

Management by the Book

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A patron of a recent performance in my Theatre Royal declared that I was on duty in a state of undress. *Undress* is a relative term and by my own standards I was decently clad – not, as one might suppose from the term ‘undressed’, clad only in my winter woolly one-piece – but properly dinner jacketed with a generous cummerbund to disguise the plimsoll line at the point of trouser suspension.

The accusing patron in question was, however, Mr. Mervyn Gould. Now Mr. Gould cherishes memories of a British Empire upon whose Hippodrome the sun has never really set. Every Monday morning he puts his band parts on the rail while lesser men have sunk to putting their tapes on the deck. His is a world of triple wing floods and butterfly swags, with a jupiter batten and trailers opening to a cameo dead. The Gould Standard for theatre managers requires not just full dress suit with white tie and cigar, but an attendant page bearing the manager’s gloves upon a silver salver.

Suspicious that my lack of dress sense might be but the outward manifestation of a more fundamental ignorance of the finer points of theatre management, Mr. Gould has submitted for my attention a manual issued to theatre managers in 1933 by the proprietors of one of the former provincial touring theatre chains.

I have studied the volume with diligence and application. There are many pointers in it which are as true today as they have always been. But there is also just a hint of the inflexibility of approach, of a stifling of possible initiative by the local man-on-the-spot, that helped to run-down the theatre chains.

Flick through the book backwards – and that is always my initial approach to getting an overall feel of any publication – and one is immediately shaken by the number of forms. Curiosity made me do a count and I discovered that proper management of a theatre on a touring circuit required completion of 17 daily returns, 19 weekly returns, and 6 monthly returns plus the maintenance of 24 record books. Each theatre had its own printed forms bearing that theatre’s name and frequently printed on its own identifying paper colour. Much of the paperwork was bound in book form with tear-out duplicates and triplicates to simplify communication with head office.

Precise hours of work are not stipulated for the Manager and his Assistant – and they are the only two people in the building whose comings and goings are not recorded (in an appropriate departmental printed ledger) to the nearest minute. However it is made clear that *The Manager and the Assistant Manager are to be at their desks in*

*sufficient time to glance at the morning correspondence before supervising the opening of the Box Office at 10am and under ‘evening duties’ the Manager and Assistant are informed that they should be in the theatre not less than 30 minutes earlier than the advertised time of the opening of the doors to the public, so that they can see that everything is in order, and that the staff is up to time. All good stuff, equally valid today, including an injunction to be in attendance during the assembling and dissembling of each audience and to inspect all parts of the house each morning and each performance. They must have been kept pretty busy doing this while completing or checking all the paper work. Nevertheless they were formally informed that *The Directors do not desire that the Managers attend the theatres on Sundays unless stress of business necessitates their presence.**

There is a timeless truth in the statement *As it is the company’s business to please the public, the Manager must pay particular attention to see that every member of the staff is polite.* However the ways of ensuring this have changed: today’s audiences would be positively alienated by a return to 1933 – *Men attendants should always stand to attention when spoken to by patrons. They must, when addressing patrons, salute and stand to attention. All attendants must always address patrons as ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’ as the case may be.* Instant dismissal is the sanction against smoking, eating sweets or chewing gum and any lounging about or unnecessary talking was strictly forbidden. And what has more flavour of a pre-feminism world than *It is essential to engage girls smart, intelligent, and of good appearance. Middle-aged women cannot be engaged.*

This flavour extends to the ‘Press Requirements’, where the photographic entry is an uncompromisingly cryptic *Plentiful supply. Non-copyright. Ladies preferred.* None of us would actually dare to say that today, but it is just what we require for publicity purposes!

And who would not like to have available enough advertising sites to enable a print requisition of 25 eighteen sheets, 20 twelve sheets, 50 six sheets, and 300 double crowns.

Typesetting costs were under scrutiny. There is a spirit of optimism in *Managers will note that they should endeavour to delete any superfluous matter from the submitted copy of Daybill and Programme.* This optimism is recognised in the subsequent sentence *It might be necessary to obtain Touring Manager’s consent.* Contractual programme biographies may be fairly new, but the niceties of Billing are an evergreen.

The Manager’s technical responsibilities seem to have been fairly limited. Apart from countersigning the daily, weekly and monthly flow of backstage staff, lamp and meter returns, it was noted that *The Manager will satisfy himself that the Stage, Property, and Electrical Staffs for the week are the minimum required, and discuss these minimums with the Head of each Department each Monday forenoon.* Still a

difficult area because such calls are made by the visitors and not by the theatre: presumably, however, a big touring circuit could bring some pressure to bear on the number of showmen called by the visiting company. (The cost of the get-out has always acted as a break on calling excessive get-in crews.) But it is still valid to particularly note that *no unnecessary lights are burning in any part of the theatre, front or back.*

There is some still valid advice on comps: *Managers please remember that our seats are our only goods for sale, and the issue of complimentary permits must be carefully controlled. This permit system is much abused, and while it is necessary upon occasion to dress the house, the greatest care must be taken in doing so.* There is also some positive tuition in the art (in one or two theatres I have recently attended, the lost art) of *obviating rows of empty seats between different priced parts of the House.*

However I am sure that NO manager ever anywhere has needed to be formally instructed to *Study the plans daily and note how things are shaping!*

For Mervyn Gould’s benefit *It is understood that full Dress Suit is worn at Evening Performances, and Morning Clothes during Matinees.* But, Mervyn, there is nothing about an accompanying Page with silver salver. Had decadence set in as early as 1933?

REIDing SHELF

I first saw *PERFORMING ARTS. An Illustrated Guide* on the new titles shelf of a bookshop. When I flicked through the pages I saw lots of pictures that suggested that the book ought to be on my own shelves – and on the shelves of CUE readers. I therefore invited the publishers to submit a *reiding* copy. Closer inspection revealed that this book must come high on the Christmas stocking hope list of anyone interested in the performing arts. (And if you are British and consequently educated to be afraid of the word *Arts*, fear not: this book could equally be called *Performing Entertainments*).

The pictures are not only lovely they are there for a purpose: they are not mere graffiti. Nearly every picture has a positive instructive message and most captions are model clarifications of why the picture was chosen. The text is tightly written. It has to be with 225 pages – albeit coffee table pages – to get through Plays, Opera,