

MATCHA

by Tony Easterbrook

WE had been very much involved in the restoration of the Grand Opera House, Belfast, one of Matcham's more exuberant creations with an auditorium in the Indian style. At about the same time we were working in Blackpool and more specifically in the Grand Theatre, an auditorium all of plaster swags and painted panels and somewhat near the Baroque. These two theatres were Matcham 1895 and 1894 respectively. Aberdeen was of this century - 1906 with a rather classically informed auditorium. It must be said, nevertheless, that none of Matcham's interiors fall neatly into any one architectural style. He amalgamated and adapted as the fancy took him. And what fancy too! It is only necessary to look at the amazing pillars forming the stage boxes at the theatre in Richmond upon Thames to perceive the wild theatrical fantasy of Matcham's imagination. Compared with that the Aberdeen auditorium is almost chaste.

The theatre, long under the control of the Donald family, was acquired in 1974 by the Aberdeen City Council. At the time of the telephone call, the Council had placed a contract for the installation of a scenery lift to replace the one already installed in the theatre.

It should be said at this point for the benefit of those poor unfortunates who have never visited H M Theatre that the building is designed on the edge of a cliff. The main entrance foyer, opening directly from the street, is level with the rear of the dress circle while the get-in is approximately two, or perhaps nearly three, floors below stage level, so a scenery lift is very, very necessary. Unfortunately, the one which had been operating very successfully for many years had failed to answer satisfactorily the severe questions posed by 1979 officialdom and the Vestal Virgins of the Health and Safety at Work Executive had turned down their thumbs in disapproval. The lift was to be consigned to outer darkness. Unsupported, as far as we are aware, by any theatrical expertise the City Council invited tenders from a large number of lift manufacturers. Fortunately the tender was won by that well-known firm in Bury St Edmunds, Tele-Stage Associates. I say fortunately though that may not, at this moment, be the view of Tele-Stage as the safety devices which were required to be built-in to the substitute lift are so many, so varied and so intricate as to make it almost impossible to be certain that scenery can be raised from ground level to stage level unless it is a fine day, the wind is in the West and Saturn in the ascendant. More worried frowns

have been given, more teeth have been tapped by pencils, more hours have been spent in attempting to pacify the great God Safety than would have been thought possible fifteen years ago.

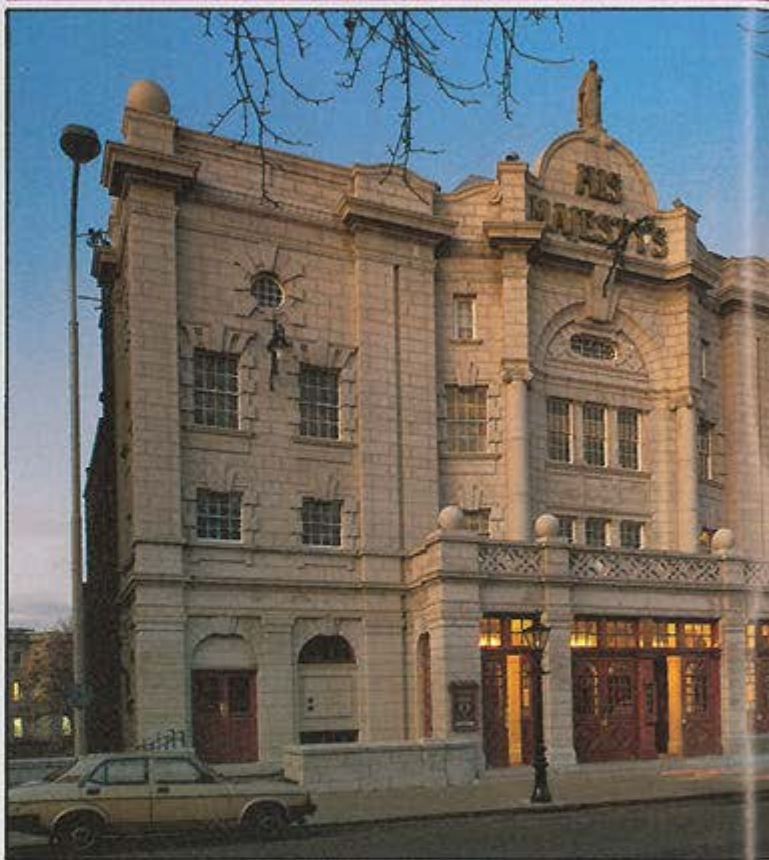
It was certain that the replacement of the scenery lift was going to close the theatre - and close it for some time. At this point the theatre management asked the Council if it would be possible, while the building was closed, to have the old hemp system replaced by a modern counterweight system or, as some of them rather more elegantly put it, a counterbalance mechanism. But all this was unknown to me when I answered the telephone.

