

# REIDing SHELF

Sheridan Morely has subtitled his **SPREAD A LITTLE HAPPINESS** as the *The first Hundred Years of the British Musical*. His century is the one since the end of the Gilbert and Sullivan era. A bit arbitrary perhaps, but not without logic. And it certainly makes for an interesting book. I started with the pictures: well selected and well printed, a visual narrative in their own right. My eye, loosely taking in the graphic shape of the text, noted such an excess of italicised show titles that I feared that Mr Morley surely could not find space for any sort of significant analysis.

But his comments, however short, are perceptively to the point. His accuracy on the musicals that I have seen, and particularly on the flops with which I have been associated, give me confidence in his judgements on the ones I would have liked to have seen — particularly those of the first half of the century. Oh to be whisked back to the Gaiety for Lionel Monckton's *The Orchid*, with Hawes Craven scenery that moved from The Countess of Barwick's Horiticultural College to the Interior of the Opera House at Nice.

I enjoy the depth and polish of today's musical but I also rather hanker for the simple innocence of yesterday's shows. Sheridan Morley's book helped me to savour both.

I used the phrase *straightforward sequential life* in reviewing Alan Kendall's biography of Garrick. His **GEORGE GERSHWIN** is in the same well-researched factual style. Indeed Kendall's approach is so objective that his book conveys little of the excitement of Gershwin's music. The more I read, the more I began to feel that perhaps he did not care much for the music. And by the end I began to be convinced that he did not care much for the man either. Or was he just trying to avoid the trap of sycophancy that endangers the biographer's lot?

The particular pleasure of reading this Gershwin biog (and it is not the only book on his life) is the facts on the shows: their initial reception, number of performances etc. The flavour of the music is, after all, something for our ears rather than eyes. Nevertheless I do wish Alan Kendall had felt able to relax just a little of his objectivity so that we could have shared more of Gershwin's pains and triumphs.

George Perry's **BLUEBELL** is a more satisfying read. We get to know Margaret Kelly and share the highs and lows of her professional and personal life as she develops her dancing troupes. The book has been republished in paperback to coincide with BBC TV's re-run of their biopic series on Margaret Kelly and her Bluebell Girls.

Book and video complement each other rather well. I watched the original series and have caught snatches of the re-run while reading the book. The way in which Carolyn Pickles, without impersonating Margaret Kelly, adds dimension to the well documented character of the written biography is a fine example of how acting in a style of carefully heightened naturalism can increase our understanding of an historic figure. The book is well illustrated and again the archival 'real' photographs complement the designed 'heightened' images of television realism.

However the Bluebell story is really just the hook on which hangs an important record of how one aspect of performance responded to life before, during and after the war — the 'during' being an interesting insight into occupied France.

In **THE EVERYMAN BOOK OF THEATRICAL ANECDOTES**, Donald Sinden has assembled 357 tales about theatre persons from Christopher Marlowe to Maria Aitken. Most of the people and some of the tales are familiar but I am particularly pleased to be introduced to William Peer, the Restoration actor with a repertoire of but two parts. Sir Richard Steele relishes the quality of Peer's rendition of the prologue to the play within Hamlet and the apothecary in Caius Marius (Otaway's version of Romeo and Juliet). Peer also excelled as the Property Man: 'This officer has always ready, in a place appointed for him behind the prompter, all such tools as are necessary in the play, and it is his business never to want billet-doux, poison, false money, thunderbolts, daggers, scrolls of parchments, wine, pomatum, truncheons and wooden legs, ready at the call of the said prompter, according as his respective utensils were necessary for promoting what was to pass on the stage'.

In the heart of a rehearsal, David Belasco sometimes threw his watch on the floor and stamped on it: it was a dollar watch that he kept in stock for the purpose, but the gesture was sobering. It is such snippets as this (or Garrick's advice to a young actor to give it more passion and less mouth) that brings people alive.

Donald Sinden's anecdotage is a rich collection, with sources meticulously indexed, and a bonus in that one cannot read it without hearing the words rolling out of its editors resonantly articulated larynx.

Writing a book about jokes is even more difficult than telling them to the first house Monday at Glasgow Empire. It takes

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