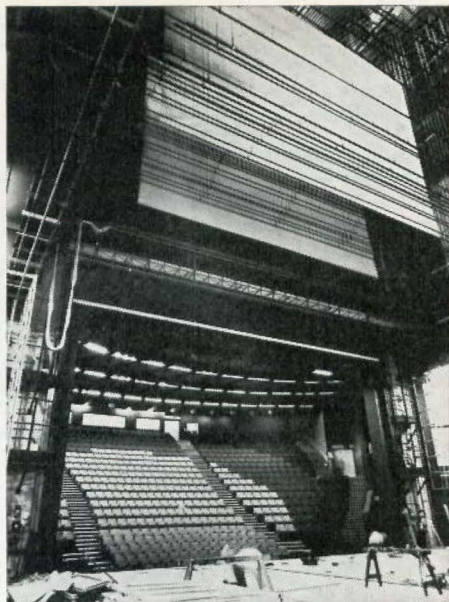


traffic engineering. Thus the excited cry of "There it is—the theatre!" is likely to be followed by a despairing wail as one is sucked down some automotive sewer whose end, wherever it may be, is certainly not the theatre itself.

The new theatre looks large and impressive in much the same way that German theatres do. You cannot miss it even if it may be difficult to decant oneself there. Inside it still feels large and in a strange way this mood seems to fit Birmingham. Why strange? It is our second city after all. Perhaps they should have built themselves an Opera House. In many ways the scale of this building is such that it could almost be an Opera House. This is the evocation that I personally receive and this would be so whether one entered by the front door or by the workshop door. One of the two paint frames there is enormous—a reminder of Covent Garden. With all the talk of Edinburgh's Opera House one wonders how it will compare with this theatre.

Of course 900 seats would be small for an Opera House but as new theatres go today it is a large number. The proscenium theatres that we have seen in the pages of TABS have tended to hover at 550—the largest being Nottingham at 750. I know when I write these words that the Belgrade is an exception and seats 900. So it is with this last that we should compare the new Birmingham Rep. What happens is people remember the Thorndike Leatherhead, look around at Birmingham and think it's big. Well so it is; it has twice as many seats and like Leatherhead all on one floor.

There are twenty-one steeply-stepped rows of Rank Strand luxury, cinema-type seats which evoke in me the feel of the enormous circle at the old Empire Cinema, Leicester Square. In place of the wide screen there is the wide stage—a proscenium opening of fifty feet—well over twice that of the Old Rep. The critic in the Guardian refers to "an immense front curtain". A curtain is a device to conceal scene changes and hitherto 42 ft., as at Covent Garden or Drury Lane, has been wide enough to symbolise the ultimate in scenic extravagance as far as we in



*Backstage at the Birmingham Rep.*

Britain are concerned. The opinions expressed in an article such as this must be purely personal so readers will not be surprised to find me once again proclaiming my dislike of wide openings as a solution to the problem of getting an audience reasonably close to the stage. It is a paper solution, because the audience are only close to the *part* of the stage nearest to them. Moreover the auditorium forms a wide fan of 100 ft. at the back, which of course means that the rows holding the most people are those further from the stage.

It is sometimes argued that a very wide opening is no longer a pros. Even if this were true, provision must be made to reduce the opening at times. The resulting structure, even when it takes as here the form of two mobile towers carrying both scenery and lighting equipment, tends to form a decided proscenium—a false pros. It is of course the style not size of the production on an end-stage which governs whether it feels "open" and in contact with the audience or not.

There are two inescapable components