

Robert Israel Wins Guggenheim Award

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A University of California, San Diego professor who is a fast-rising star in the world of stage design, has increased his luminosity by winning a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Robert Israel, of Los Angeles, was one of five UCSD faculty members awarded the prestigious prize on April 6 by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Israel, who is an associate professor in the UCSD Department of Drama, is currently co-designing with Richard Riddell the production of "Akhenaton," an opera by Philip Glass. The opera will open on Oct. 4 in Houston, and on Nov. 12 at Lincoln Center in New York City.

The Guggenheim award was granted to Israel in the category of sculpture for a project which, he says, "straddles the disciplines of design and sculpture.

"It has to do with the relationship of the form of the proscenium stage to the content on the stage, as opposed to how the form of the thrust stage affects its content."

The proscenium stage is the kind used in movie theatres, Israel said. It has a curtain, which can be raised and lowered to maintain the illusion which goes on behind while sets are being changed, or allows for magic some productions require.

"It's the kind of stage you would want for a production of 'Peter Pan'," he said, "because the audience is farther away from stage and prevents them from examining the illusion too carefully. It also allows for a absolutely frontal point of view which allows you to hide things.

"The thrust stage is surrounded by the audience on three sides and makes for more intimate theatre," he said.

Each stage presents different design problems, according to Israel.

"Pictorial grand illusions are difficult on a thrust stage. Instead, it's the kind of stage you would want for a production of 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'".

Israel says he is overjoyed about receiving the award, but it doesn't change anything for him.

"It's not unusual. It has to do with work, and it's a great thrill. I absolutely love my work, and the award happens in the course of work and progress. When there's a new commission it's like a gift. The Guggenheim allows for more work to be done," he said.

Does he think the Guggenheim will attract more work for him?

"It all ties in together," he said. "What brings me more work is doing good work. When you do good work people who give you the work see the good work. By hiring you it also makes them look better."

Israel received his Master of Fine Arts in 1963 from the University of Michigan. He joined the faculty at UCSD in 1978.

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