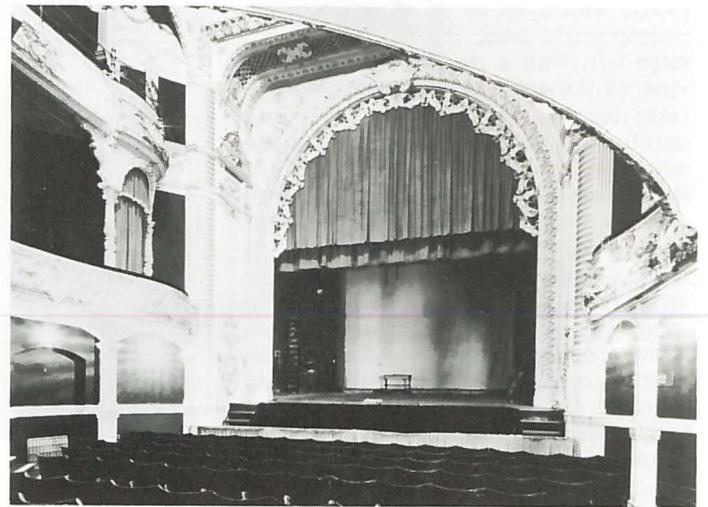


Old wine in a new bottle

The Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith was designed by Frank Matcham and opened in 1895. After a chequered career with high points under East at the turn of the century, Playfair in the twenties and thirties and with the Company of Three, the 59 Theatre Company and a series of premieres in the fifties, the Lyric closed in 1965. In 1969 the profession rallied (it had lost the St. James only a few years earlier) and a Public Enquiry was held into the proposed demolition of so historic a theatre. After a years' deliberation and in the best Lyric traditions of melodrama and of ballad opera the Minister handed down a reprieve. There was however a catch. The theatre could be demolished if the plasterwork of the auditorium was retained, but the plasterwork was only to be reused if someone were to build and pay for the theatre.

Enter the London Borough of Hammersmith who decided to foot the bill for the recreation of the old Lyric. Enter accompanied by the Borough Architect and Theatre Projects Consultants who in 1975 set about the job of rebuilding an old theatre on a new site: a job never before attempted in Britain though successfully accomplished in Germany (twice in Munich along with the rococo Cuvillies and the neo classical National Theater). To make it even more interesting there was an added difficulty. Since the theatre was to be in part paid for from the revenues of a two storey shopping centre on top of which it was to sit, Matcham's fluid but subtly organised plan had to be fitted to the rigid grid of Colonel Seifert's already designed commercial spaces below.

On 18 October 1979 Her Majesty the Queen graciously attended a gala performance of 'You Never Can Tell'. Britain's newest old theatre was ready on time and on budget.



Before and After — the proscenium and increased in width from 23 ft 11 ins to 27 ft 7 ins (8.4m) to increase the range of productions that the theatre can offer (see sketch plan opposite).



Comedy and Tragedy — these masks typify the works of Matcham at his best. Above the masks is a panel once solid which now opens to give a first class advance perch lighting position. Top right can be seen the only in view stage lanterns. These have been dipped and baked by White Light to match the decorative scheme of the auditorium.



17th October 1979 — the first paying audience at a Civic Preview of the opening production. The Mayor is in the stage left box. Note the way in which the four foot increase in width has been inserted into both circle fronts and the ceiling.