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Technical Theatre Review 24

July/August 1983

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(Cover picture)

Barbican Theatre The view from the flying control position looking across to the No. 1 lighting bridge and down into the stalls. The rig is the initial 1982 commissioning rig and the photograph was taken before the masking for the first season was installed.

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Cue is an independent magazine published bi-monthly by Twynam Publishing Ltd.

Available on subscription
UK £10.50 per annum (6 issues)
Europe and Overseas £13.00

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TECHNOLOGY: To be feared . . . or embraced?

Theatre enjoys something of a love/hate relationship with technology. Have we not all known moments when the simplicity of two planks and a passion seem infinitely more desirable than a hi-tech stage whose delights can be increasingly complex to integrate — even when free from malfunction.

Fear of technology was openly expressed by many of the participants at NoTT 83. It is not difficult to understand their concern. In the age of the chip, microprocessing is an inevitable theme of exhibitors' displays and conference debates.

Yet theatre technology is not exactly a new concept — earlier stage carpenters exploited their own century's knowledge of mechanical advantage to produce both sophisticated flying and wing substitution techniques that were not only labour saving but could achieve a degree of sophisticated timing that now taxes the skills of a computer programmer.

So why the fear? Perhaps it is a fear of the unknown: the replacement of visible hardware with invisible software. Theatre people tend to be sensualists, responding to the touch of tangible objects. To pull a rope, push a flat, or heave on the wheel of a grandmaster can be much more satisfying than initiating a programme by touching a button.

Theatre exists as soon as people are placed in an environment — they interact with each other and with that environment. These interactions can involve a complete range of sophistication from a solo on a stool to a multi-media spectacle: theatre exists in many many forms, all valid within their own terms of reference. Many of these forms have always been dependent upon technology and will continue to seek ways of developing the desirable into the possible. Partly for humanity in removing excessive physical drudgery, and partly for efficiency in releasing maximum time for rehearsal and performance — but primarily to explore ways of extending the nature of theatrical experience.

Provided that we always seek the desirable rather than the merely possible, surely theatre has no alternative but to embrace technology.

A Gold and a Silver for Britain at Design Olympics

A Report from ROBIN DON, Prague June 1983



The Congress Hall in the Julius Fucik Park of Culture and Leisure is the location for this four-yearly event of Theatre Architecture and Stage Design from all over the world.

Last month in the Waldstein Palace, the Czech Minister of Culture presented one of Britain's young designers with the finest individual award. Our congratulations go to David Short from Liverpool. His exceptionally fine costume designs for productions at The Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester received the Gold Medal. The Silver was won by Maria Bjornson for her witty design in the speciality section for Czech Opera, Janacek's *Cunning Little Vixen*. A joint production by Welsh National Opera and Scottish Opera.

WEST GERMANY

West Germany well-deservedly won the major prize, The Golden Troika. This is awarded to the country with the finest overall quality of design. Four years ago the British team triumphantly brought home this trophy but this year the West German exhibit stole the show. Having crossed the threshold one entered a peaceful landscape moulded from sand dunes and parched grass. It was further enhanced by floor to ceiling mirrored panels which reflected the environment to infinity. Within this area nine models were beautifully displayed. The environment had obviously been inspired by one of the models, which showed the designs

for the Czech opera *Katja Kabanowa*. It depicted an undulating landscape, covered with reeds and grasses. A crumbling jetty and a solitary bench was in silhouette against a sultry sky.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Having decided not to include work of their youngest designers who are at the beginning of their careers, or the works of older generations who have already had many opportunities to present their designs to an international audience, the Czech committee made their selection between the two. This middle generation of Czech and Slovak designers who have already achieved a number of well-deserved successes in the last four years, are representative of that progressive design trend which V. Beryozkin of the USSR designates Action Stage Design. Rooted in the action of the actors on the stage, Action Stage Design is bound to the actors and forms a continuity with them. Hence it is an environmental design formed predominantly by scenic objects; props and costumes. It is anti-illusionist – the stage set is not only playing along with the actor but through him. This close link produces a new synthesis in a theatrical work where the design ceases to be an independent theatrical and visual discipline and becomes a component of the dramatic text.

The Czech Architecture Section concentrated mainly on the new extension to The

National Theatre in Prague. The exterior of this new auditorium is completely constructed from thousands of hand-blown glass bubbles, each approximately 75 cm², squared off and flattened to a thickness of 30 cm. A visit to the site revealed how these bubbles were individually mounted on the exterior totally concealing the structural elements within. The new stage area is conceived as a multi-purpose theatrical auditorium (with the possibilities of a theatre



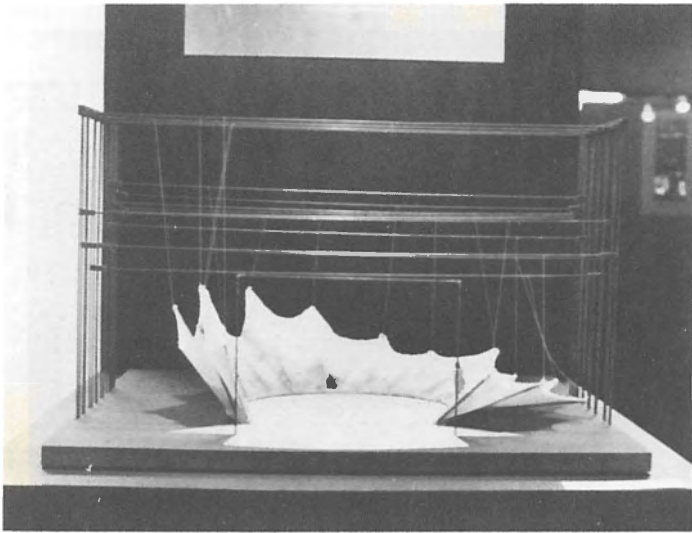
Gold medal for costume was won by UK designer David Short for *The Corn is Green*.



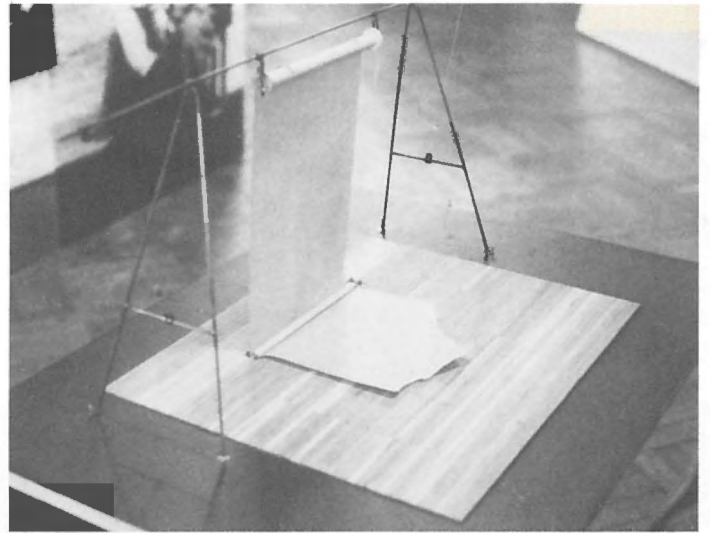
It was the turn of West Germany to take home the Golden Triga from this year's Quadrennial.



Jurgen Dreir's *Katja Kabanowa* was the inspiration for West Germany's successful exhibit.



