

REIDING SHELF

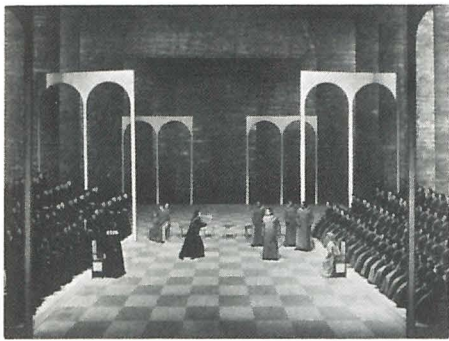


Fig. 5.
"Tannhauser" Act 2 Bayreuth 1954
Stage Designer: Wieland Wagner
Invisible ceiling as sounding board above the main playing area, correctively hung up during a rehearsal.

board, invisible to the public, approximately over the central playing area directed a beam of sound rays towards the auditorium, which otherwise would uselessly fade away in the grid. The quite inexpensive sound technical trick was achieved without disturbing the scenery or the production's intention. Just a short pause was sufficient to raise up the reflector, which was then also of service to the chorus and to the other soloists.

Rarely with musical theatre productions, more frequently, however in plays, is an effective scene detail selected where the proscenium border is as low as 4 metres internal height in order to accommodate the "wide screen picture" of the films. Perhaps this notion was prompted by the overwide stage up to 33 metres of the Grossen Festpielhauses, Salzburg. If behind a low false proscenium the depth of the playing area is used, then there is the danger that the performers' voices will be caught up behind the framework; an all too small a part of the sound energy reaches the listeners out over the apron. Here the horizontal hanging ceiling, already mentioned more than once, helps, which must be fixed as close as possible behind the proscenium framework. This sound reflector must thus be arranged mostly in strips between the lighting bridges, as the top light is essential from the front. Technology has the double task to solve – to make possible the direct incidence of light, and also sound reflection.

The knowledge regarding, the natural laws covering sound distribution in space, absorption and reflection on the material surfaces, resonance and echo, in short – acoustics, has been comprehensive and sufficiently complete for many years, to allow successful predetermination of all plans for the theatres themselves, and for the stage furnishings, especially before the actual execution of the work. Later, complicated and costly experiments in daily practical operations, can no longer be justified today. On the other hand, acoustics remain the servant of the artistic fantasy of the architects and stage designers. Following a success no-one enquires as to the part of it which the acoustic measures have contributed. When nothing is said about the "good acoustics" everything must be in order.

Richard and Helen Leacroft's **THEATRE AND PLAYHOUSE** is absolutely indispensable. No one, seriously interested in the nature of theatrical experience, can fail to be fascinated and informed by this pictorial history of the development of stage and auditorium. I am certain that I shall be returning to its pages again and again for the rest of my life. And so will future generations.

I am not surprised by my enthusiasm for the book. Richard Leacroft's cut-away isometric drawings have always been by far the best way to experience a theatre if a visit is impossible. And in the case of theatres that no longer remain to be visited, his reconstructions are based on a degree of scholarship that ensures confidence in the credibility of his conclusions.

The Leacrofts have no punditorial axe to grind: they do not wish to impose their concept of an ideal theatre upon us. Their book is content to set out to describe the development of theatre building from the Greeks to today – as it happened and with an explanation of the circumstances that made it happen.

It is basically a picture book: three hundred and fifty illustrations of which some ninety are cut-aways. The text is spare but tightly to the point. Indispensable. And affordable: thanks and congratulations to Methuen for making such an important book available in paperback at such a bargain price. Absolutely indispensable.

The theatrical renaissance that accompanied the 1979 restoration of Frank Matcham's Opera House is a fine example of the interaction of the arts and the architecture in which they are housed. The Opera House story has received widespread journal coverage but now **THEATRE IN THE HILLS** sets it within the context of Buxton's total theatre tradition.

Like most local theatre historians, Ros McCoola has to adopt a creative approach to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Her clues include playbills, gravestones, tithe maps and account books at Chatsworth. Even when these help her to prove only that a print is misdated or that a building on it has been traditionally but wrongly identified as the second Buxton theatre, there is a positive gain and her credibility is enhanced. Grafting on to the slender Buxton facts her knowledge of contemporary theatre elsewhere (with standard illustrations of Richmond, Hogarth and Kean), Ros MacCoola promulgates a picture of Georgian and Regency theatre life in Buxton that carries a ring of truth.

But with the coming of this century there are more detailed records, whether of rep at the Playhouse or the Old Vic festivals at the Opera House from 1936 to 1942.

The eighty illustrations include colour of the restored Opera House and such goodies as the Sunlight Gas Panel, the Strand Grandmaster, Matcham's original section and a rep company of faces that are now

114 Lincoln's Inn Fields, 1661

