

## Box-office Bulletins

The media claim to respond to public need. If so, we must be a nation of economic hypochondriacs with exchange rate as the pulse and F.T. index as temperature. Our theatre managers, however, are very secretive about their economic health. Oh! they are quite open about incurable diseases like VAT, inflation and inadequate subsidy. But any detailed mention of box-office symptoms is strictly taboo. General bulletins of optimism are issued but it takes a personal examination to diagnose the empty seats which the patient denies having last night or tomorrow night. Broadway box-office returns have long been exposed in weekly *Variety*. And the New York Times has taken to helping its readers with a Friday listing of *Weekend Ticket Availability* from 'all sections for all performances' through various permutations of section and date to 'sold out'. Is the west end really so depressed that the relatives cannot be told? Or potential visitors informed as to the probability of finding a chair at the bedside?

### The Indefinable Defined

The finance committee of a local authority were contemplating one of the more obscure byways of their budget. Emotive words like highbrow, lowbrow, culture and Andy Stewart were in use. The crunch, however, hinged around the difference between *popular entertainment* and *aesthetic education*. Their definition of popular entertainment is not reported but presumably includes everything that does not come within the category of aesthetic education. Their Regional Assessor's Department helpfully defined 'aesthetic' as the *appreciation or criticism of the beautiful*. Well I suppose it all depends what you mean by appreciation, criticism and beauty. If this fine body of elected financiers has a gap in a future agenda, perhaps they would like to debate one of the more disposable aphorisms of a minor member of the Confucius secretariat *Art should be entertaining but all entertainment is not necessarily art*.

### Frontcloth of the Year

I am addicted to the words and music of Fred Ebb and John Kander. My gramophone has long known by heart their *Cabaret*, *Chicago* and *The Act*. Now I am being much pleased by their *Woman of the Year* recording. Tony Walton has done some clever things with the scenery. Like a show pros of tv screens. Like trucks being shaped to interlock rather than merely butt join. Like just about the best use of film that I have ever seen in a live stage show: an actor singing a duet with a projected cartoon character. The animation image includes a follow spot which forms a stylistic bridge to the actor and his real follow spot, bringing the cartoon towards reality and the actor towards cartoon. Fusing with the words and music, this technique brings a new dimension to the art and craft of the frontcloth number.

## Beethoven Serenaded

Beethoven has slipped a bit, over my years. Goodness me, when I was a lad they used to rate him top man! Well, Mozart has the throne now and occupies it democratically on a popular vote — although I personally almost make him share with Handel. Nevertheless old Ludwig is pretty good at romantic passion — all tension and *mysterioso*. But passion, tension and mystery were precisely what was missing from two concerts within a recent month. In Montreal the hall was vast and bleak within and it was snowing without.

The conductor was a professor. Was it a combination of intellect, temperature and bleak house that made the symphonies sound like *divertimenti*? But a good *divertimento* does something for the senses: this was music to please only an analytical mind. South of the equator, there was a heat wave and the conductor was a Viennese choirboy who had escaped to the Antipodes in 1940. With a background like that



he would surely have lived through enough *sturm und drang* to give me all the tension and mystery that I craved! His appearance was encouraging: uncontrolled excess silver hair, deeply set eyes in an unsmiling face raked with a fine mixture of terror, horror and apprehension: every cartoonist's dream of a romantic musician. And he nearly, yes nearly, got the band aroused. But who could possibly play darkly on such a day in



such a country. So I enjoyed the serenade version of the fifth symphony and admired Christchurch Town Hall which is so human that Wellington has done the only honourable thing: ordered a copy.

## Sexy Handel

One of the happiest things to happen in my lifetime has been the rediscovery of the Handel operas. And one of the greatest contributions to our civilisation (almost as important as fast, painless dentistry) has been made by the musicians who have remastered the lost arts of playing simple baroque instruments — keyless wood, valveless brass, and gutted strings. The schoolmaster who most influenced my early grapplings with language went to considerable lengths to explain the difference between *sensual* and *sensuous*: but I have never been happy at any division of the senses into physical and mental. As far as I am concerned the sounds of a baroque orchestra are both sensual and sensuous. In a word the genuine Handel sound is very *sexy*. It is certainly so in Kent Opera's *Agrippina* and so I would like to sing a big da capo thank you to the Arts Council of Great Britain and Sainsbury's for paying for my superb Georgian multiple orgasm on Easter Saturday. Consequently I have resolved to shop more often at Sainsbury's. (I have long been a faithful, if occasionally complaining, customer of the Arts Council of Great Britain.) *Agrippina* was Handel's first pop hit, but it is unperformed and unrecorded. But not unknown: it is full of material that Handel reworked from earlier works or was to rework for later ones. Butlin and Chelton were splendidly sympathetic with their sets, frocks and lights. With aural authenticity and visual sympathy, it only required just a touch more courage to remove the shadow of Offenbach hovering over some of the acting: when the libretto is as strong as this one, the comedy and satire can not only sustain sincerity, they are heightened by it.

### Forward Bars

My seat for *Amadeus* at Her Majesty's Theatre was the one that I once used to light a musical whose horrors took some considerable time to heal. Looking around I was delighted to note that lighting instruments had penetrated the auditorium positions where I had most yearned for them: booms between the boxes and stage, and a bar from the auditorium ceiling. It is interesting to note the growth over the last decade of these forward bars in London and New York: is my hunch correct that on Broadway it was the sound designers who lead the way in getting this position available for technical suspensions?

### Menu Marketing

Blackboard menus are a response to the morning gathered camp of portion controlled copy writing in market researched eating houses. However one Auckland waitperson wheeled the blackboard to the table to give a full scale sales presentation on every dish. Never ever were details of saucing and garnishing so forcefully yet poetically described by such a presentable lady of such inscrutable countenance. Nevertheless the meal was excellent.