

A Colour Music Hall

Archival Nostalgia by
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A couple of years ago in CUE* we were able to read about some of the surviving and restored Movie Palaces in the States and thanks to David Atwell's book⁺ reviewed at the same time the subject spilt over into their contemporaries over here. Inevitably, we were told of the wonders of the world of the 'atmospherics' or 'outside-in' cinemas as architect Julian Leathart dubbed them at the time. Sunny dawns and moony nights in Italianate, Espanic or some other exotic 'Garden of Your Dreams' could be produced by pushing the appropriate dimmers up or down. This was sometimes left in the merciless care of a motor driven automatic contraption. Whether in the hands of the colour-blind projectionist or electrician, or in charge of a ruthless robot, sensitivity to Saint Cecilia or Mother Nature was not often a feature of such changes: especially as they involved the three primary colours of light. One of which was, of course, green!

This colour-changing was not peculiar to these plaster pleasure gardens, any large cinema of the twenties and thirties was likely to feature it behind cornices, laylights or whatever. Not unnaturally my addiction to Colour Music led me not only to think of playing light to music on drapes and sets on the stage but to ponder on the design of an auditorium in which changes of lighting would not just look pretty or ape naturalistic effects but which could create varying emotional atmosphere.

Now it is all very well to write now about what that me-of-fifty-years-ago thought and did, for there are few about who could call it to question! Fortunately, it all exists in the very first article I ever wrote. This was a long affair of 4000 words or so which appeared in *The Builder* of September 2nd 1932 under the title "Light as an Art". Such lucky publication at the first attempt may not be unconnected with the fact that my father knew Christian Barman the editor! So the theories are in print but did such an auditorium get built to incorporate them? The answer is 'Yes' and it was opened by Leslie Henson (my favourite comedian!) on Wednesday February 22nd 1939 at 3.15 p.m. This was only just in time as it closed with the outbreak of war, never to reopen; and to be destroyed completely by a couple of small bombs on the night of May 10th 1941. The Light Console and its dimmer bank survived and were installed in the London Palladium for Robert Nesbitt's production of *Gangway* at the end of the same year.

The photographs give a good idea what this small theatre in Covent Garden was like but many will remember it in its post-war

* CUE 10 pages 17-21

+ CUE 10 p. 12 & 11 p. 31

form as Strand's demonstration theatre and then the ABTT's theatre which finally closed on January 28th 1977 and is now but a hole in some developer's ground. Even the bombs did not succeed in reducing it to that!

Before examining this long defunct 'colour music hall' let us take a look at some of the 1932 theory behind its construction. My *Builder* article plunges in off the deep end:

"LIGHT in the theatre and the cinema has only been considered from the decorative point of view up to the present. Light has apparently been regarded as an addition to the already too large list of materials at the disposal of the decorator. While no one can doubt the truth of this view, it should be borne in mind that light can be considered from three angles: (1) The Utilitarian; (2) the Decorative; (3) the Psychological.

No. 1, of course, embraces street lighting, office lighting, etc.; No. 2 is well portrayed in the lighting at the Strand Palace Hotel. Generally, present-day lighting is the result of combining Nos. 1 and 2. No. 3 offers far greater possibilities than 1 or 2, for here lighting can be ranked as an art itself. It is well known that light, whether artificial or natural, has the power of stirring the emotions. Until the arrival of electric light man had no power of altering light and the resulting emotions, but now things are different; light can be made to change, swaying this way and that the emotions according to the will of the right operator. Light in this way is akin to music, but it is only akin in its powers, not in its application, as some

misguided persons seem to imagine. Such attempts at setting light to a chromatic scale and playing colour compositions on instruments (colour organs) founded on musical principles, have been, are, and will be of necessity, failures."

The works and theories of the "misguided persons" above can be found in *Coloured Light an Art Medium** by Adrian B. Klein. The *Builder* article went on to affirm that:

"It is in the theatre where this new art 'Light' may be developed to its greatest extent, both on the stage and in the auditorium, the remaining parts of the building being covered by utilitarian or decorative aims both from their architectural or lighting standpoints. The stage is out of the scope of the present article, which leaves the auditorium to be considered. Realising this, let us turn with expectancy to existing theatres; but a shock is in store. In not one of our legitimate theatres can the auditorium lighting be altered; it can either be dimmed on or off, but that is all. The Saville, Adelphi, Savoy, etc., all are good pieces of decorative lighting, but can exert no psychological effect. Thus, when the auditorium lights are turned up, a complete contrast is of necessity presented to the mood of the preceding stage scene. To get over this a play generally proceeds with a series of jerks (black-outs).

When will architects realise that modern theatre design does not mean substituting polished squares and circles for gold cherubs and acanthus leaves? Take the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre - all very delightful as interiors go, but does it help bridge the innumerable gaps that Shakespeare's plays consist of even in a theatre where a sliding stage is installed? For a black-out, even if it only lasts for half a minute, is a definite break in the visual continuity. Atmospheric backgrounds are used for the stage proper. Why not provide the means to treat the fore stage in the same manner? It now becomes necessary to turn to the much despised cinema; here at least something has been done."

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