

There was only the one, the dress, rehearsal. And this of a brand new opera of which I was not even given a summary or any idea of what the scenes were going to be. We knew, because we could see it, that they were building half a boat in the scene dock at the back. They had been at this for days, carefully planking out both sides of the hull so that we could not decide whether the action was to take place aboard or alongside.

Eventually a painted set out of nowhere was hung. It was at this point that some real theatre people made their entrance. Essentially practical used to putting on shows whatever the conditions. The little stage manager was particularly impressive – a type we would all recognise in any country. It went without saying that I would light the show, work the console and mend it if it broke down. He would see that the scenery and singers got on and off the stage at the proper times. From his rapid French which I could hardly follow, I gleaned that the first act was a room in a palace, with a sunset, a couple of candle cues and a vision or two. The second act was aboard ship opening as night with a slow dawn, Cav style, for the entire act. The last act was a full-up fine day in the Black Horse Square in Lisbon and that was what was hanging there at the moment.

Well, the first thing was to get rid of the sky borders which formed an integral part and give the great cyclorama a chance. This was done there and then; and what had been a series of cutcloths one behind the other became painted wing pieces lashed to the carriage and frame machinery with which this old stage was still equipped. How to light this and the other two scenes had to await the dress rehearsal that very night; by which time the safety curtain which had remained obstinately down so the Maestro could rehearse would be raised, presumably. We met our stage hands and gave them an idea how the Patt.73 spots on the bridges and the Stelmar incandescents out in the dome functioned. Those five must have been the last ever made.

Returning from the Hotel Borges after dinner Pep and I got a shock. It was quite impossible: the wings on both sides were packed tight with people who obviously did not belong on-stage or off-stage.

Who were they and why were they there? They were the poor people of Lisbon who had been invited along to see the rehearsal. Why were they not out-front? You cannot have them sitting in the new clean seats which will be bottomed-out tomorrow night by the highest in the land. By then I had two interpreters in train, one for the lower orders and the other for society contact. No ordinary man this latter, and he and I set out to see the Minister who with a select few occupied the very grand ex-Royal box out-front centre. The poor people of Lisbon will never know why, magically, their fortune changed that one night and they were ordered to occupy the stalls!

Lanterns had been set to cover likely areas of the stage and except for the odd special it was a matter of painting the stage and action from

the console as the drama unfolded. We have become used to a view of the stage from the lighting control nowadays; but until then it had been all theory. But it worked! The vibrations at the base of my spine from my immediate neighbours, the basses and cellos, were peculiar and the Act I vision extreme stage right could not be seen from pit left, of course. But Pep was able to give me a commentary on the phone. For the final scene I got all the colours removed from the spots on both bridges (a total of 18 Patt.73s plus spots elsewhere – say three dozen in all!).

The fleecy clouds floated by to begin – they had to be shown off – and when I had slowly taken them out so that they would not become a bore; I adjourned to one of the Grand tier boxes, there to ponder. The auditorium was superb for music and there on the stage was Lisbon as I had come to know it – the dazzling white sunlight on the buildings against a strong blue sky. I looked upon my work and thought it good. The dawn on board ship had been great fun to do too.

The following night was to present two hazards of which not the least was how to get into the place! Lisbon performances did not begin until quarter past nine in the evening. Returning after dinner (Pep had taken his earlier) clad in full tails and white tie I found the opera house was ringed with troops on both sides of the road. Wandering in and out over the weeks as if I owned the place, I had not thought to ask for a pass; nor they to give me one. For a few minutes I thought all was lost. Visions of incarceration pending enquiry seemed all too realistic in that dictatorship; especially as a political jail was immediately alongside the theatre: forming a continuation of the backstage building, as had been pointed out to me earlier on.

Time pressed. There was nothing for it: I pushed through the crowd, tapped the nearest soldier on the shoulder, declared firmly "Je suis tres importante" and set out to cross the sanded road. I was not shot in the back or in the front. I probably owe my life to my "midnight-blue" tails by Ellis of the Strand, I looked very smart. But not a patch on Arriaga de Tavares and my social interpreter: resplendent with stary orders and super-sashes they were hovering anxiously with Bill Pep who looked, as he always did, large droopy and relaxed. My entrance to the orchestra pit was breathtaking. Not for the audience I hasten to add; but for me. The S'Carlos auditorium was lovely in itself: beautifully restored and lit, exactly in period even to retaining the line of boxes on the stage itself. In a sense the place looked its best when seen from the stage end. I could never get used to the large clock over the proscenium whereas the "Royal" box slap in the centre at the other end was superb. Overall, hung a great crystal chandelier and along the box tiers crystal brackets. Not a single FOH spot had been allowed to intrude. The 1kW Stelmar spots were behind apertures, which could be closed manually in the "dome", and four 500-W spots (Patt.44s) were com-

pletely concealed in the column at the front of the stage on either side.

