

REIDing SHELF

Theatres and Audiences in the Eighteenth Century is the subtitle of Allardyce Nicoll's **THE GARRICK STAGE**. The book is an attempt to help us to see eighteenth century theatre through eighteenth century eyes. My own eyes are certainly grateful: they are now better equipped to interpret the evidence. Much of the book's proposition derives from Kant's declaration that *The eye brings with it what it sees*

The theatre historian needs to preserve, or try to preserve, a double vision. His first objective must be to determine what might be called factual or physical truth—the shape of the theatres, the methods used in translating scenic designs into actual sets, the mechanics of the stage, the prevailing trends in histrionic style, the playhouse habits and customs. But in addition, and even more importantly, it should be his task to try to see these things as they were seen by contemporaries, and it is here that Kant's statement becomes of paramount significance. Obviously, for example, the painters and engravers frequently refrained from depicting certain things so familiar as to remain almost unseen. The stage-doors, for example, were permanent features of all playhouses, but on occasion an engraver could omit them entirely while hardly any illustration shows us performers making their exits or entrances by their means. This leads us to suppose that, although the doors would have been close objects of attention for us if we had been able to attend one of Garrick's performances, they were practically invisible for the spectators of Garrick's own time.

Allardyce Nicoll goes on to suggest (and I believe him) that, whereas prints and paintings which show the actors against wings and shutters confirm what we have already learned about playhouse realism from other sources, pictures which are less architecturally faithful may be more important to our knowledge. They reveal what eighteenth audiences thought they saw. (When tomorrow people look upon today's theatre will they realise that our audience see, but do not consciously perceive, the exposed lighting, the loudspeaker stacks, and the acres of black masking? And how would today's audience respond if they were suddenly transported to the 1930s normality of battens and floats?)

For me the outstanding chapter in the book is *Lights and Scenes* from which I now more clearly understand Garrick's lighting reforms. . . .

When, in 1763, Garrick visited the Comedie Francaise his first impression was that the house seemed to be 'dark and dirty', yet it was not long before he came to realise that considerable benefit accrued from the absence of the unshielded overhead lighting fixtures; and his return to London found him fully determined to effect a change—almost a revolution—at Drury Lane. What he actually did is certain, and there would seem to be but small doubt concerning the way he did it. The certainty is that he removed the chandeliers, while at the same time he sought such means as might compensate for their loss. To achieve this end, he evidently did three

things. First, he increased the number of candles set in concealed positions, and probably he insisted that these candles should be of the best quality: whereas his annual lighting costs in 1747 had amounted to a little more than £400, in 1766 they had risen sharply to £1,200 and during the season of his retirement they soared to nearly £2,000. In 1765 *The Public Advertiser*, commenting on his innovations, was right in declaring that now the public was being given 'a perfect Meridian of Wax'. Secondly, there is reason to believe that he both improved the lamps in the footlights and supplied them with reflectors: at any rate he was at this time showing considerable interest in instruments of such a kind; on June 15, 1765, his friend Jean Monnet, obviously in answer to an enquiry, wrote to say that he would send him 'a reflector and two different samples of the lamp you want for the footlights at your theatre'. Thirdly, there is further reason to guess that he equipped the scene-ladders behind the wings with similar reflectors thus causing *The Annual Register* to note particularly the 'lights behind the scenes, which cast a reflection forwards'.

It is almost needless to say that the disposal of nearly all the lighting instruments in concealed positions offered better opportunities for controlling both the strength and the colour of the illumination, while at the same time a new significance came to be attached to the scenic area.

. . . . *The Public Advertiser* drew special attention to the fact that now 'you have a full view of the whole stage' As a result, the actors gradually were prepared to move back from the front position which previously they had tended to occupy and they were prepared to make at least some of their entrances and exits from within the space behind the frontispiece. Nevertheless, the movement was slow, and many years were to pass by before the stage-doors were abolished, before the platform was cut down and before the players, forced to accept the conditions and conventions of a new age, came habitually to perform their dramatic movements within settings framed like pictures.

The chapter on *Mixing with the Audience* is very helpful in evoking the performance atmosphere and the chapters on *The Idea of a Mid-Eighteenth Century Theatre* and *The Playhouse* are very good introductions to the period while also forming good reading (well annotated) for the Georgian Theatre Kink.

The Garrick Stage is a posthumous work of Allardyce Nicoll. It has been edited by Sybil Rosenfeld who has chosen the illustrations. Some are, as they should be, familiar classics. Others are less well known. All are apt. The page to page transposition of the 1763 engraving of Covent Garden during the 'Fitzgiggo' riot with an anonymous 1765 oil painting of *Macbeth* in the same theatre summarises what this book is all about: the narrowing of the eyes by which we can transport ourselves out of a working light glare into the ambience of a performance.

Turn of the century is a useful—and consequently much used—phrase to categorise the bulk of Britain's heritage of conventional theatre architecture. The century turn is that of nineteenth into twentieth. Compared with the rest of Europe, we have very very little eighteenth century theatre building still standing—and none of it in mint condition. Not for us the gradual nineteenth century transition of court theatre into civic theatre: it was to be mid-twentieth century before British theatre was to be recognised as a social amenity on a par with books and paintings. When that recognition came, it was on a quite classic "too little/too late" basis and stages were felled without responsible assessment of their past or future.

About 120 of the theatres that fell and 34 of the theatres that remain were the work of Frank Matcham. The swings of fashion can be extreme. The current adoration of Matcham is as positive as earlier reaction against him. **FRANK MATCHAM Theatre Architect** is inevitably and, at this time appropriately, sycophantic but it certainly makes clear why he was the leading British theatre architect of his time.

The book reveals his uncanny ability to keep coming up with elegant solutions to the problems of absurdly proportioned sites while coping with the increasing demands that were, quite rightly, being imposed by developing safety codes particularly in respect of exits. And within these theatres he found ways of accommodating the large seating that commercial viability demanded. The patrons of Matcham theatres always had a view of the stage even if their feeling of contact tended to be rather more with their fellows than with the actors. Above all, the ambience of a Matcham theatre was sumptuous: this was a night out and no mistake.

The turn-of-the-century theatre explosion was profit motivated: Matcham was at hand with a cost-effective product. And a lot of flair.

His theatres are not ideal, especially when compared with the same period in central Europe where less strenuous commercial pressures enabled the retention of the eighteenth century's shallow tiers. Matcham's seating capacities could only be attained by extensive overhangs—his theatres can have a delightful intimacy from the best seats, but from the back of pit and circles there is an inevitable tunnel effect. Also, inevitably, the exuberance of much of his plasterwork, especially in its oriental extremes, can rival the stage picture rather than focus upon it. Nevertheless, while, for example, the clean lined rococo purity of the court Schlosstheater is just right amid the exuberant splendours of Potsdam, the bleak poverty of Edwardian England demanded the escapism of baroque extravagance in its popular theatre.

However you rate Matcham, this new book is a treasure box for anyone interested in theatre architecture—indispensable to