

From The Warehouse to The Round House

Not long after the Market left Covent Garden for Nine Elms a festival dedicated to Real Ale was held in the old Flower market building. Towards the tail of a queue extending round three sides of the building could be espied, one evening, three delegates from the ABTT. Nearly two hours later they could be seen plonking down their entrance money, their objective seemingly achieved. Exactly five minutes later the three could have been seen dashing out and rushing round the corner to a different and neglected entrance on the fourth side—but a beer bottle toss from where they had started.

The alert CUE reader will have guessed that beer, real or otherwise, was not their target for that night. Though as one of the three I must say that I could have done with a glass inside after the two hours outside.

With such infirmity of direction did the ABTT Trade Show make its first bid for existence. A notion of a combined conference and trade exhibition was around but we did not like the usual hotel venues put forward by the professional organiser the ABTT intended to employ. Someone then suggested that we take a look at this particular market building which might have the merit of being cheap to rent and which was certainly a venue located in the heart of theatreland. The vision of dropping in for some festival ale and a general look around seemed both practical and attractive. Alas! we had not taken into consideration the Londoner's thirst for the real stuff nor had we allowed for the simple requirements for collective swillage thereof. A more or less rainproof roof to prevent adulteration of the product, somewhere to stack casks and tankards for action and there you have a Festtrinkhaus, so to say. Those parts of the great building which could be seen through the mêlée of beer and the beery was lit by lots of dirty daylight filtering through an overall glass roof of the class difficult-to-blackout. Beneath, all was down-at-heel requiring resuscitation after a century long battle with the departed market porters.

However, to the north-east through a stout barricade we glimpsed a spruced up newly painted, darkened and spotlit area devoted to an architectural display. Since that show was unlikely to keep the late hours of licensed premises however temporary, there was nothing for it but instant departure for another part of the garden.

There was no queue outside the entrance to the architectural display and memory suggests that there wasn't anybody inside either—except that is, for ourselves. Enthusiasm for the idea of a trade fair took a hard knock that evening. One of the three delegates, the professional exhibition man actually died during the following week. And of the remaining two only Roger Fox the ABTT's hon. treas. has stuck with, and was stuck with, the trade fair ever since. The ABTT itself had remanded the idea in custody of the limbo filing cabinet for an indefinite period when suddenly opportunity knocked: the Donmar

Rehearsal theatre in Covent Garden had a gap of a couple of weeks between one R.S.C. booking as their experimental theatre and the next, and the rent would be modest. This space of course well known now as the Warehouse theatre and the space/time element then proved a salutary discipline. The hon. treas. was joined by hon. sec. David Adams not just to organise but to do a large part of the work themselves and the result was an amateur effort by professionals which scored a direct hit.

What was particularly gratifying was the appearance of a number of the smaller enterprises among the big ones. One which took my eye, of course, appeared to be preoccupied with the restoration of Strand Electric spots which began life my reign. Not restoration as genuine old Benthams for the museum shelf but revived for a full and active life back in the theatre. Indeed in some cases their product seemed *better* than new. As befitted the open stage era there were exhibits of scenic and effects materials with an inborn resistance to fire. Sound and lighting were represented as was transport and rigging. Outstanding of all to my mind was the firm who actually tackled from first principles the problem of a music stand for the orchestra pits. The top-heavy sharp edged cocoa tin lamphouse of long standing tradition was being challenged not just by some costly special but by something expected to sell in quantity.

Next year the ABTT Trade Show moved to larger Donmar premises, namely the stage and orchestra pit of the Piccadilly theatre. While Dame Edna coxed by night we boxed by day, punctuated at regular intervals by a descending ceiling display. This had just been installed and enabled the Piccadilly to become large or small by rising or falling to cut out the Upper Circle. All at the mere touch of a button and a chorus of vociferous shouts of "stand clear".

1980 required both stage and stalls to house it all. So the Shaftesbury theatre, then dark, was occupied and now in 1981 it has been the turn of The Round House. The qualification of this venue was undoubted. Originally the engine shed of the first main line railway in the world—the London & Birmingham (later LNWR)—it then for many many years became a store for *beerbarrels*; at a time when all ale was real! Since 1969 it has been London's largest unorthodox theatre space. And in the last couple of years, the place where the Manchester Royal Exchange company and Alan Ayckbourn's Stephen Joseph theatre company from Scarborough can perform in the round.

A problem at the Shaftesbury had been that the bar was singularly remote. Thus instead of two intermingled hives of industry, one left the show to attempt the South-West passage, so to speak, and find a hushed igloo at the far end. Thus drinking partook of the nature of a religious retreat. At the Round House one's entrance and exit was ambushed by an all-day bar and refreshments. It struck the note of a lively

get-together rather than a sadistic solitary survey of product—as the marketing executive calls it. With all—well, some—respect to the big ones it was nice to see so many smaller exhibitors at this 1981 show particularly the hand-mades like props. In addition I sensed that there have grown up a number of small regionally located firms able to bring a personal touch and service by skilful admixture of items from the 'big ones' with the locally designed and made. Not everything happens in or from London, nowadays.

The first stand to catch my eye in the balcony was that music one—apparently R.A.T. Ltd. have supplied nearly 4,000 since I first saw it. Nearby was an old spilling Patt 50a Pageant lantern. It was not White Light Ltd. (although they too were busy polishing up the past on stand K) but Ancient Lights—another young firm with a good eye for period. A sort of antique dealer in lighting. As in furniture a good antique or a spare part from the past can often provide an elegant solution to a problem. Another Norfolk firm, Eltec, was alongside and it was nice to see trouble taken over designing dimmer-lever preset-panels in spite of the digital deluge. Several firms still lever away—at any rate for the smaller jobs (they would have been considered large once!). Something which is digital from end to end, literally, is the Kliegl Performance which not only does all the punching and processing that way as usual but dispenses with analogue conversion at the dimmer. Also on the T.P. Services stand, rather sotto luce, the fibreglass way to effects like fireworks.

There were smoke 'machines' on two stands and loud wailing air raid sirens and bomb crashes from loud loudspeakers but thank goodness no 'Pop'; by comparison these noises seemed homely and friendly. Pop was represented by further developments in rigging and a remote joystick control of PAR cans. The firm called PANCAN in conjunction with Electrosonic move a mirror in front of the unit which remains fixed—this has logic behind it—indeed but for a pair of tiny mirrors we would not have 'enjoyed' all those lovely laser squiggles. Talking of rigging but at the quieter end of the scale there was the Peter Mumford Carousel Cradle to tidy up multi-screen projection and, dare I say it, many a run of the mill twin slide lecture.

C.C.T. brought a nice touch of the showman to their display while Strand across the way were sternly metric, nuts and all, with their 'new thirteen' curiously named Prelude and Harmony. Lighting does tend to hog a show like this even though sound control consols are much *bigger* and have *many* more knobs. According to John Wyckham 34.78% of the stands this year were in fact non-lighting and sound. The trouble is that *these* other firms have to use a lot of the lamps in order to shine. Even a manufacturer of pantomime custard pies would have to have splotches of light to do justice to his own splotch-making missiles!