



Frank Matcham's Belfast Grand Opera House was opened in 1895 and restored in 1980.

anyone (like me) whose heart beat notches up a few extra revs on entering any real theatre auditorium. Its publication is assisted by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and occasioned by the restoration of Belfast's Matcham *Grand Opera House*. Edited by Brian Mercer Walker, the book has a chapter on the Belfast restoration by its architect-in-charge Robert McKinstry, and contributions from many Matcham specialists including Michael Sell, John Earl, Sean McCarthy, Christopher Brereton and, of course, Victor Glasstone who sets Matcham within the context of his architect contemporaries.

There are a dozen plans and a couple of dozen exteriors plus (joy of joys) about sixty interior illustrations. There is a short description of each extant theatre with a note on its present status—oh blessed be the game of Bingo for it hath kept so many theatres upstanding in the hope of restoration. An appendix lists theatres built, rebuilt or altered by Frank Matcham—in many cases with interesting contemporary newspaper quotations.

I rejoice in the Matcham heritage but, at the risk of provoking a few murmurs (perhaps even screams) of rage, I would respectfully suggest that the Matcham theatres do *not* provide a potential source of positive ideas for future theatre builders. Matcham was housing a pop theatre. His Royals, Empires, Palaces, Alhambras and Hippodromes were built and sustained by box-office profits from audiences who flocked to the actor-managers' melodramas. What did they see? Modern revivals are usually disastrous as a result of failure to apply stylistic truth to the acting, direction and scenography. However we are now far enough away from the period to take the sort of serious objective view that is necessary if we are to present these late nineteenth century plays either with historical accuracy or in a relevant contemporary idiom.

Who will be the first to restore *The Bells*—the RSC or the National?

My own insight into the period has been helped by the publication of **HENRY IRVING AND THE BELLS**. The core of the book is Irving's personal script of the play with which its extensive stage directions. Editor David Mayer's introduction sets the play within the context of its period and creative team. Eric Jones-Evans who saw performances by Henry Irving, H. B. Irving and Martin Harvey, as well as playing the lead with his own company, contributes an evocative memoir. He also joins David Mayer in providing script annotations which amplify the text in a particularly constructive way.

The book prints a piano reduction of the music score with an introduction by Nigel Gardner discussing the role of music in *The Bells* in the context of the theatre music and theatre orchestras of the period. This music plot together with scene and costume plots and a goodly selection of contemporary illustrations plus first night reviews from the Times and Observer (Clement Scott) enable us to piece together some sort of evocation of performance.

There is some interesting stuff for the technician including the disposition of the limes in the vision scenes with a stipulation to use *dia* (iris diaphragms which would have had a softening effect when used with plano-convex optics). And the receipt for *snow* is given as:

¼lb Common Yellow Soap
A Small piece of Soda
3 pints of water
all boiled together, then churned in machine till thick.

What comes through the whole book is the professionalism of the Irving approach and the dramatic sincerity of a play which (to quote David Mayer)

thoroughly deserves the recognition it received in its own time and again today as a remarkable psychological drama which compels its audience to sympathise with a man guilty of a vicious murder.

Coming up to our own time, John Elsom has charted the drama landscape of the past 35 years in **POST-WAR BRITISH THEATRE CRITICISM**. His method is to select several reviews for each key production and tie them together with a piece of his own. The play selection is pretty good—no one would, I think, quarrel with Guthrie's *Thrie Estaites*, *Cocktail Party*, *Streetcar*, *Look Back*, *Birthday Party*, *Wars of the Roses*, *Marat/Sade*, *Rosencratz & Guildenstern*, Peter Brook's *Dream*, *Equus* and *The Norman Conquests*. And there are three dozen more.

There are critics for all seasons—I have personally always inclined towards entertaining positivists like Levin and Tynan. They are well to the fore in this book; and two particularly felicitous phrases are included to remind me of critics who influenced my formative years: Stephen Potter ("... produced the play to pieces") and Ivor Brown ("... a death worse than fate").

John Elsom has picked well and summarised well—take this assessment. . . .

Terence Rattigan was the theatrical craftsman of his time. His characters were convincing, his scenes worked theatrically, his dialogue was precise and telling. He could also build a play so that they proceeded with an even logic from beginning to end: and these skills attracted a wider audience than simply the Aunt Ednas for whom he was supposed to write. I prefer, on the whole, his one-act plays to his full-length ones, because his themes often seemed too slight to sustain interest over two and a half hours despite his technical control. Accordingly from his several successes of the early 1950s (*The Deep Blue Sea* among them), I have chosen *Separate Tables*, two one-act plays which share a common setting, a shabby genteel private hotel. The sympathy which Rattigan extends to the new middle-class poor contrasts with the later studies by John Mortimer and Giles Cooper, who are both more acid in their observations; while the skill with which Rattigan handles the different stories in the dining room anticipates Alan Ayckbourn, who was then a schoolboy.

THE GARRICK STAGE. Theatres and Audiences in the Eighteenth Century. Allardyce Nicholl (Edited by Sybil Rosenfeld). Manchester University Press. £14.50 (UK)

FRANK MATCHAM. Theatre Architect. Edited by Brian Mercer Walker. Blackstaff Press. £12.75 (UK)

HENRY IRVING AND *THE BELLS*. Irving's personal script of the play by Leopold Lewis, edited and introduced by David Mayer, with a memoir by Eric Jones-Evans, Etienne Singla's original musical score arranged by Nigel Gardner, and a foreword by Marius Goring. Manchester University Press. £15.00 (UK)

POST-WAR BRITISH THEATRE CRITICISM. John Elsom. Routledge & Kegan Paul. £9.75 (cloth). £5.95 (paper) (UK).