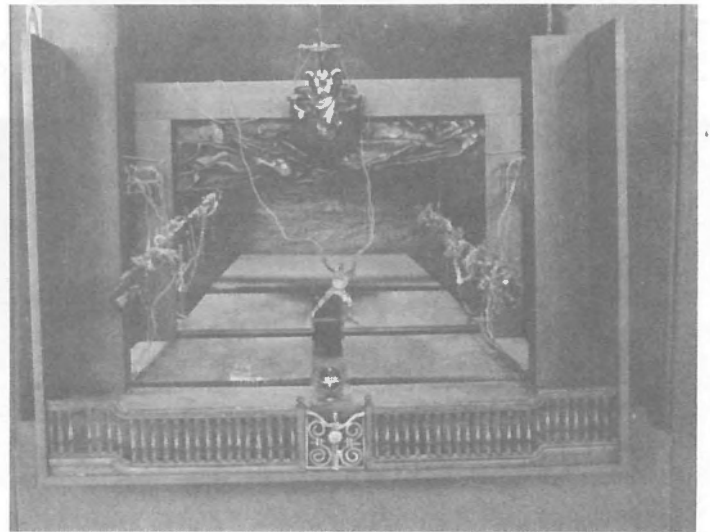
Drago Turina of Yugoslavia also received a silver medal for his Croatian Faust set.



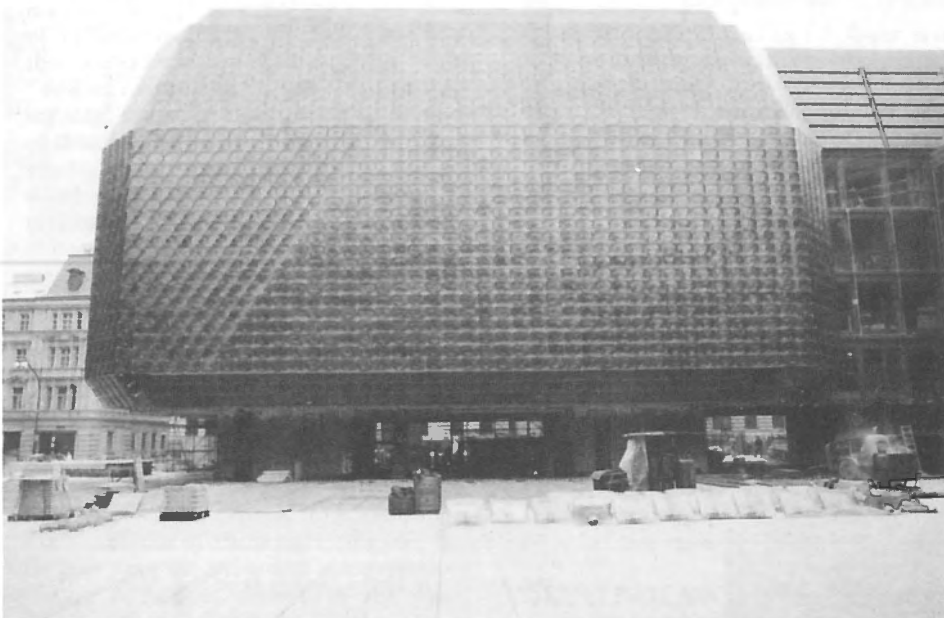
Jozef Ciller, Czechoslovakia a gold for Galileo



The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny Viki Feitscher, Australia.



One of 60 Soviet entries Juno and Avos by Oleg Sheintsis.



The new extension to Prague's National Theatre clad with thousands of glass bubbles.

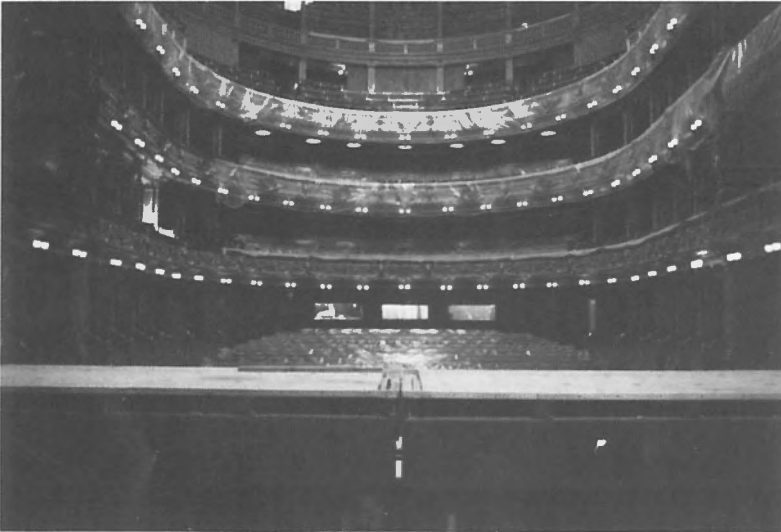
à l'italienne, Elizabethan or arena-type stage arrangement) which will provide opportunities for staging different types of theatrical genres, including performances by the *Lanterna Magika*. The technology employed for adjusting the internal auditorium space is quite astounding. The most extraordinary feature being the proscenium, which, at the press of a button can recede up stage and become part of the back wall, thus allowing a thrust stage or theatre-in-the-round area to become available. It struck me as a delightful luxury since the auditorium has a capacity of only 410 to 578 seats but certainly an ideal solution if one can afford a new building of this nature.

SOVIET UNION

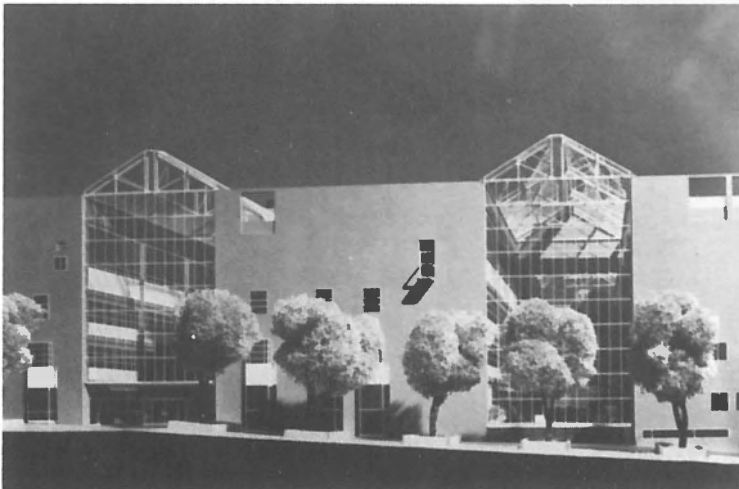
Since the Soviet Union has just celebrated its 60th Anniversary, it had decided to have 60 of their young designers represented. New



The Congress Hall in Julius Fucik Park of Culture and Leisure where the Exhibition takes place.



National Theatre, Prague.



Gold Medal for Architecture was awarded to Finland for the Theatre Academy, Helsinki project.



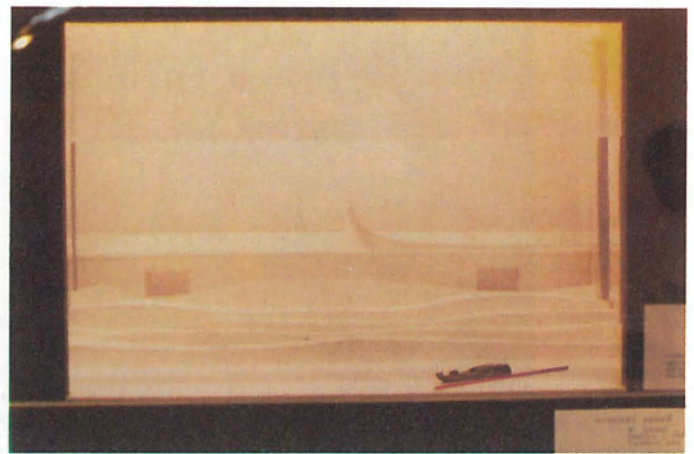
The Princess and the Ecad by Naja Petrova (Bulgaria).



An Attempt to Fly by Dimitry Krymov (USSR).



