

the 1903 Old Heidelberg, has a frontage on 41st Street magnificently restored while inside all of its boxes have been amputated, one manager having discovered that porn so inflamed his patrons that they resorted to the boxes for – well nothing new in *that*, Holland designed basket boxes from which it was impossible to see the stage of Drury Lane in 1794, a practice Wyatt kept on in 1811.

In 42nd Street we had discovered one almost untouched beauty, the Victory, alias Belasco's, née the Republic on September 27, 1900. This theatre predates by three years the Lyceum which is generally considered to be Broadway's oldest theatre. Thus the Victory is actually the first theatre to be built in this part of New York. The plasterwork is rich and largely intact. It is a horseshoe house, tiny by American standards, with the feel of the Criterion. It has three levels (or two mezzanines, the euphemism for balcony favoured by stair-hating New Yorkers). Today it is all over white and red but the quality, as a comedy house, shines through. That a Londoner would feel remarkably at home is what is so unusual; it is radically different in shape and layout from the theatres built between 1903 and the Depression.

Something had by now dawned on the single Brit on board for this the Conclave of the New York Chapter of the Theatre Historical Society. There had been a whole generation of theatre building in America



'Voluptuous Pagan Ornament!!!' (photo Glenn Loney)

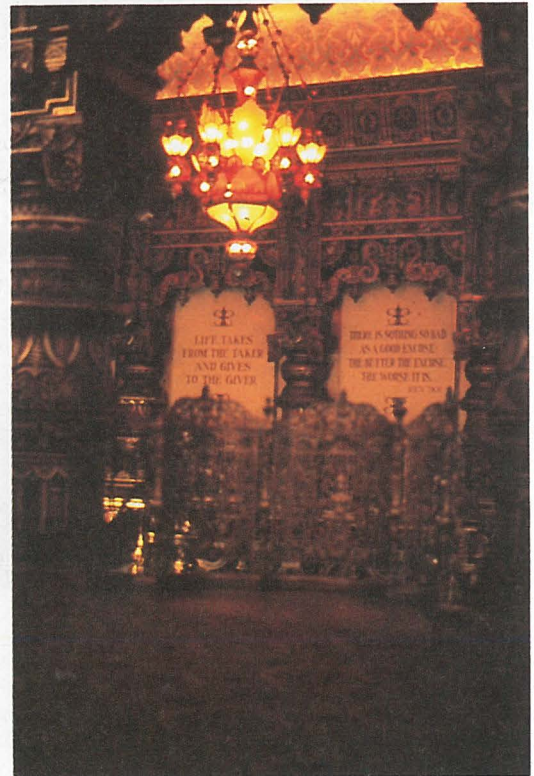


'A Rajah's Ransom'. (photo Iain Mackintosh)

which we in Britain do not know. On this side of the Atlantic the relatively few theatres built between 1905 and 1914 generally followed the pattern of preceding boom years. There followed a fifteen year moratorium from which we had emerged with theatres as pedestrian as Piccadilly or Cambridge in London, or as clumsy and mean spirited as the Playhouse in Edinburgh or the Empire in Liverpool. But in America nearly all their best theatres date from 1905 to 1930 while even the newest ones follow that pattern.

How does the Broadway pattern differ

from the Shaftesbury Avenue mould? The stages are all size for size wider than in Britain – giving substance to the story that on the sixth day God created the 30 ft wide proscenium but the Americans, being further away, did not hear properly and made it 40 ft. (Result, all those multi-set



The Gospel according to the Rev. Ike (photo Iain Mackintosh)

naturalistic modern plays from Tennessee Williams *et al.*, which are grist for the lighting designer but a strain if you are sitting at the end of the front rows.) Then the architects, Grad, de Rosa, Lehman, Lamb, Ahlschlager, Rapp and Rapp, and Krapp (sic), pulled the patrons in the front