

Robert Israel to attend world premiere of "Satyagraha" in the Netherlands

July 11, 1980

Robert Israel, associate professor of drama at the University of California, San Diego, will be in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on September 5 to attend the world premiere of "Satyagraha," an opera based on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

Israel is not making the trip simply as an opera aficionado. The performance by the National Opera of the Netherlands is the culmination of a three-year collaboration between set and costume designer Israel, composer Philip Glass and librettist Constance DeJong. Richard Riddell, assistant professor of drama at UC San Diego, designed the lighting for the production.

The opera was commissioned by the city of Rotterdam and will also be performed in Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague.

"Gandhi was chosen as the subject of the opera because he was one of the few people whose life stands out as being both brave and saintly in this century," said Israel. "The forces he brought to bear could never be directed in any kind of violent way, and that's extraordinary. Every detail of the man's life was filled with beauty."

"Satyagraha" means "strength and non-violence" in Hindi, and the term was used by Gandhi and his followers to describe their movement. The text of the opera is taken from the Bhagavadgita, a Hindu scripture which deals with the nature of God. The scripture is a dialogue between a warrior prince and Krishna as they stand on a battlefield waiting for war to begin.

"The opera is all symbolic action, and the objects used in the design of the opera become iconographic," said Israel.

"Conventionally, the design of an opera occurs after the piece has been written," he said. "In this case, I was involved from the start. The music, text and action are parallel rather than integrated, so it all had to be developed concurrently."

Israel will remain in Rotterdam to attend the October 2 opening of "Lulu" by Alban Berg. He designed the costumes for this production of "Lulu" and co-designed the sets.

Then, Israel will return to the United States to begin working on a new opera with Glass and DeJong. Glass has received a \$100,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for the American production of the opera. The opera will open in 1983 simultaneously in Stuttgart and the United States.

The new opera will be about Oedipus, the tragic Greek figure, and Ikhnaton, the Egyptian pharaoh who founded the first known monotheistic religion. The pairing of the two is not so unlikely, said Israel, when one studies parallel events in the lives of both characters.

For more information contact: Leslie Franz, 452-3120

(July 11, 1980)