

# Autolycus

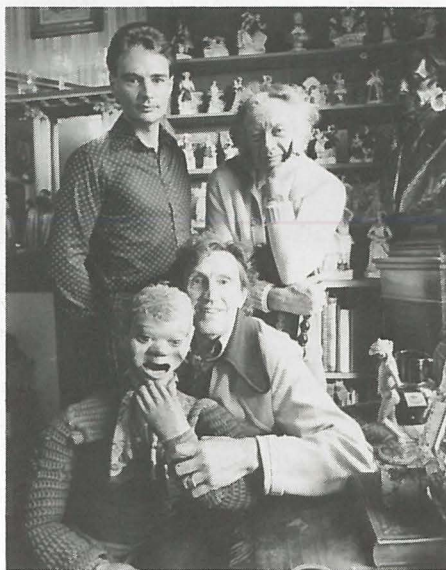
## Collectors' Corner

The faded Victorian gentility of the south-east London borough of Sydenham seemed oddly appropriate as the setting for England's best-known theatre collection. It put me in just the right frame of mind for the 'past'. And the past is what Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson have been dealing with for the last 40 years. Their vast and fascinating collection of theatrical memorabilia is so well-known that they themselves have become something of an institution in the acting world.

It is to them that actors, directors and theatre managements turn for information about past performances and productions. And more than likely Mr. Mander or Mr. Mitchenson will have that knowledge in their heads. They both admit to having photographic memories and, without hesitation, can reel off names, places, dates and even what so-and-so wore on stage in 1931. 'Sybil Thorndike said that if we hadn't been in this line, we'd have been detectives in Scotland Yard,' said Mr. Mander.

I had no difficulty in detecting their large terraced house. A brass knocker in the shape of Shakespeare's familiar balding pate told me that I was at the right front door. Mr. Mitchenson lead me into a dark and peaceful world of endless leather-bound volumes, oil paintings, water-colours, prints, china and plaster figures, playbills, posters, programmes, commemorative plates and mugs, files, letters, busts, silverware and theatrical *objets d'art et trouvees*.

The music hall, ballet, opera and the circus were also represented and there were literally thousands of old 78 rpm records. All nine rooms in the house were fully occupied with treasures, as well as the passages and corridors, the staircase and landings, the cupboard under the stairs, the kitchen and the loo. Not a square inch of wall space was left unadorned. It was bewildering to know where to look first.



Colin Maberley (left) and Joe Mitchenson. Seated front Raymond Mander with ventriloquist's dummy. (Photograph Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection)

Somewhat dazed, I was guided into an Aladdin's cave of a sitting room upstairs to reorientate myself over a cup of tea.

The amiable Messrs Mander and Mitchenson clearly live and breathe for the theatre. First nighters *par excellence*, their enthusiasm is infectious.

They met in 1939 when both were acting. Mitchenson was the son of a drama critic and Mander was related to Miles Mander the film director. Both had already begun collecting; Mitchenson was gathering postcards and books on the theatre and Mander's interest had been cultivated at the age of seven when he was given an album of theatre postcards. Their common interest sealed the partnership.

Forty years on brings a special reward for their devotion to the theatre. Their house is now so cluttered that Lewisham borough council has offered them, at a peppercorn rent, a large and permanent home for the collection in Beckenham Place, an imposing eighteenth century manor set in over 150 acres of parkland and just 15 minutes from Victoria.

Mander and Mitchenson were gleeful when a television reporter inadvertently referred to it as Beckenham 'Palace'. 'We now call it Beck House,' said Mr. Mander in a mock-regal tone. 'Our whole idea is to make it a sort of Kenwood for south-east London. As well as housing our collection, the council has plans for an arts centre; an open-air theatre, concerts, restaurants, the lot.'

Beckenham Place certainly has the grandiose air of a museum. It is built in Portland stone to a classical design. Four Ionic columns support a pediment bearing

the motto – 'Nihil sine Labore' – nothing without hard work. It couldn't be more appropriate for Mander and Mitchenson's labour of love.

If they can keep to their timetable, they intend to start moving in August 1981. In the meantime they have set themselves the awesome task of raising no less than £250,000 to pay for the cost of removal and, most importantly, the cost of cataloguing the thousands upon thousands of items they have accumulated. 'I'm not very good at counting,' said Mitchenson, 'and as we've got six tons of files in one room alone, we now have a curator who is gradually sorting it all out.' The curator is Colin Maberley who spends his day sifting and sorting, annotating and cross-referencing.

Donations from £1 to one of £5,000 have been arriving ever since an appeal was launched in May. On that occasion Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Sir Peter Hall, Lady Elwyn Jones and Prunella Scales, among others, all gave their seal of approval to the new venture. More recently, news of the appeal has been circulated to all the theatres in England. When the cast of 'Annie' at the Victoria Palace heard the call to alms they instantly raised £71 with a jumble sale between houses. Hattie Jacques donated her beads. 'That's the typical generosity of our profession,' said Mr. Mitchenson.

Financial help towards the cost of buying new items comes from the National Art Collections Fund, the Victoria and Albert grant in aid scheme and the Pilgrim Trust. The Trust paid £800 for two pictures of Henry Irving as Henry VIII and Becket now hanging on the wall. But many items are given to Mander and Mitchenson. The descendants of Forbes Robertson recently left his treasures to the collection.

All the great names in the theatre history are represented – an escutcheon carried in the funeral procession of David Garrick in 1779, a bronze of Charles Wyndham, pages written in a spidery hand from the diary of Macready, an engraving of John Philip Kemble as Richard III, two water-colours painted by Noel Coward, more by Somerset Maugham, a caricature of Maugham by Ronald Searle, a figure of Gwen Francgon-Davies playing in her first big success in 'The Immortal Hour' by Rutland Boughton.

Here is a first leather-bound and ancient edition of Thomas Killigrew's long-forgotten dramas, there are some plaster and wax characters from The Beggar's Opera and Peter Pan. Elsewhere are Venetian puppets, a ventriloquist's dummy, the original set-design for The Mousetrap, back numbers of The Era dating from 1863 and The Stage from 1880, even back numbers of Cue are in there somewhere among the dusty prompt copies, the theatrical stamps and the remains of Mander and Mitchenson's exhibition of stage designs which they took to Russia in 1978.

They have written some 20 books and contributed in one way or another to a staggering 700. As Dame Sybil Thorndike once remarked of them: 'The boys are our passport to posterity'.