From the lighting point of view these were not as acute as might be, due to the boxes on the stage itself which meant that there was a permanent carpeted no-mans land forestage before the house tabs. These boxes had got Applebee's (and my) goat on our Sud Express visit. They were subject to argument upon argument, with and without the Minister. We had a considerable body of opinion in favour of their removal on our side. It was not a matter of losing seats as they were not accessible to the public. When I returned; the boxes were still there, we had lost and the architect had won. Today the words "I am glad to say" have to be added.

From the pit this auditorium filled with people, dressed as only a small country can, with orders, sashes and bright uniforms abounding, had become a fairyland. It was a scene from an epic Ruritanian film and this was my night. This was what my whole career had been leading up to and would, only too probably, end with. It was to be savoured to the full, not a drop to be wasted.

After the Spanish ambassador had entered to a standing ovation, it was President Carmona's turn while the real master, Doctor Salazar, stood quietly to one side. No display for this, then, unusual dictator. One never saw his portrait hanging up anywhere in his country: thus it was that Carmona took centre "stage" that night.

I cannot remember if there was an overture or a short prelude but I do know that when the velvet tabs parted (in disorder since the two halves were separately worked each from its own side) the house lights descended only to half-check and stayed there. It was inconceivable that the dimmer had broken down as we had been asked to supply, as an economy, a manual board for that. A frantic enquiry of my "hot line" alongside evoked his response that the house lights were never taken right out when his illustrious excellency was in any theatre. He was much loved but it was a precaution.

Disaster pending: not only were there those night sequences and visions in this, the first act, but what about my lovely stary opening and slow dawn in the next. "Hot line" was dispatched red hot foot. After a while, the house dimmed to black-out. His illustrious excellency was not shot: that made two of us who were lucky to escape that night!

At the end of Act II Dr. Salazar sent a message of congratulation, via "Hot line" (who else!), on my dawn saying that it reminded him of those he used to see at Coimbra. Before taking charge of Portugal he used to be a professor of mathematics at that university – their Oxbridge. He could not know that the third disaster to avert had suddenly presented itself just before the end of that very act. My long dawn done I was just relaxing when I noticed that sailors up aloft were untying ropes here and there and were just about to unfurl a very large sail. It would run right across the stage like the fore and after on a Thames sailing barge. No sign or warning of this at the

rehearsal. If one had wanted to intercept the spots on No.1 bridge and towers to give the effect of a patch-work quilt, this was the best way to do it. To select the appropriate tabs (stopkeys) took but a moment and a quick check as the sail came down and "my" scene was saved.

Looking back over exactly forty years at this production of *Don Joao IV* and the way it was put on, I have to say, in spite of all the intervening developments, there could not have been a better control and position than my Light Console in the orchestra pit. From there it was possible to see a singer oscillating the adam's apple or licking the lips before bursting into song. Instantly the circuit or circuits for that area were selected and the light increased gently as the mouth opened. A modern memory board would have had nothing to memorise. My plot had only one line on it; the opening dimmer levels for the stary night on board ship. I wanted the tabs to open on this, so levels had to be set without being able to check them visually. When as in that case you have a cyc with the three primary colours the mixture has to be precise.

At the rehearsal the closeness of console to stage enabled me to hop up and set the lanterns exactly myself. Not, I hasten to add, during the show itself. Tails were worn very long indeed in the thirties. Like good theatre people anywhere; once they had been shown at the rehearsal, the odd wave and pointing from the stage was all that was needed. Backstage there were these few men, including of course Bill Pep, who knew how to get a show on. Language was not so serious, we could in some part read each others mind.

The Gala over, two clear days had to elapse in order, so I was told, to allow the de rigueur clothes to circulate. One more gap of two or three days and that was that. Three performances and except for the odd concert nothing to follow; the Italian company would not face the wartime journey. Something had to be done so I played my colour music card. The records came from the very limited collection of the Emissora Nacional. The cyc was used but I had to have some white drapes which meant a visit to the Lisbon equivalent of John Lewis just down the hill from the hotel.

Pep left as soon as we had opened but it was nearly six months before I got a seat in the KLM Dakota which had been added to make a second flight each week. I must say that looking round at the lit-up Lisbon on my last night I had a feeling that I was dotty to go home. All the more so, when being shown into my room at the Royal Bristol the following night I saw that my window was filled in with brown paper, the glass having been blown out the night before. ■

*In the next issue of Tabs, Fred Bentham continues his reminiscences, telling of wartime London shows, the sale of his second Light Console and of a narrow escape from electrocution at the Palladium!*

†Sightline. Vol. 13 No. 2.