANDO, Page A15
They took Handel seriously

ORLANDO

Continued from Page A11

pression of each sentiment. And white repetition in the disco or in
certain avant garde music is sup-
cised to suspend attention, to cre-
ate trances, in Handel its function
is to enforce attention.

There were fewer than a dozen
performances of Handel’s operas in
England in the 200 years between
1755, when he was still alive, and
1955. Most of the stage produc-
tions since, including the famous
Arts at the Boston Lyric Opera and
International Festival, have begun
with the fundamental assumptions
Handel cannot be trusted, that
the conventions within which he
worked, are dead. The assump-
tion continues that through heavy
weighting (particularly of da capo)
and recitative, the opera is made
clearly like the operas of the stan-
dard repertory, and therefore more
relevant or at least “accessible” to
temporary audiences. This has nev-

or worked: in destroying the qual-
ties of Handelian opera, modern
producers and conductors have not
created the qualities of anything
else.

Smith and Sellars began
instead by taking “Orlando” serious-
ly, by saying Handel was a great
musical dramatist and that “Or-
lando” is a great opera, and then
by asking “What is the nature of
its greatness?” and “How can we
communicate that in the theater?”

Their achievement takes its
strength from the inherent dramatic
ability of Handel’s music, which
shines through some necessity but
weakens compromising that
were made in rehearsal and
performance. The counteren-
schedulable alternate with Jeffrey
Gall in the male alto title role, for
example, didn’t work out, so San-
ford Sylvan sings the part trans-
poused by an octave—a terrible idea
made acceptable only by Sylvan’s
voice and dramatic artistry. The
budget has restricted the size of the
orchestra, so that some of the mu-
sic sounds thinner than it ought to.

and conceals one of the characters:
up from a trapdoor rides a hillside-
Taylor drinking fountain. It’s good
for a laugh, but what does it mean?
The self-satisfactions inherent
in Zoroastro’s personality and moral-
ity of the opera’s emotional joces,
the music doesn’t have the same
resenting the music becomes motion;
over the course of the evening you
notice the patterns of motion, the
way the characters move, the
vocabulary of gesture which
shakes into those of the other
characters, their feelings and desires,
and the settings, and the settings
and the characters’ feelings and desires,
and the settings, and the settings
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,
and the settings, and the settings,