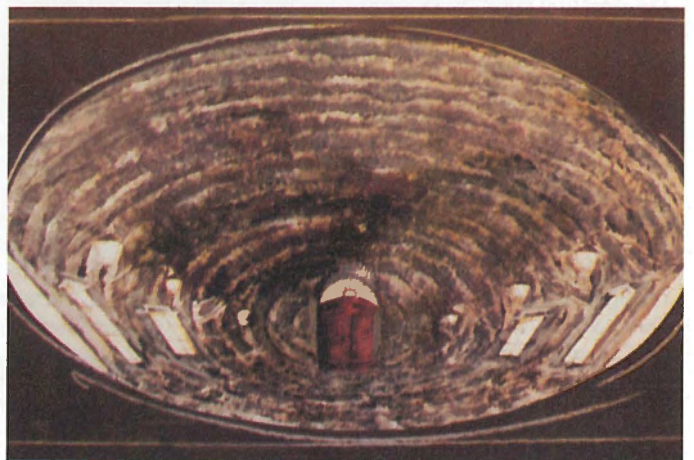
Too good to be true, *James Plaston, Canada.*



Gold medal for Scenography, *Andre Aquart's Ondine, one of the French entries.*



Gold medal for thematic design to *West Germany's Maro Arturo Marelli for Jenůfa by Janacek.*



Silver medal for Scenography to *Italy, Maurizio Bato for The Damnation of Faust.*

names have come up in the last four years, but because of the many designers represented, each artist was limited to just one or two works. It was nevertheless possible to trace the basic trends of current Soviet design as continuing the traditions of the 70s—creating an integral and plastic image of a play to match the internal drama conflict, and a return, in this new phase, to the “one set for each act” principle of employing stage space. At the same time, the work of these young Soviet designers brings convincing proof of their search for the new, which will certainly contribute to the overall enrichment of Soviet stage design.

Recent years have seen a marked change in available training opportunities in stage design, geographically. Whereas, some time ago, designers were predominantly trained at the Surikow Institute of Fine Arts in Moscow and at The Institute of Theatre, Music and Cinematography in Leningrad, there are now design schools in other national republics (operating under the auspices of the Academics of Arts and Arts Institutes) in their capitals from Kiev, Riga, Tbilisi, Vilnius to Tashkent. Some very fine designs were on show and many received medals of honour. Several of the young Soviet designers were in Prague. As at previous Quadrennials, there was much socializing with the British team into the early hours.

FINLAND

There were medals for Finland also. The Theatre Architecture section here was particularly interesting. The new Opera House in Helsinki shows an exciting blend of solid flat concrete areas interspersed with large areas of glass which soar up into a conservatory-type roof in the foyer areas. Built by the side of a pool, the whole effect is extremely dynamic.

FRANCE

The Gold Medal for stage design was won by André Acquart, his work was consistently outstanding. Models and photos from four extremely stylish productions shone through. The most eye-catching being a production of *Ondine* at the Champs-Elysees Theatre, Paris 1982. The stage picture was convincingly like a half-remembered dream.

ITALY

Maurizio Balo gained the Silver for his striking set for *The Damnation of Faust* at the Teatro Comunale Di Bologna in 1982. A daringly clever design which achieved the effect of an infinite universe.

GREAT BRITAIN

There was no architectural entry this year but the high standard of work from the twenty-seven stage designers from Britain was greatly appreciated.

Students from the second-year theatre design course at The Central School of Art and Design performed a daily programme of lively “Design in Action” events. Wimbledon School of Theatre Design was represented by a splendid photographic display of recent work.

This is the third time we have exhibited at a PQ and the members of the Society of British Theatre Designers realize how great a contribution to international understanding and co-operation in the world of theatre and the arts is made at these exhibitions. Theatre design is not just an academic subject but reflects the cultural and artistic heritage of a nation.

To this end our exhibition was drawn from the very wide range of theatrical activities in Britain. We had work from our national companies and work from the regional theatres, from established designers and from those just starting their careers. We all joined in greeting fellow designers and architects from many lands in celebrating the Prague Quadrennial 1983. Twenty-four countries participated: Australia; Belgium; Bulgaria; Canada; Cuba; Czechoslovakia; Denmark; Federal Republic of Germany; Finland; France; German Democratic Republic; Great Britain; Holland; Hungary; Italy; Japan; New Zealand; Philippines; Poland; Soviet Union; Sweden; Switzerland; Vietnam; Yugoslavia.

One Year On

JAMES SARGANT

Amidst all the criticism that has been levelled at some aspects of the Barbican Centre, the Theatre has remained relatively unscathed. The main auditorium in particular seems to have acquired a reputation as something of a haven in a troubled sea. Before going on to look at the areas that work less well and to speculate as to the reasons why, it is perhaps worth recording why the auditorium has remained such a particularly successful element in the Centre.

The answer lies in the very close co-operation that existed between the RSC as the eventual user of the Theatre and the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. The Corporation of the City of London, as the clients, should be congratulated for allowing this dialogue to go ahead with the absolute minimum of interference. The compliment to Sir Peter Hall and John Bury, the Artistic Director and the Head of Design at the RSC during the key period of 1964-1968, and who fronted the RSC contribution to the design, is that, when the time came, Trevor Nunn, the present RSC Joint Executive and Artistic Director, asked for only one basic change to the stage format, which related to the forestage side access areas. And there is only one major regret as to the final stage auditorium relationship, being that the recent RSC production style has been inclined to wrap the audience more round the edges of the stage than would ever be possible at the Barbican, where the line of the safety curtain, being in the front of all the acting area, precludes any real flexibility in this area.

The brief to the architects had been almost impossible — to seat an audience of 1250 — the compromise between the Corporation's desire for 1500 seats and the RSC ideal of 800 to 1000 with 120° from the point of command — 5 feet up from the front edge of the stage, with no member of the audience to be more than 65 feet from this point (60 feet from the front of the stage). The solution of the three circles with just two rows of seats in each circle, which is so much a feature of the auditorium design, was brilliant, but has finally produced the limited problems of the auditorium. To achieve the perfect sightlines to the back of the acting area required very precise sightline calculations — a slight increase in circle depth could severely affect the sightlines of the circle below. The foyer design of the Centre itself behind the back wall of the auditorium gave very limited possibilities for the cantilever required and considerable headaches to the structural engineers, Ove Arup. This all led to the construction drawings being produced to the meanest measurements possible, add to this the discrepancies in the construction, which lost some inches, and the result was not enough room to house the extremely comfortably designed stall seats and leg room at a minimum gangway width, which makes continental seating with non-tip up seats far from comfortable. The front rows of all

three circles suffered in this way, which with the total comfort elsewhere, is regrettable. The problem is perhaps less acute in the top circle (3) where the audience is inclined to lean forward in their seats to get the best view of the action, so sacrificing a little seat depth and seat back comfort is not such a loss. In the ideal world the view from this top circle is perhaps 2° too steep, according to textbook ideals, but the nearness to the stage compared with a more conventional balcony or gallery makes up for the steepness.

As far as backstage is concerned, nearly all the drawbacks stem from the structural and basic contract drawings being completed and signed and sealed as far as the RSC was concerned in 1968 with completion not achieved until 1982. The other major problems being the restrictions and limitations of the site and introduction of the second performing space, which was not part of the original concept. It was at first thought that the Guildhall School of Music and Drama facilities would be available to RSC as often as they wanted. This may have been so in the sixties, but with the great development in the theatre activities of the school, their existing facilities now hardly cope with their own performances of theatre, opera and the teaching and rehearsal process.

The Barbican Centre was always intended to be the centrepiece of the residential aspect of the whole Barbican development. The Barbican concept of a fortress and height limitations — the top of the flytower not to exceed the height of the neighbouring residential block and only the three tower blocks of flats were able to soar into the air — led to the problems of too much of the Centre being underground with very little access to daylight and the outside world. In the light of the neighbouring Whitbread development, this now seems to be a sad restriction. The interest of the RSC in a double-height flytower to assist in repertoire working added to this problem and led to the bottom level of the Theatre being at sea level, measuring 50 feet below ground level. The fortress and centrepiece aspects also led to no real entrance and extremely limited access to the site. This was a major difficulty for the contractors, John Laing, particularly as the majority of the residential development was complete before the Centre got under way.

