



The play's the thing

French's, the theatrical publishers, who live in Southampton Street, Covent Garden, next door to the house that belonged to David Garrick, are 150 years old this year, and have produced a scholarly guide-book to themselves to celebrate their birthday. It contains, among much else, an ABC of the playwrights and authors (round about 1800 of them) whose work bears their imprimatur, and records that, as early as 1856, the original Samuel French, who was an American, was boasting that he had 100,000 plays on hand. 'Plays! Plays! Plays! Plays!', his company advertised. 'For Reading Clubs, for Amateur Theatricals, Temperance Plays, Drawing Room Plays, Fairy Plays, Ethiopian Plays' (the black comedies of their times, one presumes) . . . and everything else besides from wigs to waxworks.

French's have prospered by catering for the greater optimism, diversity, and, indeed, the greater prosperity of the amateur theatre. Their 'Acting editions', full of explicit instructions on casting, costumes, movement, set-dressing and stage-business, which up to the 50's included also the full professional lighting plot even if it was to be used only on the boards of the village hall, are still the definitive manuals for fine as well as coarse acting. Their *Guide of Selecting Plays*, and its sister publication in America *French's Basic Catalogue of Plays*, are still essential start-points for every person mad enough to see himself (or increasingly herself) as a producer.

We must regret only that the *Guide*, moving with the times, has had to abandon its stringently restrictive classifications of character, which assumed easy familiarity in stock companies with how to play 'the tragedian', the 'light comedian', the 'low comedian', the 'ingenue', the 'Heavy Lead' and the 'Heavy Woman' (no, not Tessie O'Shea, Lady Macbeth). In wishing French's a jolly Birthday year, CUE suggests to them that some new acting exemplars might be brought back to the pages of the guide. How about the 'Liberated Woman', the 'Failed Romantic Male', the 'Unfulfilled Juvenile'?

Autolycus column contributed by Mike Walker and Anthony Pugh.

Sound as an artist's medium

PHILIP CLIFFORD

Harold Burris-Meyer, Vincent Mallory and Lewis Goodfriend: **Sound in the Theatre**, pub. Theatre Arts Books, 153 Waverly Place, New York, N.Y. 10014, pp. 93, \$12.95.

This is an important book, not superseded in the twenty years since its first appearance. Its reappearance, although badly mishandled in one isolated but important respect, is very welcome. If the arrival of review copies here signals the publishers' intention to get the book into bookshops, we are fortunate.

The authors' ambitious and radical aim is to treat of 'sound as an artist's medium' (foreword) in a broadly inclusive field which they define concisely and elegantly: '... any instance in which a sound is produced by man or instrument and in one operation travels to the listener's ear, and where between source and hearer, control may be applied . . . this definition excludes television and radio transmission, since there control is divided . . .'. The theatre's resources of sound are understood to be the artist's performance and the acoustical behaviour of the building as well as specific items like mechanical sound effects and electrical control systems. In progress from considering sound itself through hearing, acoustics, systems and equipment to matters of organization and operation, the authors simultaneously maintain their concern with theatre sound as a medium and present a remarkably well-organized view of theoretical and technical aspects of their calling.

Probably the most famous part of the book is the long series of formally-presented 'problems' in chapter V, in which a specific requirement is tackled in the light of an overall conception, often fully explained (e.g. Herbert Graf's version of the church scene in 'Faust'). The proposed solutions are reached by utterly direct methods that, in the case of 'Faust', must have involved formidable hard work and (for its time) technical complexity. The one-page section on audibility (p. 33) contains an astonishing amount of well-founded practical advice as well as the most important single observation on theatre P.A.: '*The response of the reinforcement system must . . . be adjusted whenever level is changed.*' (The authors' use of italics is sparing and always justified.) The uncompromised directness of the practical advice in the pursuit of an artistic conception is well seen in problem 15 (page 38), the performance of Widor's F major organ Toccata in a 'dry' theatre acoustic: 'Calculate the reverberation time of St. Sulpice where Widor was organist.' Well, of course — but how many of us would do it?

The authors' appeal to their own experi-

ence is elsewhere less formal. For example, they recall that virgin effects discs were employed at every performance of Erwin Piscator's production of 'King Lear'. Magnetic recording has made this a purely historical anecdote, but there is a clear value in knowing that Piscator's management spent the time and the money and thought it well spent. (They were not unique, of course; the Royal Opera House possesses more than a dozen unplayed identical 78's entitled 'Pigs in brushwood'. They sound remarkably like pigs in brushwood.)

By now it will be clear that the clarity, directness and method of the book make it uncommonly proof against obsolescence. The chapters concerning specific equipments were an exception and it is a great pity that the work of revision has not been sufficiently thorough. What appears is so out of date as to be misleading or time-wasting. For example, two block diagrams (pp. 48-49 and p. 51) show control desks in which the level of the signal is not uniform at the conventional access points. This can't be recommended, or even justified except on cost grounds, since it makes use of the patchfield a matter of time-consuming thought (and, in emergencies, unacceptable risk). This is a nonsense in a facility which should increase flexibility and convenience. One reason for this kind of design is that passive combining networks are employed instead of the virtual-earth mixer designs which have replaced them. The system recommended for floating transformer coupling of mixer to power amplifier results in the signal being as much as 20dB below mixer output level on its long, interference-prone journey to the amplifiers. The programme equalizer described on p. 61 appears to be a passive device, but active equivalents made in the U.S.A. have been available in the U.K. for at least eight years. Cheap and small transistor equipment has made constant-impedance faders, and their insertion loss, unnecessary. The provision of a table of amplifier output voltages with corresponding power values (p. 89) would be more useful if the circuit impedance were 8 ohms instead of the now uncommon 16 ohms. I have already laboured the point, no doubt; but the authors' account of purpose-built theatre sound equipment using transistors and integrated circuits would be worth reading. This reproach, for such it is, is aimed at the authors' and publishers' bookmaking strategy, and certainly not at their competence, which is elsewhere convincing.

Both publishers and authors, for example, deserve praise for their unstinting and effective use of diagrams, graphs and tabulation in presenting complex and valuable information. Acoustic properties