

THEATRE DESIGN AT CROYDON

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One of the 'perks' of contributing to this magazine is that a reporter from Cue can enjoy a little of the respect (fear?) earned by the professional press. Another is the occasional invitation to press launches and first nights. This explains why I attended a performance at Croydon College last Autumn and enjoyed the evening so much that I resolved to fill a gap in my own education and find out how the college goes about teaching theatre design.

Croydon College, like many similar institutions, runs a Faculty of Art & Design. Unlike most, it offers a long established Theatre Production and Design course lead-

theatre, the performing arts, architecture and costume. A busy and fascinating first year! After this "orientation" period each student has to choose a speciality — Set and Costume or Lighting and Production, and devote the rest of the course to these subjects. Throughout the course about twenty percent of the lectures cover non-theatrical design topics — complementary studies aimed at widening horizons.

Senior lecturers, all with extensive theatre experience, are Suzanne Adams — Design, Mike Hanson — Planning and Construction, John Turney — Scene Painting, and Robert Muller — Lighting and Production. Ralph Adron provides specialist tuition in Design, Clifford Bayliss in Properties and Technical Drawing and Natasha Kornilof in Costume Cutting and Making. They are assisted by other members of the college and by visiting specialists from the world of professional theatre. The whole course is validated by external assessors and students are eligible for mandatory local authority grant awards.

The course has priority use of the College theatre — a flat-floor academic assembly hall but with a reasonably well equipped stage, a 50 seat studio space and well equipped workshops for set construction, costume cutting and property making. Each year students develop their skills by working on a series of projects leading to the realisation of their designs for setting, light-



General view of displays and Ring Round the Moon set.

ing to a B/TEC Higher National Diploma in Design. It is a three year course with the final year spent on secondment in the entertainment industry. About twenty-four new students are accepted each year, a few direct from sixth-form, but most after an arts foundation course or a less specialised diploma course or suitable theatre experience. There are usually more women than men. The specialities offered are Setting and Costume and Lighting and Production studies.

The Director of Studies is Iain Potter who described the course to me and showed me round. New students begin by being introduced to the design processes, craft skills and practical staging techniques which must be applied when interpreting the script and supporting the actor in a theatrical presentation. This includes textual analysis, set design, costume design, lighting techniques, production management, construction, model-making, technical drawing, scene painting, property making, costume cutting and making, and the histories of



Costume for Ring Round the Moon by Trish Lee.



Don Giovanni set by Martin Kern.

ing and costume etc., going through all the production processes required to mount a minor production in the studio theatre, a major exhibition (The Workshow) and, as a culmination of the second year, a full scale production in collaboration with a visiting theatre company.

This year's production was staged in the college hall in December and was 'Ring Round the Moon', Christopher Fry's translation of the Jean Anouilh piece, played in a permanent Winter Garden setting. My brief mention of this production was hidden in the Cue January product review. As I reported then, it proved a very enjoyable evening with excellent performances by the visiting cast and straightforward, competent lighting, scenery, costumes and stage management.

In the past, courses have staged shows at the nearby Ashcroft Theatre and co-operated with the Ealing Drama Studio, Surrey Opera, Croydon Warehouse Theatre, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Royal Academy of Music and local amateur companies, providing all visual design, scenery, lighting, costumes and stage management and staging and sharing the production budget.

Evidence of the quality of the hands-on experience policy is most apparent to a day visitor in the workrooms. The woodwork and painting shop has a deliciously evocative smell of sawdust and size and on the day I was there, scenery and properties were nearing completion for the second year Workshow. All the usual materials and techniques are used to give the widest possible range of experience. Basic woodwork-