At the time the building was planned lack of daylight for the majority was not thought to be a great drawback. Backstage conditions in most London theatres were miserable and with very few of the new provincial theatres complete with their so much improved backstage conditions, the airiness and outlook of Stratford was very much the exception. Also at this time with no Other Place/Pit style of work, the actors and stage management in particular spent very much less time in the theatre than is the present pattern. This virtual underground existence, when someone can arrive in the Theatre

before ten o'clock in the morning to leave well after eleven o'clock at night and goodness knows what the weather is like outside, is the thing that can never be solved and would be top of many users list of concerns.

Ventilating and lighting these subterranean areas has also not proved ideal. At the planning stage, cooling as an element of airconditioning was a luxury rather than the norm in this country. That the Barbican Theatre and Hall were going to be cooled was a feature item. For the rest normal airconditioning would have to suffice as an aspect of keeping down already high costs. Being a complex with a central plant room, the long runs of ducting have potential problems of drop off in efficiency and the heat gain from fresh air to outlet point adds to the difficulties. These points have been carefully monitored, airflow is certainly as it should be, but no more. This, plus the heat gain, has already led to the need for at least part cooling to be introduced in a number of areas in the Theatre and in the Centre as well. Eventually it is hoped that this partial-cooling will exist in all backstage areas and in the administrative offices. Due to the heat and running cost problems of a theatre with the minimum of daylight and access to fresh air, neon lighting was the basic backstage lighting solution. This has proved to be a very trying light for long hours of rehearsal or room occupancy. In the rehearsal rooms an element of tungsten light has had to be introduced, regardless of the added heat, but in some areas such as the band box, maintenance wardrobe and wigs, daylight adjusted tubes are now in use. The RSC had of course a fair idea in advance of the electricity cost implications of the underground existence, but an electricity bill five times above that being paid at Aldwych is a hard pill to swallow.

The facilities for the actors in the terms of dressing rooms and Green Room, were based very much on Stratford and have worked out reasonably well, once one has got over the lack of daylight and the lack of cooling, now partly remedied. But with only quick-change dressing rooms at stage level and with all other dressing rooms three and four floors above stage level and four and five levels up from the Pit, the movement of



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Looking across the stalls. The line of the safety curtain in front of all of the acting area is apparent and the rows of seats with a door at the end of each row except in the front five rows. The overhang of the three circles is evident – the just-in-view fourth 'circle' is the back lighting bridge, which also houses positions for the follow spots.

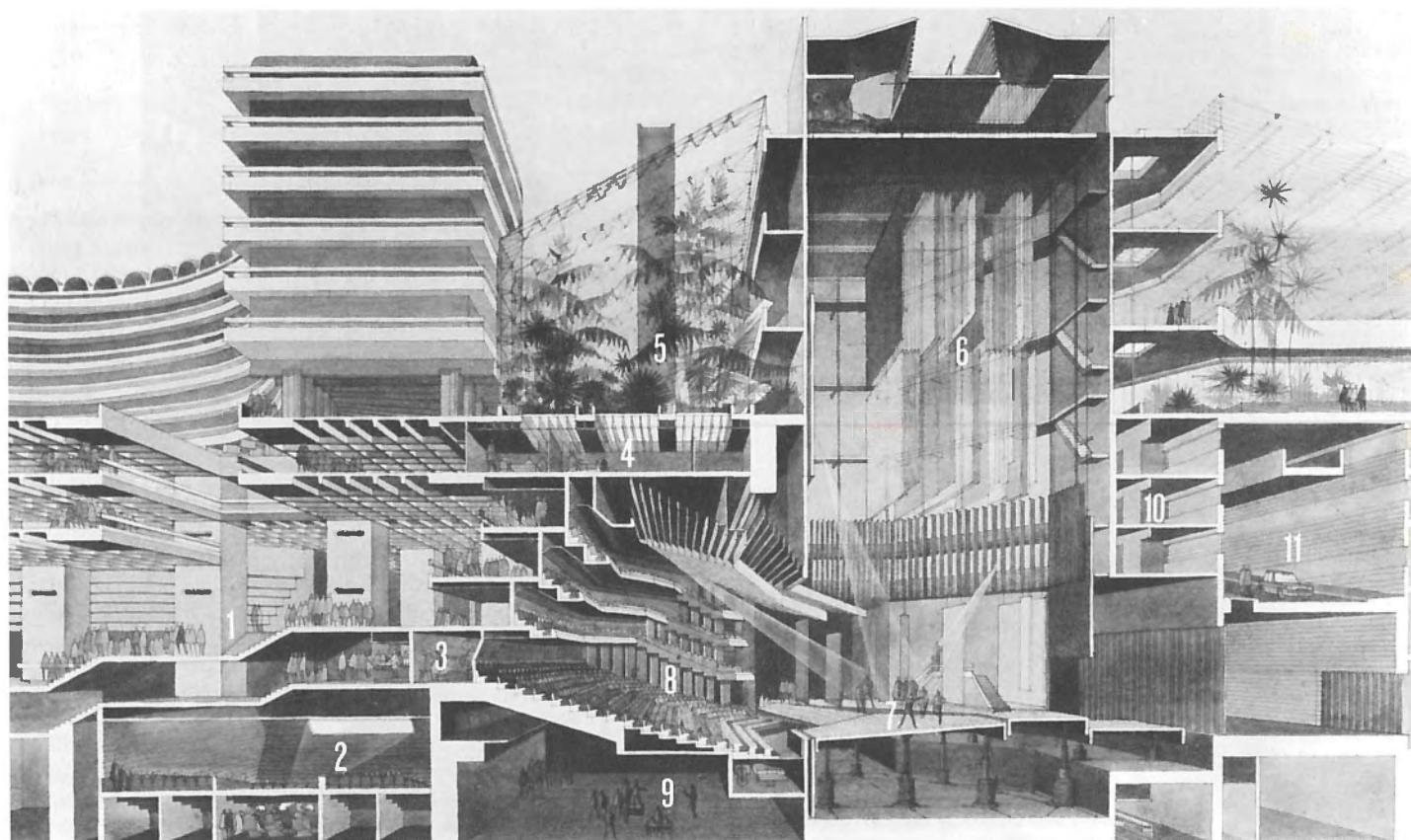


Looking out to the auditorium with the three circles and lighting bridge above from a centre-stage position, approximately 7 metres from the front edge of the stage. The back wall and control rooms behind seem deceptively close. The 'papering' the walls with people with the three side circles also adds greatly to a general feeling of intimacy.

the actors to and from the two stages, with the risks of using the lifts in performances, can be both tiring and frustrating during performances and time wasting in technical and dress rehearsals. But the site of the Theatre within the Centre, representing only 17½%

of the cubic area of the Centre, made expansion further back or to the side at stage level impossible. An actors committee of the sixties also had a strong preference in this unsatisfactory situation for the chance of some daylight rather than nearness to the stage.

The original intention to help ease this traffic problem was to introduce paternosters on each side of the stage. But a large number of accidents both in this country and abroad involving these continuously moving lifts has ruled out any further installations within the



*An early impression showing an east-west section through the RSC Theatre drawn by Richard Dawking.
Key: (1) Foyer, (2) Cinema, (3) Control rooms, (4) Theatre administration, (5) Conservatory, (6) Flytower,
(7) Stage, (8) Auditorium, (9) The Pit, (10) Dressing rooms, (11) Access road.*

EEC. One can certainly imagine the problems that could have been caused by actors getting on and off moving lifts in elaborate long costumes and headdresses! The dressing rooms themselves have proved to be practical and were never intended to be luxurious. The lack of power points in relation to the spaces provided was a GLC requirement, although they had been by default fitted in the National Theatre, and has proved to be very restricting. From the safety point of view this is totally understandable as so many theatre fires have started in dressing room and wardrobe areas, but being unable to use curlers and hair-driers, except in the wig room, is a great frustration. In the ideal there should have been more small rooms, for four as opposed to eight artists, which seems best suited to the RSC Company make up, and more shower units within the rooms as opposed to across and along the corridors.

