



by Gordon Robson Small

Gordon Robson Small was born in Scotland, emigrated to South Africa in 1936 and was educated at Durban High School and the University of Natal (Architectural Department).

Major works include various faculty buildings for the University of Natal, one of which won an award from the Institute of South African Architects and numerous factories, shopping centres, banks, churches, schools and houses.

WORK on the restaurant section commenced in 1931/32. The owners, Messrs. African Theatres Ltd. had decided to spare no expense in making this the finest theatre in South Africa. After a short spell the project was however abandoned and Mr P. Rogers Cook, Company Architect, travelled to England and America to study the latest theatre plans with the object of embarking on a much more elaborate scheme than at first contemplated.

A further delay occurred after the completion of the front containing the restaurant. Problems were encountered in the housing of the ventilation plant which was to serve the whole of the complex including the Princes and the four storey broadcasting studio and office block, which was proposed where Medwood Court now stands. The acoustics and ventilation of the recently completed Johannesburg Colosseum had first to be put to the trial before similar methods could be applied in Durban. Once the below water table basement was complete, the largest plant in the southern Hemisphere to supply "cool and dehumidified" air could be installed and the theatre built in the same style as the restaurant giving Durban its "all-Elizabethan playhouse".

Although "not fashionable at the time, Elizabethan architecture was considered appropriate for play-

houses". The associated architect Mr A. Wolsey Spicer had an "expert knowledge" of period architecture and "designed the restaurant section to give the impression of open air, as a replica of an Elizabethan courtyard surrounded by houses of the period with an illusion of a star-lit sky and sunset and dawn effects". This character was most pronounced in the illusionistic ceiling of stars in the theatre.

The Princes which had opened on 26 July 1926 (with Charlie Chaplin in "The Gold Rush") was to be remodelled in the 17th Century French style and refurbished with a full sized stage, whilst the broadcasting studios were to conform to the standards of the BBC in London. These plans were never carried out.

Supervising architects were Messrs. Cowen, Powers and Ellis. The restaurant opened on 6 July 1934, the Cinema on 7 June 1935.

References: *Architect Builder and Engineer* August 1931, June 1933, March and July 1934

The Preservation Battle

In December 1976 the 50 year ground lease expired. The Playhouse theatre had become redundant in terms of modern cinema sizes and a renewal of the lease was not considered.

The central siting of the building, its considerable architectural merit and the economic advantages in

**FACE-LIFT
— TO THE —
NATAL
PLAYHOUSE**

rehabilitating an old building were the main factors in the Natal Provincial Administration acquiring the Playhouse.

The Playhouse site being insufficiently large for a full theatre complex, the still functioning Princes, later known as the Colosseum, Medwood Court and a portion of the Albany Parking Garage were also acquired.

The Architectural Challenge

Guiding all rehabilitation decisions, was the fundamental desire to preserve as much of the original fabric as possible. This meant not only the physical substance, but essentially the spirit of the building.

The Playhouse theatre will become the opera auditorium seating some 1300, and the circle of the Princes will become the drama theatre seating 500. The Playhouse Proscenium Area will be rebuilt to



Journey the first, in which the Editor visits Silly Sussex, sees a truly rural "Supper Theatre" and hears how a bassoon player blew - literally - away.

YOUR Editor awoke one morning in October knowing that a good day was to be enjoyed.

What would it be? Was it simply a day away from the office, or was it something more positive? Yes - now I remembered, a trip was to be made into rural Sussex with Alan Luxford - one of our export area managers who lives near Brighton and is therefore well up on the local theatre scene. We were off to see the Malthouse Theatre Club at Goddards Green, Hurstpierpoint.

The editorial barouche is headed down Brighton Road to a few miles beyond the end of the M23, then off to the left in the direction of Burgess Hill, through Goddards Green, down

**THE EDITOR'S
JOURNEYS**



lanes of ever decreasing width but ever increasing charm until a sign post points the way to the Malthouse Theatre.

This delightful theatre has been created within a barn in the grounds of her home by Sandra Scriven as one of the increasing number of rural theatres cum restaurants that are to be found in the country not too far from many of our main cities.

The barn itself was derelict until some five years ago. Sandra set about bringing to life her ambition of combining professional theatre with a restaurant of character.

What were this charming lady's qualifications - in addition to a fascinating personality and eyes of the deepest green?

First - she is a real theatrical professional. She attended RADA, where she won the Ivor Novello award then into "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at The Strand Theatre, then "Billy" at Drury Lane followed then by a spell with the RSC at Stratford.

Readers who know the world of singing will be interested to hear that our heroine's voice was trained by Isobel Bailey and Bruce Lockhart, no less.

The programming at the Malthouse is extremely diverse. Among 1983's offerings were "Under Milk Wood", a Country & Western