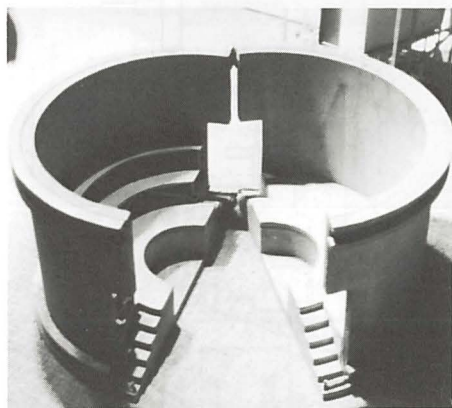


Leonardo da Vinci's secretly mirror coded plans for a 'theatre in the round' and the constructed model from same.



Two of his previous students were included; Pieter Hein's multi-levelled 'Die Rauber' from the Volksbühne, Berlin 1971, and a brutally sharp 'Antigone' from Susanne Raschig, which used every available corner of the Schillertheater, Berlin.

Zeffirelli's 'Carmen' livened up the Austrians; looked like one would have an exciting evening. Likewise Joseph Svoboda's 'Die Soldaten' by Zimmerman for the Munich Staatsoper.

Two novel features were a 200-year-old pen and wash model from Vienna, full of Biblican grandeur, and a lovingly constructed model for a 'theatre-in-the-round' from Leonardo da Vinci's secretly mirror-coded plans.

Our own presentation, now nearing the end of its first year of touring, looks extremely fresh and still holds its own, primarily because of its overall unity and keen individual economy of style.

After Munich, the whole collection will be on show in Zurich during June, before our golden trophy section (featured in Cue No. 1) comes to the National Theatre for July, August and part of September.

ROBIN DON

CURTAIN DOWN – to begin

REG BARTRAM

The term 'Curtain up!' has become so much a part of our theatre jargon that it can be written into cue sheets and it means that point in time when the stage is revealed and the action commences. This belief is reinforced by the O.E.D. which states, under the heading of 'Curtain' that it is the screen separating the stage from the auditorium, which is drawn up at the beginning and dropped at the end of an act. Curtains which rise from their parked position on, or within, the stage floor are known, but the associated problems tend to put them into the effects or novelty class and to be situated in the back stage area where their ever-present hauling wires will not prove a hindrance and may even be disguised with clever lighting. I do remember seeing one front curtain which rose to close the act, but its very venue, the Tivoli Gardens, probably puts it into the novelty class.

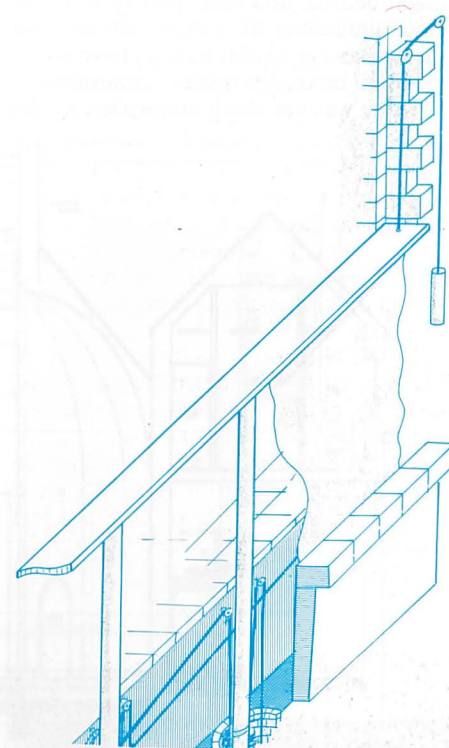
The first users of a front curtain on a grand scale appear to have been the Romans at about the first century A.D. and modern technicians might amuse themselves with the problem, in the absence of any contemporary technical explanation. This absence is fairly puzzling in itself as there still exists the ten books on architecture by the Roman engineer, Vitruvius. Book five is mostly devoted to the theatre, beginning with the selection of the site; then going on to the detailed lay-out and construction methods, seating, acoustics, stage and scenery etc. Elsewhere he shows a keen interest in mechanical contrivances, so how could he have resisted the minor marvel of a mechanical front curtain, spanning a width of sixty to one hundred feet with nothing above but the open sky? Not even a mention of its existence.

The direct evidence comes from archaeologists who, in the course of their excavations have revealed a trench, parallel to and immediately behind the stage apron front and the claim for this trench is that it housed the *aulaeum* (front curtain) in its parked position. These trenches occur at the theatre of Dionysos at Athens (dating from the rebuilding during the reign of Nero) and at the Roman theatres at Priene, Timgad and others, but notably at Pompeii, where it can still be viewed.

Along the bottom of the trench are stonelined holes of a drain-like appearance. This sums up the evidence and one can be excused for feeling sceptical. Logically the head batten of such a curtain should also be wide enough to cover the trench opening; so that it forms part of the stage flooring and it seems out of the question that this could be hauled from above, apart from the absence of overhead purchase points the ropes and bridles would need to disappear somewhere when the curtain was down, during the action on stage. Perhaps the trench had another theatre function, even a common drain, it was the lowest part of the whole building.

However, scepticism takes something of a

dive when one reads the only eye witness account which I've been able to track down. The Roman poet Horace writes, 'When it (the curtain) was dropped at the beginning of the performance, first the heads and last the feet of the actors could be seen. When it was raised at the end, first the heads and last the feet of figures painted on the curtain would appear.' He scarcely could have dreamed this one up and there is no doubt about what he described. It must have worked and somehow have been thrust upwards from below.



The trench at Athens is about 23 metres long and about 5 metres deep and there are 9 shaft holes in the floor of the trench which would allow this number of poles to push the head batten, with its attached loose curtain, sufficiently high enough to mask human activity on stage from the uppermost audience seats. How was manpower applied? The obvious solution would be a rope fastened to the foot of each pole, passing over a pulley high up in the trench and down again where it could be pulled by a man in the trench (nine men actually). A second pulley, for each pole, with a second rope down to a leaden counterweight would help. The hauling lines might even gather at some point and go onwards to a windlass, though this would be difficult in the trench itself. There would be some danger that the whole somewhat crazy contraption might topple over in the raised position and my suggestion is that a rope at the ends of the head batten, passing over pulleys high up on the side stage walls and down to counterweights on the outside of that wall would help to make it more stable.

CURTAIN UP – Fin.