

Victoria Theatre, Ballarat

In 1856 the boom gold mining town of Ballarat could boast three theatres. The originals have long since disappeared but now, as part of a mining museum and historical park development at Sovereign Hill, Ballarat now gets one of its theatres restored to it.

Sovereign Hill has been laid out to show the lifestyle and history of the gold mining period. Part original and part replica reconstructions are the humpies, mineshafts, pithead machinery, crushing plants and so on, clustered round a main street of banks, shops and industrial establishments typical of their day. Included is the United States Hotel (with a practical bar) with Victoria Theatre adjoining.

Although modern materials are used, care has been taken by the architect in charge, Ewan Jones, to keep the interior as close to authentic Georgian style as possible, in fact, stage lighting was the hardest problem. In the end, normal profile spots were used front of house, some concealed behind a slot in the rear wall over the gallery and others (Pat 23's) unconcealed on brackets halfway along the side walls. We never did find out how the original stage was lit, but contemporary Ballarat houses were lit by gas. The Victoria has limited staging, as part of the stage house is a lean to, so small flats and roll up cloths are necessary.

Simple though it is, the place works well, and certainly is a valuable reminder that theatre building does not always have to be a multi million dollar venture to be successful.

Denis Irving, our Australian contributor, is a leading Melbourne Theatre Consultant.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I wonder if any of your readers could assist the members of the Australian Association of Theatre Technology to solve a puzzle of nomenclature, with respect to the mode of action of a pair of traveller or house curtains as used on stage. These actions can be 'vertical' or 'flying'; 'festoon' or 'butterfly', and most commonly on small stages a horizontal bi-parting action using an overgrown equivalent of domestic window curtain tracks.

In Australia this horizontal mode is generally known as 'French action', a term which has been happily accepted by stage crews for as long as we can remember. But, someone has recently asked, why French action? What is the origin or justification?

Discussions around and appeals in our local AATT journal have drawn a blank, hence the letter seeking enlightenment from some historically minded CUE reader from England — or possibly even France.

The truth when revealed will be published in the AATT journal with suitable acknowledgements.

Yours faithfully,

D. C. IRVING,
Vice President
AATT (Victoria)

REIDing SHELF

I suppose that British Theatre has enjoyed three periods of greatness: Elizabethan, Georgian and NOW. Perhaps I could, and should, add the Victorian Theatre which is the nearest that we have ever come to a truly popular theatre—and the nearest that we are ever likely to get to a popular *live* theatre in an electronic world.

Joan Littlewood's *Theatre Workshop* was surely one of the prime influences in the development of the theatre of *today*. Ensemble acting in a style of heightened realism, in settings of selective realism, is the norm for what I find in much of my theatregoing whether to the national establishment theatres or their fringe alternatives.

These acting and scenic styles—and integrated music and clean lighting statements—were a shattering discovery for an 18-year old at the 1949 Edinburgh Festival. The performances of Moliere's 'Flying Doctor' and Chekov's 'Proposal', together with the previous Festival's Glyndebourne 'Don Giovanni' were probably the influences that finally determined a life in the theatre for me.

These 1949 performances were, of course, on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival: it was to be 1966 before Theatre Workshop appeared in the official programme on the Assembly Hall's open stage which cries out for just that sort of style which they had pioneered. By now, however, their great decade (1953-63) was over: the company were being destroyed. Mostly by success whereby the west end transfers broke up the ensemble that had been nurtured in the Theatre Royal at what was then often called the *other* Stratford—that is, the one down the central line tube at E.15. Theatre Workshop was also destroyed by exhaustion: the weariness of forty years of battling for funding.

Throughout Howard Goorney's **THE THEATRE WORKSHOP STORY**, the personal sacrifices of the company come through repeatedly. Most of us, in opting for a theatre career, have accepted that we must personally supply a considerable chunk of the necessary subsidy by working for less reward than would be acceptable 'outside'. (I am sure that I am not alone in having this actually in writing, on my files, from one of the most eminent of the establishment theatres!) But the limits must have been reached in what the Theatre Workshop actors went through for their art—whether in nutrition, or in carrying lumps of scenery as personal baggage. Harry Corbett recalls the 1955 invitation from the International Theatre Festival in

Paris to represent Great Britain at the Theatre des Nations with 'Arden of Faversham' and 'Volpone'.

It was quite hysterical. We had no money to pay freight charges, and we had to take all the set over as personal hand luggage. Gerry held the ferry up for two hours while he argued with the crew and the Customs. We had masses of stuff including cheese-shaped rostra and two pillars, about twelve feet high and three feet wide. I carried one of these up the gang plank as personal luggage! We all carried a piece of the bloody set. Somehow we got there and took Paris by storm.

The author, Howard Goorney, acted (with the occasional break) with the company from their pre-war Manchester beginnings as *Theatre of Action* and subsequently *Theatre Union* in the mid-thirties. His book makes use of interviews with company members and here is a 1947 memoir from Jeanne Goddard who was in charge of wardrobe

In Felixstowe we played to poor houses and had so little money that we all went to a little old lady who ran a cafe at the front. In the morning she'd give us a plate of broken biscuits and a glass of milk for threepence; and in the evening, after the show, we'd go to the fish and chip shop for sixpennyworth of chips—and that was our diet for the week. Nobody complained as everybody was treated alike, including Joan and Ewan, I remember going out of the Stage Door behind John Bury, and being very amused to notice that his espadrilles, which looked all right when seen from above or from the side, were a sham. From behind, I realised, both rope soles were completely worn through, and he was really walking on his bare feet!

International recognition came early and there were successful tours to Czechoslovakia and Scandanavia, prior to the great Paris conquests. It was perhaps easier for the Theatre Workshop style to be appreciated in continental Europe where audiences had more experience, even expectation, of non-naturalistic production styles. However, with long running hits like 'The Quare Fellow', 'The Hostage', 'A Taste of Honey', 'Fings aint wot they used to be' and 'Oh What a Lovely War', they finally reached a wider audience and critical acclaim—although the founders bore a guilt that they had betrayed their original ideals of a truly people's theatre.

It is interesting to note in passing that the West End transfers were instigated by Donald Albery whose son Ian is currently looking to today's Fringe to fill the same west end theatres.

A very readable book and delightfully non-sycophantic. A just tribute to Joan Littlewood and her collection of what she liked to call her *nuts*. In the words of Peter Hall