



# Theatre Museum in Rehearsal

In Cue 10 *Anthony McCall* previewed the Theatre Museum's exhibition *Spotlight: Four Centuries of Ballet Costume* at the V & A and reported on the availability of the archives to serious researchers during the preparations for the move to the Museum's own premises in Covent Garden – now scheduled for 83/84.

FRANCIS REID, in his continuing role of Cue's museum tourist, visits the exhibition and also finds some other theatric pleasures in the V & A shop.

Theatrical costumes are intended to be seen under stage lights. But the conservation of old fabrics – particularly when they have been treated with dyes and paint – is dependent on a controlled environment with restricted exposure to high levels of light intensity.

Dance costumes are also intended to be seen in motion.

In response to these problems, John L. Paterson devised an exhibition formula for *Parade* at the 1979 Edinburgh Festival and in Cue 3 (previewed in Cue 2) he described not only the philosophy of his concept but some of the nuts and bolts by which that concept was realised. This basic Edinburgh format has been repeated for the current exhibition – which includes many of the Edinburgh costumes but has an increased proportion of Royal Ballet items in view of that company's current half century.

To prevent over exposure, the costumes are lit intermittently in a sequence which has been programmed to integrate with a 30 minute sequence of ballet music excerpts. The costume lighting rises and falls about a pivot of continuously glowing foot lamp filaments.

As a by-product of the conservation requirement, there is an expressed hope that the crossfade lighting technique might impart a sense of movement to the costumes. I find that this does happen. But it happens to a limited extent – remaining good thinking without quite developing into reality.

What the changing light does – and, I fancy, does more positively at the V & A than in Edinburgh – is to link the costumes to the music. (Not, of course, relating each costume to its own music: that sort of programme would belong to a different sort of exhibition). The effect created is very theatrical: an audio-visual experience in its own right. It is not ballet. Actually, it is not unlike walking across a stage where the warming-up dancers have been frozen in

various attitudes during the overture while the electricians complete their focussing and the lighting designer calls for memory checks from his board operator.

The lighting is good – as indeed it should be. The dancers do not move and static objects are relatively straightforward to light. The lighting angles are generally, within the limits of an overhead rig, balletic. So with lighting from side and back, and faces and limbs anonymously black, the costumes stand out against the dark background.

The music joins the light to create a rather relaxing ambience so that one graciously accepts a light starting to fade just as one is examining an interesting bit of costume detail. The catalogue foreword

suggests, and experience confirms, that the timing is less frustrating than in Edinburgh.

Although the costumes are designed to be viewed at opera house distances, close examination gives a fascinating insight into the craft of the costumier. Some of the older costumes, in particular, demonstrate the skill with which simple fabrics can be used to project opulence with light weight and at low cost. In matters of dance costume (both design and realisation) this exhibition will surely prove to be an excellent demonstration of the ability of a collective display of the past to stimulate the creativity of the future. Time – and the next costume exhibition – will tell.

If the exhibition has a weakness, it is the shortage of related material – scene



*Rowlandson's The Prospect Before Us shows the corps de ballet's view of the principal dancers and captures something of the architectural and social conditions of Georgian theatregoing.*