The introduction of the Pit, addition of a Production wardrobe and the increasing importance of sound in the theatre today have all aggravated the space problems, which had been very much tailored to the RSC of the late sixties, even including one particularly large dressing room for 'spear carriers' etc. — a luxury that can no longer be afforded even if it was still in the style of the work of the Company. The Production Wardrobe had to be solved outside the Centre, but the needs of the Pit and sound department have been absorbed in the best way possible, but with great limitations. The housing of the Pit cost one rehearsal room and required a wardrobe and staff room and

office accommodation, which could only exist at the loss of another department's space or facility. It also caused the one major change to those 1968 drawings, which was the connection from the Pit to the cinema foyer in order to allow public access. Being already an under construction diaphragm wall, this was achieved at great cost and heart searching. An extra management team has also put great strain on their already limited accommodation. The loss of the rehearsal room would have been bad enough with generally only one production in rehearsal at a time. Now with two shows for two auditoria to be housed, the shortage of rehearsal space is acute and the search for a near rehearsal facility is already under way.

With the continuous development of control equipment, electronics and luminaires, the RSC encouraged the City's consultants, Theatre Projects, to hold off the ordering of equipment until the last possible moment. But in spite of their efforts, the main contractor's insistence of the majority of this equipment being ordered and even delivered as it turned out years in advance of use, meant that some items were out of date before they had even been rigged or connected and commissioned, let alone used in anger. The only real exception was the lighting board, where by some careful reporting and a little politicking it was possible to update three times. The contractor had to be the same, Rank Strand, but the changes were achieved against the odds from a 480-way MMS, which would have been slow, to a Palette and on to a Galaxy — a National type Lightboard was strongly suggested by the

consultants, but was never financially viable within the bill and, in the RSC's opinion, was not really the board best suited to their way of working. The carrot to the Corporation on each occasion was a slightly lower price and the contractors and consultants assurance that there was no possibility of any delay as it was very much a plug in item with the minimum of a requirement for alterations to the fixed furniture. The lighting switchboard is perhaps the only item in the whole bill, which ended up being considerably cheaper — the specification in the first bill was for a 480-way 3 preset. This would have required considerable space, but as lighting controls have become ever more compact and sound control has grown in



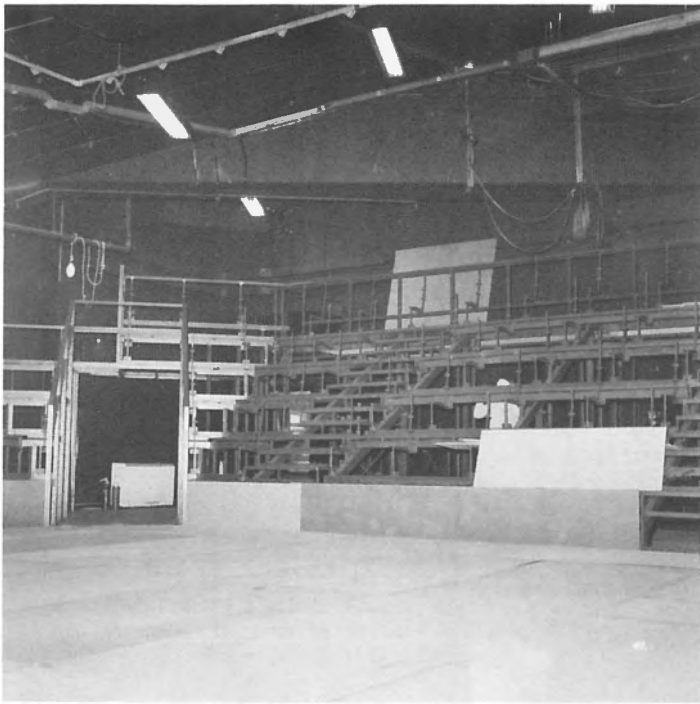
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The permanent elements of the Pit seating under construction. The acting area relates exactly to the Other Place in Stratford, but the seating is tiered on three sides, as opposed to being on two levels as at Stratford. (Photographs John Leonard)



*The completed auditorium and stage area, as set for the opening production, *OUR FRIENDS IN THE NORTH*. The audience capacity for this production was 200. The capacity has dropped to 155 for one production, but can reach up to 240 for productions incorporating a fourth side of seating.*

both concept and size, the swop over of the two control areas was achieved, giving lighting and sound the sort of space they now require.

With the addition of the Pit and various changes in the RSC administration during the long time from completed plans to completed buildings meant that many spaces were going to be used in different ways to what was originally intended. The need for the Corporation to put a stop at the earliest possible moment to any variation orders that could have accommodated these changes was understood. The priority had to be to get the main contract completed, the building handed over with no further excuses for delay or increased cost that could be attributed to this type of variation. Then the changes could be undertaken. As progress to the final handover slowed up, as seems inevitable in the later stages of many such contracts, the time for the RSC to do these works at their own expense was fast disappearing and therefore becoming ever more expensive to achieve. It was depressing to have to watch the fixing of fitted furniture according to the original bill, which would have to be removed or restyled directly after the handover. The rehearsal room, due to become the Pit had to be completed to a high standard of paintwork, floor finish, balanced ventilation and so on. A January handover soon became February by the time the Corporation and architects had snagged the area to their satisfaction. During all this period it was a matter of trying to wait patiently, knowing that so much of this work was going to be ripped out or altered in order to achieve the Pit

and there were now only three months left to the first performance in which to achieve the work. Some of this frustration also of course passed on to the contractors, who watched dismayed as other contractors immediately attacked their so recently finished work.

Much has already been written about the power flying system, sound and electrics rig both by the user and consultants. Suffice to say that into the second season one is becoming ever more conscious as to just how much of the electronics of the flying control desk is all but obsolete, some components required for spares are getting difficult and expensive to obtain or have been replaced by less-satisfactory components within the terms of the design of the desk, and heat within the desk may be the cause of some unreliable performance. This latter point will be tackled, but the obsolete nature of the control desk due to the great electronic advances of the last few years does not bode too well for the future. This again stresses the often-aired opinion that this type of item should be left out of the main contract on a theatre development or refurbishment if at all possible. To do so can also considerably reduce the cost.

It was never really possible that money available for sound and communications would cover the required installation, due to the developments in this area and the requirements now being made by composers and directors. From the start facilities were short and it is here that RSC money has had to be spent and equipment from the Aldwych installation put into the front line. Again some facilities and equipment were outdated

from the outset and have never been properly incorporated into the operation. Alternative and additional systems are already in use.

In year two the lighting rig has also developed substantially in the wake of last year's experience. Good positions have been further expanded and accesses to many lamps to speed repertoire change overs have been enhanced and provided from scratch, including the introduction of two further on-stage bridges, much reducing the reliance on the original access cradles, which were rigged to the flying bars for each changeover.

These are just some impressions. Each department within the Theatre would surely add to the suggested improvements and criticisms and be wise after the event. The wonder is that, with such a restricted site, with so much of the development needing to be up and down and plans that, for the RSC at least, were all but put to bed in 1968, such a successful theatre has emerged. There is no doubt that we complicated our own lives greatly by the addition of the Pit, but the work is vital to the Company and adds immensely to the spectrum of activities within the Centre available on any one day, which remains one of the best qualities of the Centre. To retain all these has been a battle over the years of the development, but with the perseverance of Henry Wrong and Richard York, the Centre's Administrator and Deputy Administrator and the City Committee responsible for the content, it has been achieved and we are grateful.

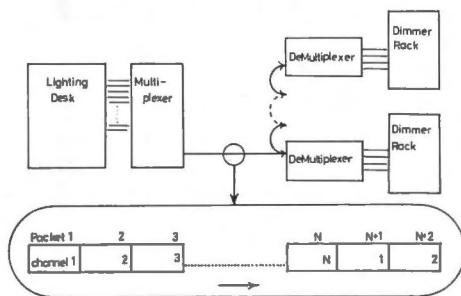
James Sargant is the administrator at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Barbican Theatre.

