

# Autolycus

## Back to School

The Arts Council is running a second one-month course for arts administrators, starting on January 19, 1981 at the City University Centre for Arts, Northampton Square, London EC1. It is aimed at sharpening up the skills of arts administrators in every sphere of the arts, from theatres and arts centres to touring companies. It also serves as a useful refresher course for more experienced administrators.

The course covers such fields as book-keeping, budgeting, budgetary control, licensing and employment. There will also be tutorials, seminars and opportunities to extend and develop specialised interests and skills.

The course fee is £150. The Arts Council will be offering bursaries to enable some students to attend.

## Twelfth Night at the Wells

Lilian Baylis re-opened Sadler's Wells Theatre on Twelfth Night, 1931, fifty years ago next month. The site on which the theatre now stands, furthermore, has been occupied by buildings devoted to entertainment since 1683, when Mr Sadler discovered the mineral wells in the ground of his 'musik house'. Baylis found the present building in a state of disrepair approaching a derelict shell and launched an appeal for its improvement. The rest is history.

With the emphasis now on dance and opera, the Wells is London's main lyric touring house, not to mention the home of the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. So its fiftieth anniversary celebrations will focus on these fields with tributes from top performers.

Starting with a party for 1,000 people

featuring the Twelfth Night Revue and a vintage bus trip from the Old Vic to the Wells to collect celebrities from the National, Coliseum and Royal Opera House (all associated at one time or another with Baylis or the Wells), the send-offs will continue until June. The other four theatres will also mount their own tributes, among them the unveiling of a plaque to Baylis in the dress foyer of the Coliseum.

Any veterans of the era or friends who've not been contacted or bought tickets for the party and cabaret on January 6 should write to Mary-Ann Bemish pronto enclosing six pounds (all in) for each ticket . . . they are going like hot cakes.

## But yet the pity of it, Iago

As the cries of 'wolf' grow louder and louder among West End theatre managements and darkened or half empty theatres testify to the gravity of the problems facing the industry, there lurks an even more sinister threat, one of self-destruction.

The vultures of the business, who live not on remote cliff tops but in agents' offices, lighting hire shops, at stage doors and even onstage, are the black angels of death, whose murderous cries and poisonous influence is harder to stomach than the twin evils of rampant inflation and rocketing costs.

These black creatures' chief delight is rumour. Not informed rumour, which is after all the very fabric of showbusiness, but idle invention, malice. And their motive? Ego. Nothing as outgoing as the bearing of good news, but the mischievously selfish aim of inventing stories where no juicy, real-life disasters have come to their ears.

So widespread are some of these rumours that one can begin to doubt one's senses. The brainwashing can be persistent, and, coming as it does from the very heart of the theatre industry, it really hurts. The effect is truly poisonous, alas, since it spreads doubt and gloom on even the most successful shows.

For months now theatrical masochists have rubbed their hands with glee at each fresh disaster besetting 'Sweeney Todd', the most conspicuous recent victim of the rumour machine.

Someone heard of a producer hiring lighting-equipment for his show at Drury Lane, which would follow on the heels of Sweeney. Was he *already* hiring effects back in July? 'Mack and Mabel' was going to open at the Lane on September 10; then 'Barnum' was going to squeeze out the Demon Barber after its acclaimed New York run (although another variation was squeezing 'Annie' out of the Victoria Palace instead); and finally London's only pantomime this year was to open after Sweeney's closure (in fact Jim Davidson in 'Dick Whittington' has been booking for its Palladium season for months and there will no doubt be other pantos as usual).

Ever since the first night of 'Sweeney Todd', it has been an obsession that it cost £500,000 to stage, and would be the costliest failure if it closed.

Even the rave notice in the Sunday Times, which described it as a 'brilliantly integrated piece of music theatre, breathtakingly impressive, with stunning performances', could not resist adding that 'if it were to fall, the expensive crash would be heard all over London'.

So, finally it did close in mid-November, barely five months after it opened. It ran at a weekly profit, modest admittedly, but the half full houses would have filled the Prince Edward where 'Evita' is playing, so percentages are deceptive. And we should remember that at Drury Lane this superb show was playing eight performances a week.

We should all have been rejoicing, of course, that the English production of Sweeney was as successful as it was. This was the nearest Stephen Sondheim's music has got towards operatic form. The New York Met has taken up its option and will include it in its 1981 season. Meanwhile the U.S. production with Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou opened in September in Washington D.C. for a year-long nationwide tour. All we have left is Sheridan Morley's comment that to anyone who cares even remotely about the future of the stage musical, 'Sweeney Todd' would *have* to be judged the most important musical of the decade.

It would be foolish to claim that silly or even malicious rumours killed Sweeney. But in this case, as with many others on the theatrical scene, one might say again 'with friends like these, who needs enemies?' Anyone can dislike a show - even without seeing it. But what is gained by thoughtless gossip of the poisoning kind? With much of the media only too willing to be misinformed about the realities of our business, speculations and innuendos,



Alas, poor Todd.