

# Autolycus

## Revivals, survivals, and many happy returns

'Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis?' Rubbish! Hang around anywhere in show business, at any theatre, fashion-show, or discotheque and everything is *exactly* as it was – and us with it. If the British ambition in terms of work is 'less of just the same for more money', our aspiration for our leisure pursuits is obviously 'more of just the same for less effort'. Hence all those old films and repeats of repeats on TV. Hence the blessed (and profitable) survivals in the theatre like 'The Mousetrap' and 'No sex, please, we're British' ('the longest running comedy in the world' if you don't count 'The Frogs', which was written, no less, to poke fun at Euripides). Hence all these revivals. And that goes for people as well as shows. Not just 'Hello Dolly', you notice, but *Dolly and Carol Channing*. Not just 'My Fair Lady', but *My Fair Lady and Anna Neagle (and Rex Harrison somehow involved)*. There is also the matter of 'Beatlemania and Brian Rix and of Tommy Steele reviving Tommy Steele'.

Any excuse for a birthday, that's us. 'Though one remembers sometimes that it was more fun to blow out the candles on the birthday cake than to eat it.

This issue of CUE has a full measure of revivals, survivals and birthdays to report on. From Frank Matcham's Opera House at Buxton to a parade of Ballet costumes, mostly of Diaghilev's period, in Edinburgh (Diaghilev would have been 100 this year, and it is 25 years since Richard Buckle put on *his* Diaghilev Exhibition and scented the air with Mitsuoaka in the *same* Edinburgh building).

Now, incidentally, comes the news that Strand are reviving *their* London Lighting Lectures at the ICA (tickets from RSE's Mr. J. Powley) on Mondays through November. Our own Francis Reid talks on the 19th. This is *his* 25th anniversary in the business. In CUE 3 he will be writing about that other happy survivor on the London scene, The Talk of the Town, which is now celebrating its *own* 21st birthday.

Altogether we don't know whether to feel young or old. . . .

## Chalybeate springs eternal

It has not gone unnoticed that the gala opening night of the first Buxton festival went off in gloriously, incorrigibly theatrical fashion. The Minister for the Arts, Norman St. John Stevas, one of the evening's lesser lights if you glanced down the guest list, expressed himself greatly relieved when the replacement principal soprano in Donizetti's 'Lucia di Lammermoor' came through the ordeal unscathed. She had arrived two hours before curtain-up, fresh from Munich, unrehearsed and unfamiliar

with the part, to replace the much-heralded new discovery who had been smitten with flu that very morning. In the event everything went well.

The theme of the festival was (loosely) the works of Sir Walter Scott and the programme came out nicely balanced between the two venues at which events were centred throughout the festival fortnight. At the concert hall, a glass and ironwork rotunda dressed up in black and white and pale blue, the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra gave us, safely but with some verve, a Berlioz overture (the seldom-heard 'Rob Roy'), a Beethoven violin concerto, and Mendelssohn's Scottish symphony. At the Opera House (which Derek Sugden writes about on another page) with its generous trimmings of gilt and cherubs, 'Lucia' was the undisputed jewel in the festival crown. What lingers in the memory, stimulated by the house's blend of intimacy and sharp acoustics, were the ebullience of the choral singing, and the sprightliness of the playing in the pit. Also, of course, the comfortable sight of tightly-packed rows of very Northern faces (standing room sold out by 10 o'clock in the morning. And best seats hit £8, mind). On the fringe of the festival (or should it be the side-whiskers?) the very jolly opera for children, 'The Two Fiddlers' by Peter Maxwell Davies, seem particularly worth remembering.

Finally, perhaps, it is Buxton that one remembers as the main event on the programme. A thousand feet up, with the Derbyshire Dales crowding in on it from all sides, its cascading river, its park floodlit, and, at its centre, an opera house that much travelled Brian Benn of Theatre Projects has described as 'the prettiest this side of Salzburg', the town is a faintly Victorian extravaganza in its own right. It also has citizens with a lot more energy and determination than most towns of its size. This was something admiringly remarked on by the Arts Council's director of festivals, Keith Jeffrey.

Plans for next year are to extend the length of the festival to four weeks (book now), and to retain the idea of a literary theme to tie events together. Paying allegiance to The Bard, the 1980 operas will be 'Hamlet' by the French 18th century composer Ambroise Thomas, and Berlioz's 'Beatrice and Benedict'. Nobody could complain that in the matter of programming, the company at Buxton, drawn from Welsh National and Scottish Opera, was being unadventurous.

## Enter pursued by a growl

The rebuilding of the new Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, West London (opened by the Queen in October) has prompted a good deal of criticism from disgruntled local ratepayers, some of whom have contributed

unwillingly to the theatre's costs.

Why, they demand, has Hammersmith Borough Council lavished 3.2 million on rebuilding the Lyric, not to mention a £320,000 grant for the first year, when down the road the Riverside Studios, also subsidised by the council, is already successfully providing 'theatrical amenities for them as want it'.

Local prophets of doom regard the council's heavy financial stake in the theatre as a proverbial waste of ratepayer's money.

Why not use the money to provide better sports facilities, they mutter. One local worthy even suggested the new theatre should be given to the Poles. The Poles? Yes, he said, the large Polish community thereabouts could do with a theatre of their own. Its very hard to find productions of *You Never Can Tell* or *Macbeth* in Polish you know. Even the Lyric's opponents looked slightly askance at this somewhat eccentric idea.

It was left to the local Conservative candidate, Mr. Jeremy Cripps, doubtless keen to make political capital from the controversy, to restore sanity to the debate. 'Beer and bingo are fine,' he exclaimed, 'but we need more than that. With the support of the Arts Council and of local businesses, with the right artistic policies, with expansion of restaurant facilities and the exploitation of television possibilities, I see no reason why the Riverside Studios and the new Lyric Theatre should not both flourish and attract people to Hammersmith as the Mermaid Theatre has drawn people to Blackfriars.'

Not surprisingly, Bill Thomley, the artistic administrator of the Lyric, concurs. When the new theatre was unveiled to the press he said that while his theatre would undoubtedly draw upon the same kind of audience as the Riverside, it would be producing different plays. Where's the competition if the same audience visits both theatres, he argued. 'We are delighted to be cheek by jowl with the Riverside,' he added.

But Mr. Thomley did admit that the Lyric could never be self-supporting, even with full houses every night. 'We will have to take the rough with the smooth,' he said, adding that it was about time the Arts Council, which has so far refused the Lyric a grant, made a contribution to West London.

He emphasised his desire to create a programme which would appeal to the locals in particular, as he hoped they would form the backbone of regular audiences. It was not his intention that the Lyric should be a 'try out theatre' where successful plays transfer to the West End.

Whether the programme appeals to the good people of Hammersmith and its environs remains to be seen. The councillors and theatre people, who comprise the independent trust which administers the Lyric, are clearly optimistic. And that's what show business is all about.