MULTIPLEXING IN THE THEATRE

IAN R. FUEGGLE

Multiplexed or Multiplexing is a term being used increasingly in technical descriptions of theatre control products and the like, not to mention micro-computers, personal computers, word-processors and even washing machines. So it is not exactly new, as some would have us believe, and for some years now American lighting boards have used Multiplexed or Digital Dimmer drives. Also CCT's successful MX colour wheels and more recently the large memory (multiplexed) Semaphore system, all use multiplexing techniques.

What is *multiplexing*? In simple terms it is the ability to feed lots and lots of information down a single wire at the same time, or very nearly the same time. What in fact happens is that the wire is *time shared*, the information being carried down the line in packets with each packet allotted its own segment of time in the wire. In practice the lighting control transmits instructions to the multiplexer which feeds the packets of coded information along the line to the De-Multiplexer. See Figure 1.



From there the signals are converted and passed to the correct channel at the dimmer.

What are the advantages of *multiplexing*. First there is the cost-saving of large runs of multicore cable, from control room to dimmer room, now replaced by one-, two- or three-core cable. Second, once established there is an increase of information available. For example the operator is warned if a fuse has blown or a lamp failed. Also it is not necessary to have all the dimmers in one place, with more than one De-Multiplexer the dimmer units can be placed wherever necessary, only linked by the Multiplexed line. Other advantages are of course increased speed and capacity.

However, the full benefits of multiplexing will only start to flow if a standardisation programme can be agreed between the manufacturers of theatre control systems. But now is the time to be doing the ground work by discussion through the ABTT and other learned societies. Let us by all means welcome lively and healthy competition, but at the same time let us also eliminate some of the confusion in customers' minds which comes from having too many different standards.

The author works in the Marketing Department at CCT Theatre Lighting.

OLIVER MESSEL (1904–1978) at the Victoria and Albert Museum

CHARLES SPENCER

The best way to approach the Oliver Messel Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, organised by the Theatre Museum, is as a slice of history. Messel can hardly be assessed as a great theatrical draughtsman, and there are serious limitations to his imaginative evocation of periods or themes. Yet he was one of the most sought-after and successful stage designers in British history, and enormously contributed to the pleasure of vast audiences.

Given the ephemerality of theatrical forms, with only a small percentage of work surviving for future consideration or revival, Messel emerges as the visual distillation of a particular period of British theatre, of a style and a taste now gone forever.

He was unashamedly a decorator. Roy Strong suggests that "his work was so hypnotic" because "after the starvation of the war years he swept his audiences away with his painterly stage visions." Therein lies a major clue. The post-war entertainment world, personified by Tennents in the theatre and Alexander Korda in films, decided that what the British public needed was colourful escapism after the tragic reality of war. They were clearly right, and successful. It was revival time, nostalgia, Oscar Wilde on stage and screen, the famous productions of John

Gielgud, the marzipan importation of Paulette Goddard as "the ideal wife", plus concoctions by Beaton, the poor man's Messel.

The sad historic irony is that the true begetter of the style, Rex Whistler, was killed in France in 1944, before he could deservedly



Self portrait by Oliver Messel at 17 Oil. 1922. Lent by Lord Snowdon.



Edith Evans as Lady Fidget and Ruth Gordon as Mrs Pinchwife, in the Country Wife, Old Vic Nov 1936. Photograph J. W. Debenham. Costumes and set by Oliver Messel. Theatre Museum Collection.

dominate the post-war scene; he in turn was artistically descended from Ricketts, Sheringham, Lovat-Fraser, themselves inspired by the new designer-status of the Ballets Russes, palely imitating Bakstian fervour.

In the event Oliver Messel had little competition in living-out the visualisation of the post-war British theatre (shadowed but hardly rivalled by Beaton), heralded by his most innovative production, the 1946 version of *The Sleeping Beauty*. First seen in its entirety in the West in the Diaghilev/Bakst version in 1921, the great Russian classic was given a national interpretation by the Ballet Rambert in 1939, but had to await the birth of the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden for its essential splendour.

Oliver Messel was born in 1904 and at the age of 18 entered the Slade School of Art — before specialised theatrical courses. W. A. Propert the distinguished writer on the Ballet Russes, who ran the Claridge Gallery, exhibited Messel's Character Masks and introduced him to Diaghilev and C. B. Cochran. In 1925 the young Messel made his theatrical debut with masks for the Ballets Russes' *Zephyr et Flore* (designed by the great painter Braque), while his association with Cochran, from 1926, in a series of sophisticated revues, reached its apotheosis in 1932 when Messel designed two shows for the great Max Reinhardt — the revival of the mime-drama *The Miracle* at the Lyceum Theatre, and *Helen*, adapted from Offenbach, at the Adelphi.

It was the all-white decor for the latter that established the Messel style — with its derivation from contemporary, fashionable, interior decorators, such as Syrie Maugham. The style remained virtually unchanged, if not always at its best, for the rest of his career. How does one describe it, with its dangerous superficial frothiness and feathery grace, plus, at its best, the uncommitted elegance of English watercolour painting? The Baroque featheriness can be traced

to seventeenth-century French court designers — Gisse, Berain, etc. — with their carefully described detail (not imitated by Messel). With this basis, he aimed at a kind of throw-away, aristocratic insubstantiality, so that plants seem hardly able to stand up, and figures appear to be boneless. The languid grace of the costumes cannot be denied, but there is an inappropriate sameness in stance and gesture no matter what the period or subject. Carl Toms, Messel's assistant from 1952 to 1958, says that he was a serious student of historical periods and style. Of course, no matter how thoroughly researched or assimilated, history must become theatrically submerged in a personal statement, a convincing summary of shapes and detail; and inevitably such summaries must as much describe the past as the present. What stamps Messel is not his draughtsmanship or scholarship but

the uncanny accuracy with which he reflects his own time, distilling and summing up a particular evolution of British taste and theatre.

That period was notably escapist, even frivolous, and in terms of playwriting one of the least productive of the last 100 years. Indeed, in terms of sumptuous production and visual entertainment (thereby raising the designer to prominence) the post-war decade can be compared with the Victorian stage. That was a time of brilliant impersonations and elaborate stage effects, but of virtually no new English play of value.

The history of art can be described in terms of swings and see-saws — classical and romantic, neurotic and escapist, decorative and austere, etc. By the end of the nineteenth century the reaction resulted in the monumental puritanism of Appia and Craig, the distrust of actors' personalities,



Costume designs for Caesar in the film of Caesar and Cleopatra, 1945.



Costume design for *The Country Wife*, Old Vic 1936.



Scaled-up drawing, ink on tracing paper for garden scene Act IV *Le Nozze di Figaro* Glyndebourne 1955.



Costume design for a sprite in *Zemir et Azor*, Theatre Royal, Bath, May 1955. Ink water colour and gouache. Oliver Messel Collection.



The bedroom scene in *Helen Adelphi* 1932. Photograph Sasha Enthoven Collection.



Head of a Faun Mask. Papier mache, painted and glazed. About 1924. Oliver Messel Collection.



Corner of dining room in penthouse suite, Dorchester Hotel 1953.

the anxiety for intimacy, the distaste with extravagance. There especially arose the need for non-participant authority, i.e. the impresario and director; and all this coincided with, produced, or was itself produced by one of the greatest periods of literary theatre — Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw etc.

There then occurred another swing on the roundabout, the exuberant visuality of the Ballets Russes, where as at the Renaissance, content was dominated by ephemeral brilliance.

As the catalogue at the Victoria and Albert Museum makes clear, the mid-nineteen-fifties, when Messel was the leading English designer, was involved in visual formulas which "have become largely outdated . . . the painted flat, the border and backcloth . . .

lavishly, tastefully designed sets with costumes, often richly coloured, of expensive materials". This was the formula of the court entertainments, and significantly continues to apply to ballet and opera, the forms they inspired.

