

Autolycus

The sound and the fury

Trying to listen to what sounded like the divine ghost of Gwyneth Jones singing lieder in an elegantly long but acoustically difficult drawing-room—this was on TV, mind you, where you'd think they would have had practice enough—we got to wondering what went wrong with microphones. In this reporter's dear, dead, departed days at the BBC, when *all* vision was somehow enhanced by the swinging interventions of the boom, sound seemed to work better. Of course, then it was thought of as monaural rather than stereophonic, and balance, if it was considered, required the human voice to emerge as if in *front* of the instrumentation, rather than behind it. Nowadays, with the microphone being used by most singers if not actually as a vibrator at least as a phallic symbol, and catering better for impressions of musical noise rather than for the expression of sung words, it may be possible to hear things better but it is becoming harder, surely, to *listen* to what's going on.

Drawing a veil over the physical dangers of sound in, say, yer average discotheque, which may fill a different kind of orgiastic need, we would still like to ask why, in the live theatre, musicals sound so much *worse* than they do on recordings. And, as an extension, if *this* is why in this country ('though not on Broadway), despite the enormous cost of their staging and the huge goodwill that welcomes them in, shows like "Sweeney Todd" have left their audiences vaguely dissatisfied.

Today, maybe, everything has got too complicated to be measured by Sir Henry Wood's criterion of what made for good acoustics—that everybody in the audience should be able actually to see the "F" holes in a 'cello. But you'd think that *something* in the world of sound could provide the counterpart to the marvellously subtle memory-boards of theatrical lighting systems.

And you'd think that a new class of Sound Designers might have proudly emerged into theatre-programmes for credit and congratulation. The note we often make on theatre-programmes is: "Sound by Tannoy 1945".

Flying the flag

London's attraction to tourists as the theatre capital of the world is often remarked on, particularly with reference to our friends across the Pond in the New World. However inaccurate the statistics may be, it is certain that in high season the West End is knee-deep with them. We thought we would investigate the selling methods used

to sell theatre over there and came up with a surprise or two.

Under the umbrella slogan 'London Is . . .', the promotion boys at the British Tourist Authority have had the cunning idea of using two expatriate Americans, Elaine Stritch and Michael Rudman, to extol the delights of the London scene (in all its glorious variety) compared to say, ah, Broadway, for the sake of argument. The object of the 'London Is Theatre' publicity tours to various American cities is to earn editorial space *outside* the travel pages. Both La Stritch and whiz-kid Texan Rudman have had success in New York theatre and thus present a more credible (unbiased?) sales team to the average yank.

Stritch, forever immortalised for her performance in Sondheim's 'Company' and 'Two's Company' on television here, and Rudman, who started at the Mermaid and worked widely (he guided Hampstead Theatre's fortunes until his departure to the National as an associate director), are indeed good choices. Their observations as 'outsiders' were interesting.

Rudman, for instance, notes that ticket prices still trail New York's by a considerable margin. 'Evita' in London runs from \$7.50 to \$20; in New York the figures are now \$10 to \$30, for the same show. A top star might get \$1,200 a week, "maybe more" for a play, whereas Richard Burton was clocking up a reported \$50,000 a week for 'Camelot', he said. London's fringe theatres charge \$4 to \$5, which is still low. The steepest tickets on Broadway, note, are now '42nd Street' with a top ticket price of \$50. For that you'd get in to see Luciano Pavarotti at Covent Garden, in our highest-priced seats of the year.

The climate for new plays and playwrights is healthier over here, Rudman remarked, however bad things may seem to us. And of course, our state subsidy system is so different from the paltry American equivalent, that new plays are treated quite differently over here.

But the hottest tip of all was the British Airways offer under its 'London Show Tours'. For \$249 per person (based on double occupancy, and not including air fares) you get a remarkable three nights of theatre, unlimited public transport, hotel with breakfast, car rental for three days, a pub tour, admission to discotheques and casinos (presumably for *après théâtre*), and dining discounts. You interested too? Full details are available from your local *American* travel agent.

Veni, videodi, vici

We turn, with great pleasure, to the subject of video to report a world first by a British arts organisation. Raise a toast, please, to

the Royal Opera House, and in particular, to their enterprising Paul Findlay, who recognised the potential of a specially set-up video company to record its own productions. Following up a few casual conversations on the subject, Findlay saw an opening for additional revenue to be earned without undue capital risk to the taxpayers.

It is worth noting that the temperature is hotting up in this field. The Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Paris Opera are actively seeking to tie up similar agreements of their own. Television companies like Thames are being quick to exploit sales opportunities worldwide of say, 'Swan Lake' with Natalia Makarova and Anthony Dowell, which they recorded at Covent Garden last autumn. All areas of video are mushrooming, not least such specialist areas of production as live entertainment. Long may the arts remain a specialist field; how much better to 'popularise' a subject as complex and often multi-layered as opera and ballet with the benefit of comfortable experience, than to bring in 'new boys', whose aim can only be to go for the big effect. These are vital issues if video is to play a part in popularising live entertainment.

The deal concluded by Covent Garden is for a tripartite agreement between the BBC, an independent company, Covent Garden Video Productions, and themselves. Although final negotiations with the unions have yet to be concluded—a traditionally sticky area, this, and one of the reasons why we do not see more live entertainment on the small screen—it looks as though a minimum of three productions of opera or ballet will be recorded each year for the next five years. After that, they will take stock again. As for how they will market each video disc, it is still too early to say. But all video 'configurations'—their way of saying all manner of video uses, including no doubt, possible domestic sales and a rumoured pricetag of around £40 per video disc—have been tied up, with Covent Garden Video undertaking to raise the lion's share of the cash required for each recording. Mind, they also take the lion's share of any profits. As for how they will market it, there is talk of launching their own recording label or labels to suit the 'product'.

The first two recordings have already been made: Offenbach's 'Tales of Hoffman', with Plácido Domingo heading a starry cast and reputedly the major production of 1980 (broadcast by the Beeb in early January); and the ballet 'La Fille Mal Gardée'. Joint managing director of Covent Garden Video, Robin Scott, tells us that they have not ruled out the possibility of recording in other areas as well, such as opera, dance or theatre by other companies, if it were beneficial to all parties. Chairing his board is the Garden's indefatigable Mark Bonham-Carter with Sir John Tooley, Dr. Reiner Moritz (*the* TV arts salesman), Julian Wills (joint MD) and Christopher Peers (ex-record industry boffin) making up the rest of board.

Autolycus column contributed by Anthony Pugh and Anthony McCall