

REID ing SHELF

Will It Make a Theatre is subtitled a guide to finding, renovating, financing, bringing up-to-code, the non-traditional performance space. The two hundred pages of crisp factual nitty gritty are intended to give practical help to Americans in general and New Yorkers in particular. Some of the information is specifically geared to New York City building codes but that does not make the book significantly less interesting to anyone who is considering turning an existing building into a performance space.

Many of us agree that the success rate for smaller less orthodox theatres is higher for conversions than for virgin designs. Existing spaces, no matter how unpromising their shape, can often stimulate the imagination whereas the freedom of a blank drawing board can induce paralysis of the inspiration cells.

like *consider*. And is not self-questioning the basis of any design process?

The book is illustrated with line drawings, schedules, and a couple of jokes. The treatment of dimensions is very positive and the graphics often illustrate just why a certain dimension has to be the minimum suggested. The writing team have obviously had 'hands on' experience of doing everything in cramped conditions and there are many space-conserving ideas.

When I build my studio theatre, I will think most carefully upon this text.

It is unlikely that I would have bought the new biographies of *Hannah Pritchard* or *Robson of the Olympic*. However, as a member of the *Society for Theatre Research* I received these publications as an integral part of my annual subscription package. I am glad that I did. I usually enjoy the Society's publications and I got much pleasure from these volumes — not because I am particularly excited by the detailed careers of either Mrs. Pritchard or Mr. Robson or indeed their like, but because biography is such an excellent framework for presenting the sort of minutiae which are the essential stuff of feeling any period's atmosphere.

light the scene. The Stage Manager, with a notebook and pencil, remains on the stage as a connecting link with the unseen electrician.

'I want more light on the back,' cries the producer.

'Two more floods upstage, Bill,' says the stage manager.

'What mediums, sir — amber or pink?'

'Neither,' says the producer. 'I want to try white.'

'How's that, sir?'

'No good. Check them down. That's too much. Bring them up again. What are they now?'

'Half-check, sir.'

'Not enough. Bring them up . . . slowly. Slowly! More yet.'

'They're full up, sir.'

'Oh, all right; put in a pink.'

'How's that, sir?'

'No good. Try an amber. *Hm* . . . I don't like it. Try the pink again. Now try a straw. Let me see the amber again. That's not rich enough. I want a number four.'

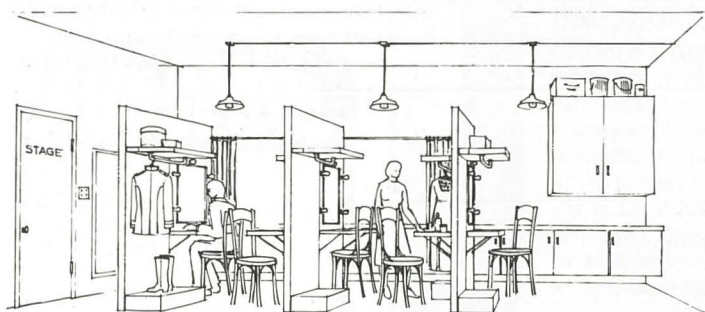
'Put in a number four, Bill . . . Eh? Oh! That is a number four, sir.'

'Then frost it. All right, that'll do.'

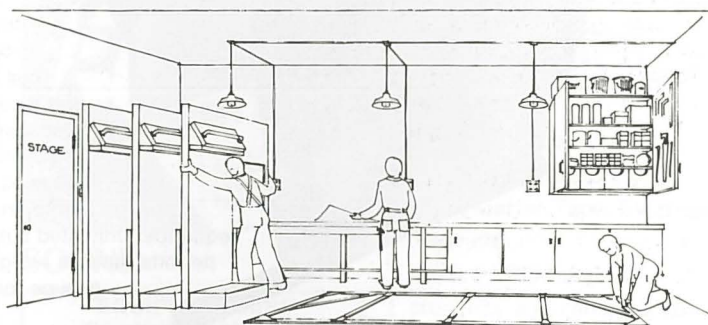
'Plot that, Bill', says the stage manager, making a note.

'Now your floats', cries the producer.

'Check up the whites . . . more yet . . .



Portable dressing rooms set up.



With dressing room units stacked, the multi-use space can become a shop, a rehearsal space, or can be used for other activities which do not conflict with the performance schedule of the small theatre company.

Will It Make a Theatre is in four parts (1) *The Search for a Space*, (2) *How to Get It* (3) *Designing and Planning* and (4) *Making it Legal*. The art of *searching* is deciding what to look for, knowing how to set about finding it, and then evaluating what you find. *Getting it* is about negotiating and funding while *designing and planning* divides its consideration of space into The Stage Space, The Audience Space, and The Support Spaces. Although the details of *making it legal* refer to New York's planning and building regulations and procedures, the general problems are universal and requiring consideration on the grounds of commonsense and safety. Much of the language is terse and much of the advice may seem to be a statement of the obvious. If the advice seems obvious, then just recall some of the theatres that we have all worked in. Was there not a lot obviously wrong? Now, if the persons who got it obviously wrong had been studying checklists of the obvious, might not some of these obvious mistakes been avoided? The checklists in this book are not dogmatic — they are sprinkled with words

These are academic books (the presence of *footnotes* is always a reliable indicator to the reader in search of scholarship) and the format belongs to a more leisurely age of publishing (there is a 37 page listing of Mrs. P's nightly performances).

For an impression of a more recent (but nevertheless now quite historic) theatrical period, I have acquired a second-hand copy of Philip Godfrey's 1930s *Backstage*. There is a familiarity about text and pictures which makes me feel that it was probably one of the books that inflamed my schoolboy desire for a stage career. Cynics — and we all must surely have just a soupçon of cynicism if we are to survive — will particularly enjoy the chapters on 'Studio or Art Theatres' and 'The Producer'. *Producer* is now the Mr. or Ms. that we call *Director*, so let us pass over an evocative description of a scene change when scenery was scenic and catch the Producer doing a bit of lighting. The equipment has changed but has the procedure? . . .

The Producer comes in front and begins to

Stop! Too much! Down again! That's better. Are the baby spots in?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Take them out. What's in your perches?'

'Ambers, sir.'

'Give me straws.'

WILL IT MAKE A THEATRE. Compiled and written by Eldon Elder; associate writers Marsha Imhof and Sharon Lee Ryder; with drawings by Eldon Elder. Published (1979) by the Off Broadway Alliance and Distributed by Drama Book Specialists, 150 W 52nd St, New York 10019. \$6.95.

BORN TO PLEASE. HANNAH PRITCHARD, ACTRESS 1711-1768. A critical biography by Anthony Vaughan.

ROBSON OF THE OLYMPIC. Mollie Sands. Both Published (1979) by The Society for Theatre Research, 14 Woronzow Road, London NW8 6QE. Each £6 to non-members.

BACKSTAGE. A Survey of the Contemporary English Theatre from behind the Scenes. Philip Godfrey. Lithographs & Drawings by Pearl Binder. Published by Harraps (1933).