This remained Messel's most appropriate arena, at the Royal Opera House or Glyndebourne; applying the same formula to Shakespeare or Restoration comedy. Otherwise he remained virtually untouched by serious intellectual or emotional drama; after the Cochran revues his name is associated with Offenbach, the French boulevardiers Anouilh and Roussin, Christopher Fry, Dodie Smith, Truman Capote.

Since I am old enough to have seen a number of Messel productions, there is no denying the simple pleasure of his decorative charm; but on no more stimulating level than his interiors for the Dorchester Hotel, or the dolling-up of the Opera House for festive occasions. He was more like an illustrator —

the pretty clothes, the detailed sets emerge as coloured pictures in a pretty book, never intended to enquire or question.

It was all part of the contemporary scene. In his book *Film and Stage Decor* (1940) R. Myerscough-Walker refers to London productions of serious plays designed by the American artists Lee Simonson and Mordecai Gorelik; ". . . such productions are never a commercial success in England. They are for a limited run, capable of producing tremendous enthusiasm." Messel he describes as "eclectic" qualifying the term by stating that he was the most brilliant eclectic working on the London stage.

Myerscough-Walker differentiates between designers whose work merges with and contributes to the essential character of the production, and those, whose work "will dazzle the average person into applause". One thinks of the world of revue and popular entertainment, and to repeat, their historical origin in the Renaissance courts.

Quite apart from any assessment of Messel's artistic gifts and his long career in theatre and films, the exhibition must be admired for its thoroughness and fascination. The Theatre Museum, notably Roger Pinkum, have done a fine job in assembling original designs and models, and a superb collection of photographs. The last, indeed, is among the most rewarding aspects of the show, an historic panorama of a particular period of post-war British theatre.

A major regret, however, is the neglect of Messel's work for films. His cinematic career spans 1934 to 1949, from Korda's *Private Lives of Don Juan*, with the aging Douglas Fairbanks, and including Leslie Howard's *Scarlet Pimpernel*, Howard and Norma Shearer in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains, and best of all the marvellous Thorold Dickinson version of *The Queen of Spades*, with Edith Evans and Anton Walbrook. Perhaps the organisers wished not to blur the theatrical image; but possibly there remains a snobbish underrating of cinema design.

The Oliver Messel exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum continues until 30 October 1983.

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How Safe is Your Theatre?

ALAN TODD

Most managers, after recoiling sharply at such a question, would probably retort that since their theatres were licensed it followed that they complied with the requirements laid down by the "authorities" and were, therefore, as safe as could be, thank you very much. They might even add, if they felt like warming to the subject, that they were probably a lot safer than some of those big stores down the road, particularly at times like Christmas when they bulged from top to bottom with highly flammable goods and were festooned with plastic decorations, which followed one along the ritual journey to Father Christmas's polystyrene Grotto! And what about all those people jammed into the gangways, bristling with umbrellas and parcels - all trying to move in different directions at the same time!

Indeed, have they not got a point when they compare that kind of *mêlée* with the far more orderly conduct of their own patrons, who buy their tickets and quietly file into long rows of fixed seating to watch the show? And as quietly file out - well, usually.

That said, it is probably true that, not since the days of Richard Burbage, whose Globe Theatre was burnt down in 1613, has there been a manager who has not infringed one or two, or even on occasion quite a number, of the regulations laid down for the safety of people in his theatre.

Of course, in Burbage's day, the puritanical City Fathers regarded theatres as evil places and joyously declared the destruction of the Globe to be "an Act of God." Today we would be more likely to ascribe it to a neglect of elementary precautions while, at the same time, being thankful that current building regulations do not permit theatres to have roofs of straw which can be ignited by the firing of cannon during Shakespearean productions.

Rather the opposite may be said to be the case these days, for such is the proliferation of regulations of all kinds - building, Health & Safety at Work Act, Fire Precautions Act and so on - that it can seem a wonder to some that a theatre can get built at all or, when it is, that a show can actually be mounted in it!

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the begetters of these requirements do so in the name of safety, both for those who work in the theatre and those who visit it, and while some may appear to bring with them the proverbial sledge-hammer to crack a nut, it should not be forgotten that quite a few of the regulations have been brought about as a result of previous fires, accidents or near misses.

Irksome Rules

That some officials charged with implement-

ing the rules occasionally display little or no understanding of how theatres work is just one of those irksome realities that managements (and others) have to live with while muttering invectives behind the door through which the representative of "authority" has just passed!

There is an oft-repeated story of a senior GLC official (now retired) who came across a rule stating that an unguarded edge more than two feet above floor level in a "place of assembly" should be protected by a fixed guard-rail or barrier. After visiting the Lyttleton Theatre during the construction of the NT complex he returned to the office with the news that there was nothing to prevent actors from falling off the stage on to the front row of seats, which certainly is very close. In accordance with the rule, he argued, a guard-rail should be provided across the width of the proscenium.

Fortunately, wiser counsels prevailed, or we might have seen the creation of a new breed of National Theatre Players who only needed to act from the waist upwards.

It is well that this official was sufficiently unversed in theatrical lore as to be unaware that, in the not too distant past at the Old Vic, a sword had been knocked out of an actor's hand during a stage fight and had ended up on an empty seat in the stalls. That would surely have convinced him that nothing short of a partition between stage and auditorium would suffice!

Of course, when one comes to consider the matter, a theatre can be quite a risky place to be in: more perhaps for the actor than the audience. What with stage traps, moving trucks, heavy scenery zooming up and down over one's head, masses of electricians, stage effects of all kinds including firearms, which have damaged people before now, and set changes in almost total darkness, it is astonishing that more accidents don't occur, particularly at rehearsals before these manoeuvres have been thoroughly worked out and plotted.

Surprise is often expressed at the variations between licensing requirements in different parts of the country. Now that national building regulations exist (except for London) some standardisation may be expected in this quarter, but licensing conditions remain in the hands of the local District or County Councils. Depending on the administration arrangements, their control and implementation may be in the hands of the local police or fire brigade or a department of the Council. The only unifying factor is the Theatres Act, 1968 which, under Section 12 gives the local authority power to licence theatres and public performances of plays.

Some authorities, particularly the GLC, have very detailed requirements in respect of theatres and other places of public entertainment. Technical Regulations - which deal with standards of fire separation, construction, means of escape and electrical,

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mechanical, lighting, heating and ventilation, etc. and Rules of Management – which cover the licensee's responsibilities.

The fact that authorities in various parts of the country have differing views as to what they will or will not permit explains why, for instance, scenery that has been rendered flame-resistant by one particular method is accepted in one area but not in another. Or why there may be conflicting rules regarding the use of real flame in a production. Or in the use of laser beams for special effects! It may be illogical, it may be infuriating, but there it is. It is something to do with allowing individual local authorities to exercise their rights – but it certainly makes life hard for touring companies or for those presenting out of town try-outs!

Responsibility of the Licensee

In general, local authorities are only concerned with what takes place within their own borders and it can sometimes be extremely counter-productive to protest that since such and such was permitted in the last town visited – why not in this one? It usually behaves the "offender" (if such he be) to give in with the best grace he can muster – unless he can be absolutely sure of blinding the officials with science! The better approach is probably to get some good advice beforehand.

Experience suggests that, not until something occurs which provokes officialdom into taking some punitive action, is it always fully realised that it is the licensee who is directly responsible for any contravention of either the Theatres Act or local requirements – not just the manager, unless, of course, he happens to be both.

If the scenery fails to comply with the appropriate fire standards; if the stage basement becomes an extension of the wardrobe or, which is more likely, an unauthorised workshop; if the secondary exit from the

dressing-rooms is obstructed by storage (whether flammable or not!) or the self-closing fire doors are wedged open – it is the licensee who is liable for prosecution, not the miscreant who perpetrated the offence.

Licensees who really love their theatres (and there are one or two around who may not own to such total commitment) become deeply involved in the whole process of presenting both play and playhouse in the best possible light to the paying public while at the same time trying to ensure that those who work in the theatre are able to do so in the most satisfactory conditions. In general terms this means clean and safe conditions throughout the building.

