

# REIDing SHELF

Its anniversary time in Covent Garden with 250 elapsed years since John Rich opened the first of the three theatres on the site that has become the home of our national opera and ballet companies. Celebrations include **THE COVENT GARDEN ALBUM** of images from performances across all these years of one of the world's greater theatres. For much of the 'thirties, Covent Garden had *The World's Greatest Theatre* thrust upon it by what we would now call its marketing officer. In fact while this may have been a period when 'most of the greatest singers of the day appeared and many of the greatest operas ever written were performed', the policy of the house and the quality of its productions might perhaps be tactfully described as 'ad hoc'. But the last 35 years or so have seen an exciting performing arts renaissance in this country and the Royal Opera House is in the forefront: truly now one of the world's greatest opera houses. And one that has at last become able to start taking the first steps to acquire staging facilities that are both adequate and humane.

The 245 pictures include all the familiar classic prints and photos from the era of John Rich to that of John Tooley – but good to have them together and so well reproduced. As a bonus there is a dozen pages of potted biography of the three houses. This album is a delight for anyone whose theatre interests run to opera, ballet or architecture.

When Yeats reached the Olympian heights of trying to light a play, I remember on one particular occasion a dawn effect was required, and he tried it this way and he tried it that way, and still nothing was to his liking. Indeed, it didn't look like a dawn to me. But finally, at the back of the stage a strange kind of red, roseate glow started coming up. And Yeats suddenly leapt in his seat and said: 'Yes, that's it! That's what I want, that's what I want!' . . . to be interrupted by the electrician, who stuck his head out from the side and said: 'Well, you can't have it – the place is on fire!'

That is one of the quotes (in this case by Denis Johnston) from **THE BOOK OF THEATRICAL QUOTES** in which Gordon Snell has collected entertaining snippets: some factual, some witty, all interesting. Most are from books or broadcasts, but some of the anecdote has a genuine flavour of the saloon bar where much of our theatre heritage is passed on with relish and timing. Young fresh students of theatre will learn a lot from this book and so will bits of old tat like me. I began with an electrician's contribution to scenography, let me end with some advice from Alec Guinness to the set designers:

Rostrums, apart from cluttering the stage, tend to produce a one-foot-up, one-foot-down sort of acting which I find peculiarly dispiriting. I have very few conversations on the stairs in my own house, and see no good reason for making God's gift to an actor – a

flat square stage – into something like the entrance to the Athenaeum.

Room, room, brave gallants all,  
pray give us room to rhyme.

For the mummings, the actor/audience relationship was a simple matter of negotiating for a performance space. For much of the present century it has been a major area of agonising for theatrical thinkers. Arnold Aronson in **THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCENOGRAPHY** has set out to record the experimental productions that sought to break through what their creators saw as the limits of frontal staging. He acknowledges the difficulties of his task in a preface . . .

The major difficulty in doing such a broad survey is that its parameters are hard to determine. There seems to be no point at which it can be said that all information has been thoroughly exhausted. For every performance that is mentioned here, some scholar will know of another such production that predates it. There is, unfortunately, no one name to search out, no single, inclusive library entry that will yield all the relevant information. For discovering records of past environmental productions I was dependent on the recommendations of fellow historians and frequently on sheer accident and coincidence – happening across a magazine article when it was least expected, for instance. Because of this, it is sure that there are many important productions that chance has not led me to discover.

I reproduce this extract because not only does it so clearly state the fundamental difficulty in producing a book of this kind, but it also demonstrates the absolute need for trying to do so. Aronson has indeed had a very good shot at doing it. He has searched out the details of the key experiments, analysed them and distilled the information that we need to know. Including, in many cases, the unsolved problems acknowledged by the participants.

His book is not concerned with the many thrusting stages that merely carry the action through the proscenium frame. His *environmental* performances take place in non-frontal situations where the spectator frequently has to look more than forty-five degrees to the right or left in order to view the whole production. Found spaces, transformed spaces, happenings, annular stages, Max Reinhardt, Norman Bel Geddes, Meyerhold, Gropius, Okhlopov, the Living Theatre, Grotowski, and many many more. They are all here and many of the points made are well illustrated. Aronson has done a clever and essential job in getting it all into one smallish volume. This book is the starting point for anyone concerned with total concepts of performance space, whether a practising environmental scenographer or just a committed student of acting, direction or design.

And, lastly, the book that is so splendid

that I am holding it for that prime reading time of my personal year, the Christmas holiday. How do I know that this one is so marvellous if I have not yet read it? Because I have dipped and each and every dip has assured me that this is a book to be devoured. I am referring to **THE NOEL COWARD DIARIES**. Nearly 700 pages of them covering the years 1945 to 1969, plus some briefer entries for the war years.

My dipping, which has included some complete years in addition to single days, has discovered two flavours. One, perhaps rather obvious, is an impression of an older theatre world – albeit one that was changing throughout the time span of this book. The other, much less tangible, is an insight into the world of performance: the heights and depths involved in creating, sustaining and surviving. Under the sophisticated veneer, there are agonies and ecstasies so raw that any stageperson will immediately identify.

For even the most successful dramatists and composers, death marks the beginning of a period of neglect that will ultimately be followed by a period of rediscovery. But, in Coward's case, this cycle took place within his lifetime. The post-war development of theatre involved a reaction against his dramatic style. But, once the new angrier mode of performance was established, his own particular talents could once again be recognised. The fundamentals of performance had not changed and neither had the internal churnings of performing people. Therefore much of his diary is concerned with recording actual manifestations of timeless truths.

Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley have edited impeccably with footnotes that explain everyone mentioned: people that my generation can identify but who will become increasingly obscure to future readers. And without doubt these diaries will be one of the invaluable sources for any future theatrelover trying to reconstruct the flavour of the first twenty years of the post-war showbiz industry. And recorded with such wit and elegance! With these diaries and a decent bottle or two, this could be a cosy Christmas!

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**THE COVENT GARDEN ALBUM.** 250 Years of Theatre, Opera and Ballet. Lord Drogheda, Ken Davison, Andrew Wheatcroft. Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul. £5.95. (UK) (Paperback)

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**THE BOOK OF THEATRICAL QUOTES.** Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes of the Stage. Compiled by Gordon Snell. Published by Angus & Robertson. £5.95 (UK) (Paperback)

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**THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCENOGRAPHY.** Arnold Aronson. UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Distributed in UK by Bowker Publishing Company, Erasmus House, Epping, CM16 4BU. £25 (UK)

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**THE NOEL COWARD DIARIES.** Edited by Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley. Weidenfeld & Nicholson. £15 (UK)