

Tempered with reality

BRIAN BENN

THE STAGING HANDBOOK BY FRANCIS REID. 160 Pages, published by Pitman, price £3.95.

One of the most difficult types of book to review is that of specialist technology, aimed at a wide spectrum of readers. It is a statement of how things are, and apart from comment of style, presentation and errors in fact, the reviewer is forced to read it all most carefully in order to judge its success as a source of information. This can be a dreary chore.

In his new book, Francis Reid describes the complex and idiomatic process of presenting a stage performance, and fleshes out the titles and functions of the players in this private drama with a lightness of touch and a strong measure of commonsense. His common theme, running through the three sections of Organising, Staging Departments and Staging Process, is the combination of planning and communication.

As to style, Reid has firmly held back on the comments on the ridiculous or overblown that mark his earlier work, using a gently serious approach to make his point: 'As soon as a theatre starts to receive subsidised income, there can be a temptation for financial control to become a little less stringent. . . .'

or
'Schedules are not imposed: they are agreed. A successful schedule must not only be realistic, it must be agreed by all participants to be realistic. . . .'

or
'The only true solution to the inadequate stage is to accept its limitations and adopt a scenic style that tries to make imaginative use of what exists. . . .'

Having explained the how and the who in the first two sections, Reid then devotes some excellent chapters to demonstrating how the basic processes are shaded in different forms of presentation, ranging from straight plays through musicals, opera and ballet to the one-night stand and the amateur production. This section illustrates both ends of a long scale, using original schedules to illuminate the complexities of handling 'non-available' opera singers in repertoire, and a vivid couple of days at the Piccadilly Theatre when the theatre was being rebuilt coincidentally with the production of *Man of La Mancha*. Even the Albery paint was ordered 'TO BE DRY BY 9.00 A.M.', and no doubt it complied. Another theatre faced with a more rapid planning session is illustrated by a hand-written panto cue list, containing the memorable instruction 'ELEX 3 - Bleed with oboe'.

The presentation of the book is pretty good and familiar to Pitman readers. It is free of typographical howlers and the illustrations are as good as the size and cost of

the book will carry. Not all the photographs are fully identified, which is a small shame. The numerous key words in the chapters are italicized, but in a type face which actually makes them less visible. My favourite illustrations were a photograph of a flyman apparently wearing a sporran (or an athletic support with a dual purpose), and that golden oldie of young Bristow grimly trying to free his hand from a Grand Master colour bank clutch.

As to fact, I must record that Reid has done his homework, apart from a slight lapse in the text where he confuses his brails with his breasts, but disentangles them in the good glossary. The index is cross referenced to the glossary, and the keen reader gets a further reading list of fifteen of the best current books.

The most stove-enamelled old stager will find interest in this book, especially anyone with passing curiosity of work outside their speciality and the jargon and pressures common to others. Reid succeeds in describing and tabulating a very odd environment and its occupants. The learner of any age now has a handbook to use as a check against their opinions of their own excellence.

CORRESPONDENCE

From Mr. Percy Corry

Dear James,

Congratulations on your first issue. Your CUE is interestingly varied and should meet with approval and I hope with commercial success.

Even if the old TABS had survived it was clear that some attempt would have been needed to broaden the appeal. This thought prompts me to offer a modest suggestion for your consideration.

Past issues of TABS have had many articles in which designers have described what they have done and how they did it but lighting, settings, costumes etc. have never had the independent appraisal they deserve. Just occasionally they receive a few lines of approval at the end of press criticisms. The critics restrict their opinions mainly to the script, the acting and general interpretation. It would be a welcome novelty to reverse the emphasis and to have informed critical opinion devoted mainly to the visual and technical details of productions with some assessment of their contribution to or deviation from the general interpretation. This extension of theatre criticism could be stimulating and, perhaps at times, provocative recognition of the work of designers and technicians. It would, I suggest, be necessary to have a critic who is able and willing to provide regular reviews of current productions: reviews that have impartial authority and candour. I hope he would not be anonymous nor be concealed by a nome de plume.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

PERCY CORRY,

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