

Back-stage at Buxton

When a new theatre is built or an old one completely renovated it is customary to prepare a simple description of the auditorium and stage which is then posted in theatrical directories for the benefit of managers, both business and technical, who thereby can calculate whether the theatre will fit their pocket and their show the theatre's stage or pit; However, in this instance, very little has been done to the stage area beyond general refurbishments. Hence, orchestra pit apart, previously published guides to the technical installation of the Opera House, Buxton, still apply.

There are two reasons why reconditioning rather than wholesale replacement was chosen. Firstly, there was not enough money, second the back-stage area and equipment were in a remarkably fine state of preservation. The stage flying system continues to be the most primitive and yet the best proven known in the theatre: ropes and manpower. The timber grid over the stage, flying galleries and crossover bridges are all original: the timbers are vast, some 42 feet long of 6 inches by 1 foot solid. The flying is at 7 inch centres. The stage is raked at 1:24 as it should be in all theatres with this form of auditorium. Even the safety curtain is original although the mechanism to lift it has been completely overhauled and smoke seals fitted at the sides where

there were none before. At the sides of the stage can be seen the fork arms for sliding scenery on from the side, a vestigial reminder of the Georgian system of changing scenery in the full gaze of the audience and a system which must have been archaic when installed in 1903. In the auditorium provision has been made for modern stage lighting spotlights and, though no attempt has been made to conceal them from view, the positions have been carefully chosen so as to obtrude as little as possible and still do their job.

All traces of the original traps had vanished from under the stage and hence there was no conflict between conservation and modern practice when the new pit was installed. It is this new pit which also indicates the direction that future renovation will take: an improvement rather than a restoration which aims to increase both the excellence of presentation as well as the range of entertainment the management can provide to the Buxton audience.

There is at present no provision for sound effects and only the most essential communications network for the stage management – not quite speaking tubes but very nearly. A complete renovation of the technical area is yet to come, meanwhile the Opera House stage resembles the deck of some great sailing clipper, still rope hauled and with all its original timbers checked and scrubbed down.

A Strand Grand Master of 1938 has been

completely reconditioned and will provide good service for another quarter of a century or until the cost of spare parts becomes prohibitive.

Strictly speaking it is not a Grand Master but a hybrid of two types: Colour Master and the earlier Bracket Handle with a total of 42 circuits.

Modern electronic systems would offer considerable advantages of circuit handling but the local people are familiar with the old machine, it does its job and the 54 permanently wired circuits can be patched to it or to touring dimmer packs up to the limit of the 150A 3 phase supply available.

IAIN MACKINTOSH

Buxton Opera House Limited

Chairman: Mrs. Margaret Millican
Vice Chairman: Mr. Michael Williams

Interior Contract
Architects and Engineers and
Quantity Surveyors: Arup Associates
Theatre Consultants: Theatre Projects
Consultants Limited

Exterior Contract
Director of Planning: Mr. Maurice A. Brennan,
DipTP(Leeds), FRTPI, FACS

Architect: Mr. Antony Walker
Supervising Officer: Mr. Howard Walker
Quantity Surveyors: D. Rogers Associates

Main Contractor for
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