

# Stage and Scenery – Performer and Acoustics

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and if more float spot points, each with a dimmer, should not figure in a first-class installation – seven or eight 100 watt spots housed between lengths of compartment float as a kind of miniature spot batten at the front edge of the stage, for serious use instead of for mere shadow stunts.

The proscenium position referred to is a valuable one, as I found while supervising the Lisbon Opera House scheme early in the war. There the proscenium column either side was hollow towards the stage and we concealed four 500 watt spots with dimmers in each. They were specially valuable because the columns were further from the acting area than usual, due to a vertical line of boxes actually on the stage between proscenium and house tabs. These historical curiosities did keep the artistes at respectable range.

Very often side spots are fitted under the side boxes of a theatre, but invariably they are too far from the stage, being almost circle spots, too few in number and the wrong type – usually Pageants! As they are on the side walls of the theatre managers are chary of hanging an array there, and even in the Old Vic, architecture came first and was allowed to make nonsense of most front lighting, as Mr. Devine confesses. Stratford-on-Avon is happier in this respect, real places of concealment being sited to give a variety of angles (see TABS, December, 1951).

Of course, lanterns available up to now have been bulky and somewhat of an eyesore, and the practice of using a sheet metal housing has aggravated rather than ameliorated these defects. The latest lantern, the baby mirror spot (Pattern 23), is as near good looking as a spotlight can be and is certainly small and compact. Therefore, I pray architects and others allow it to hang in the open, frankly as a spotlight, and in sufficient quantity for spotlighting to be used as spotlighting and not a "hope for the best" localised flood.

F.P.B.

George Devine CBE was a remarkable man who was able with every right to describe himself in Parker's *Who's Who* (another favourite work of reference!) as "actor, director and producer" and was particularly associated with the establishment of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Sloane Square – Arnold Wesker, John Osborne and all that. Due to Devine's early death in 1966 at the age of fifty-six he had little experience of the surrender to the lighting designer. Peter Brook's *Dark of the Moon* was put on in 1949. We can see that the punchy lighting of today's massed beamlights, call them Parblazers or Rockettes or what you will, is not a novel concept. What is new is the much higher levels of light. We must take care that just as in sound we up the decibels so easily, our lighting does not become a tale of full up light and fury signifying nothing.

I think this chance to look back in wonder salutary. Incidentally, book flipping is something that the new age of computer reference may destroy. My only trouble is that at the time of writing I still cannot remember what it was that I went to that particular volume of Tabs to look up in the first place!

It is both surprising and refreshing to be able to note that at last a singer on the stage has advanced demands with regard to stage acoustics. At the 1983 Heilbronn Theatrical Congress a chorus-singer asked whether, "Scenery should really be constructed without regard to its acoustic serviceability".

Anyone who has been closely connected with the theatre as an acoustic specialist for almost half a century, will have been astonished that the performing artistes, whether they be actors, singers or musicians, have not raised a more frequent voice against the unreasonable demands inflicted on them on stages and concert platforms. As if determined by the Gods, the acoustic conditions on platforms and stages are being endured, even though before the very first note rings out, it is clear to see that singers or even tonally limited instruments – perhaps indeed harps or harpsichords – are being placed on the most luxurious carpets, ceremoniously surrounded by pleated velour curtains. This

means that the first note to emerge is throttled, and has to be assisted in the auditorium after leaving the source of sound; this calls for manifold reflection. Should this aid be lacking directly close to the sound source, even the best acoustic theatre or concert hall will only be able to offer slight compensation. The performing artiste senses the shortcoming – most probably, instinctively and "forces", i.e. frantically seeks to raise his voice. He thus loses the dynamic fine shading up to pianissimo. A first violinist, of a municipal theatre also with an unduly muffled auditorium, recently complained that it was impossible to play any cantilena or any melody suitable for singing.

The artiste certainly has an awesome task when he has to play music or speak in an old hall, possibly of architectural merit, without the necessary acoustics in the auditorium. On the stage, however, it is the responsibility of the artistes and the technicians; they must appreciate and use the fundamental principles of acoustics, just as they have had

*Letzte Bitte*  
*an meine lieben Grossen.*

*!* *Denkbarkeit!*

*- Die grossen Noten kommen von selbst;  
die kleinen Noten und ihr Text sind die  
Blauplauder. -*

*Mit dem Publikum etwas sagen, sondern  
immer den Anderen; in Selbstgesprächen  
nach unten oder nach oben blökend, nur  
gesad' aus. -*

*Letzter Wunsch:*  
*Bleibt mir gut, Ihr Lieben!*

*Bayreuth, 13 August 1876.* *Richard Wagner*

Fig. 1.  
Wagner's final request in a note pinned to the door of the Festspielhaus before the first performance of the "Ring" at Bayreuth which he did not attend. This note concerned the clarity and truth to life of the acting and starts with his general precept that if we take care of the short notes the long ones will take care of themselves.