As I journeyed north I reflected on the last time I was in the theatre. It was always a pleasant place to visit, largely because of the hospitable staff and the high regard for tidiness and cleanliness in the building. Even if the lino in the dressing rooms was worn the welcome was always overwhelming. The raked stage with its revolve had the upstage left and right corners cut off at approximately 45° and above it, the fly tower tumbled home to a conventional central lantern. The grid was, of course, wooden and the hemp sets worked from a gallery on the OP side. On the prompt side there was an exceptionally wide gallery and beneath it on a mezzanine floor in the prompt corner, access to which was by means of a steep staircase complete with elegant, highly polished brass rail reminiscent of a ship's ladder, was the array of dimmer racks operated by means of a 100-way pre-set board situated in the prompt side stage box.

The space below the stage was dominated by the metal tripod, mounted upon a concrete plinth, which supported the centre of the revolve. Downstage of that tripod was a very confined mezzanine floor having a few hutches for musicians and some rather inadequate toilet facilities. At ground level, that is to say at get-in level, was a fairly large L-shaped electrical workshop and store and, extending beneath the auditorium, a commodious store for scenery. It should be noted that His Majesty's Theatre is well-known in the area for mounting both pantomimes and its own Summer shows. The existence of a large scenery store is therefore as important as the triangular paintframe at fly floor level backstage. Ideally both these facilities were to be preserved. It was also hoped to improve the paintframe as it was operated by an exceedingly old hand winch and lit by some asymmetrically suspended battens which were rather more decorative than efficient.

HIS MAJESTY'S THE

TO have been associated with the restoration of a Frank Matcham theatre is fascinating enough; to have worked on two seems like unbelievable luck, but to have become involved in a third within a space of five years is almost too good to be true. This, how-



The auditorium, having stalls and three tiers, the latter beautifully raked and wrapped round the proscenium opening was finished, as I had always remembered it, in an off-white plain colour. Most of the rear stalls, underneath the dress circle, could be cut off when occasion required by a curtain suspended from an aged tab track suspended centrally from the rear stalls ceiling. The walls at the rear of the stalls and down the left and right of the auditorium stalls level were, for some distance, covered with some highly decorative Art Nouveau tiles. These were highly regarded by experts of the period.

Curiously the public areas outside the auditorium were considerably larger and more elegant than one normally expects to see in a theatre of this date. To be sure if you were in the auditorium above dress circle level then the very idea of your having a drink in the interval would be anathema. However, the circle was served by a most elegant square room, panelled in mahogany and

having in its centre a circular bar with a marble top suitably tricked out with bottles of malt and a pretty barmaid. The stalls bar, though substantial in size was a very different kettle of fish. It had been 'renovated' in the past and bore an unhappy likeness to a station waiting room on one of the London commuter lines. The entrance hall itself, again mahogany panelled had, it was discovered, underneath a rubber tiled floor, a delightful marble one. To the left as one entered was the obligatory Scottish sweetie counter and to the right a beautifully designed but completely inadequate box office containing two very chatty ladies who hopped up and down all day on rostrums placed within in order to allow them both to work and serve the public at the same time.

But all this is background for what happened in the future. The immediate problem was to discover whether or not there was a way of putting a counterweight system into the stage house.