But a licensee who endeavours to meet his obligations needs to feel that he can rely on his staff not to do silly things that can let him down.

Of course, the Health and Safety at Work Act places a responsibility on an employee as well as an employer to take "reasonable care for the health and safety of himself and of other persons who may be affected by his acts or omissions at work . . ." But how many people take that axiom as seriously as it is meant?

How many people daily walk past things that require attention – and do nothing about it? Things like door closers not working properly (sometimes disconnected altogether); junction boxes with missing covers; ventilation grilles blocked; electrical repairs or extensions "temporarily" fixed with tape, but never properly completed; worn carpets; damaged steps and so on.

Seemingly trivial matters

Even something such as using a fire extinguisher to wedge open a door "just while we get this thing through" and, of course, leaving it wedged open can put a whole area at risk on two counts. First, in the event of fire, flames and smoke will pass straight

through what is intended to be a barrier specifically designed to prevent this from happening and second, the extinguisher, having been taken down from its bracket in its approved position may not be replaced and may well end up along the corridor or even completely out of sight and, therefore, not available at a time when it might be needed.

There are many such seemingly trivial matters in a place such as a theatre which, if they do not receive the prompt attention that they should, could in the event of an emergency, greatly increase the risk to persons and property.

It is understandable that, in these days of tight budgets and exhortations to economise, managements tend to put off what they consider to be minor repairs and replacements for as long as possible, perhaps even hoping that some of them will even go away if left long enough! But the day comes when the list of minor items becomes too long to ignore and the cost becomes the cause of much head shaking and efforts to shift it on to next year's budget (if there is a next year). And all the time there is that obligation to maintain the standards of safety required by the licensing authority, to whom the financial aspects of doing so are of no concern whatsoever.

What it all boils down to at the end of the day is that, behind the scenes, employers, staff – yes, and performers too, should all contribute what they can in the interests of good conditions and safety at work while, out front, the public, having crossed the threshold, paid up at the box-office and entered the auditorium, should have the right to feel that everything that should be done to ensure their comfort and safety in a place of entertainment, has been done.

In fact, they shouldn't have to think about it at all.

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NoTT 83

NoTT 83 was a big one. It established a norm by which future theatre conferences can expect to be judged. The NoTT 83 posters were subtitled *Nordisk TeaterTeknik Arkitektur Scenografi* and the participating countries were Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – the five nations of the Nordic Theatre Committee which maintains contacts, cooperation and exchanges in Nordic theatrical life. The event was held over a May weekend in Stockholm with the Association of Swedish Theatre Technicians as hosts. There were some 2,000 participants of whom 1,700 were paying delegates.

The conferring took place on the Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Backstage and workshop tours of the Stockholm theatres were available on the Friday. Throughout the three days there was a General Programme with discussions on virtually every area of design, technology and architecture. These general seminars were intended for non-specialists – that is, they afforded an opportunity for cross-fertilisation between

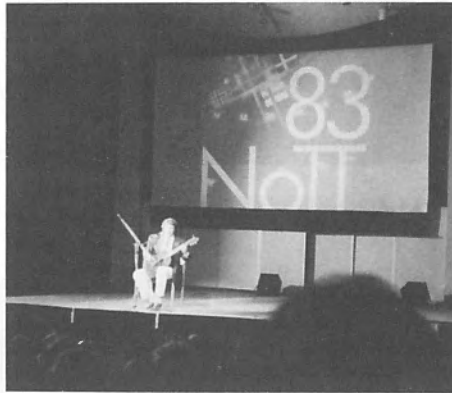


The foyers housed exhibits of design, architecture and all the many crafts that contribute to a theatre performance.

the various specialist disciplines — but were led by specialist speakers including the dozen invited guests from Britain and the United States.

Simultaneously a series of professional seminars explored in some depth the problems of specialist areas. The subjects were Architecture, Scenography, Stage Technology, Lighting, Sound, Work Environment, Stage Management, Props, Make-up, and Set Construction/Scene Painting.

NoTT 83 hosted a visit from the OISTT's Architecture Commission and so two evenings were devoted to a discussion on *From Room to Theatre* which aired once more all the predictable and unresolvable topics from



After the speeches at the opening ceremony of NoTT 83 the audience were entertained to a few songs.

Later, in mid-conference, there was a Gala Performance in the City Theatre. It is appropriate that a technical theatre conference should be reminded of the performer in this way!

passionate planks in black boxes through "why doesn't my theatre work" ("because you didn't tell us what you wanted") to sightline purity versus audience chemistry. But the pleas were eloquently put, and the fray was consequently stimulating. Especially as the simultaneous translation was excellent.

On the middle evening the City Theatre housed a Gala Performance which set new standards for conference entertainment — and demonstrated the need for flexible playable lighting rigs for one-nighters. A couple of comic stagehands provided con-

tinuity with a series of deliberate technical mistakes. There was a big band and production numbers from Cabaret plus all manner of performers including singers from the opera and dancers from the ballet. In a more technical vein, a UV scene was repeated in working light to show the mechanics and an actor did a Reagan transformation of demolishing accuracy using an on-stage make-up table. This was followed by the feeding of the multitude — all conference delegates banqueting together in a huge basement entered by one tiny door. Those of a nervous disposition were observed to join those addicted to regulations in seeking tables near the exits.

The manufacturers and their agents had turned out in force and their stands seemed so hyperactive from opening to closing that many had difficulty in doing that assessment of their competitor's product which is normally one of the main activities of the quieter conference exhibitions. But then the Swedish Minister of Culture, when performing the opening ceremony, had talked big money for housing the arts. And for once the lighting boys, though present in force, did not dominate!

The foyers also contained non-commercial exhibits on design, prop-making, costume cutting, make-up, architectural projects etc — indeed all specialities except lighting!

Well done the Nordic Countries — NoTT 83 was a splendid production. See you at NoTT 86

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Stockholm's Other Gustavian Theatre

FRANCIS REID tours the theatric gem at Gripsholm.

Drottningholm, preserved and performing, will always be mecca for any theatric pilgrim in search of an understanding of eighteenth-century staging. But also within day-tripping distance of Stockholm by road, rail or water, is *Gripsholm*, commissioned by Gustav III, that supremely theatrical monarch whose life as a patron, playwright and performer concluded with assassination at a masked ball within Stockholm's opera house.

The Gripsholm theatre was built by Eric Palmstedt in 1782. Like *Drottningholm* it ceased to be used for performances after Gustav's death in 1792. But, unlike *Drottningholm*, it has not been brought back into performance use and there are no plans to do so now. Gripsholm is not therefore subject to the wear and tear that is becoming a serious problem at *Drottningholm* where the constant flow of audience, performers and tourists is slowly but steadily eroding the timber structure.

When describing a visit to *Drottningholm* in CUE 9, I tried to explain the traumatic impact of experiencing the quality of the lighting of both auditorium and stage upon my understanding of eighteenth-century theatre. The selectivity which light imposes upon our perception of space must be a major factor in experiencing the original atmosphere of a historic interior. And so it was also in Gripsholm — whether sitting in the auditorium or commanding it from the stage.

Gustav adapted a sixteenth-century castle for his winter residence and the theatre is incorporated within a tower of the original fortifications. Visitors to the theatre approach through rooms and corridors furnished in Gustavian style and so are properly prepared in terms of period atmosphere. However, the theatre is the only part of the castle attempting a period ambience in its artificial lighting — although elsewhere, when visiting by day, one can of course experience the same clear lakeland daylight that Gustav knew.

The round tower, in shape and size, has applied a considerable constraint upon the architect although, unlike the previous theatre of 1773 which also contrived to include a stage, Palmstedt used the tower for auditorium only. He has — and we note once again the creative stimulus that often gives the found space an edge over the open site in theatre architecture — he has responded to the problem by embracing the given shape to turn its limitations into positive virtue.

When Palmstedt received the commission to design the new Gripsholm theatre, he had just returned from an Italian tour which had included a visit to Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. A semi-circular auditorium was the natural response to the structural



Gripsholm Slottsteater.



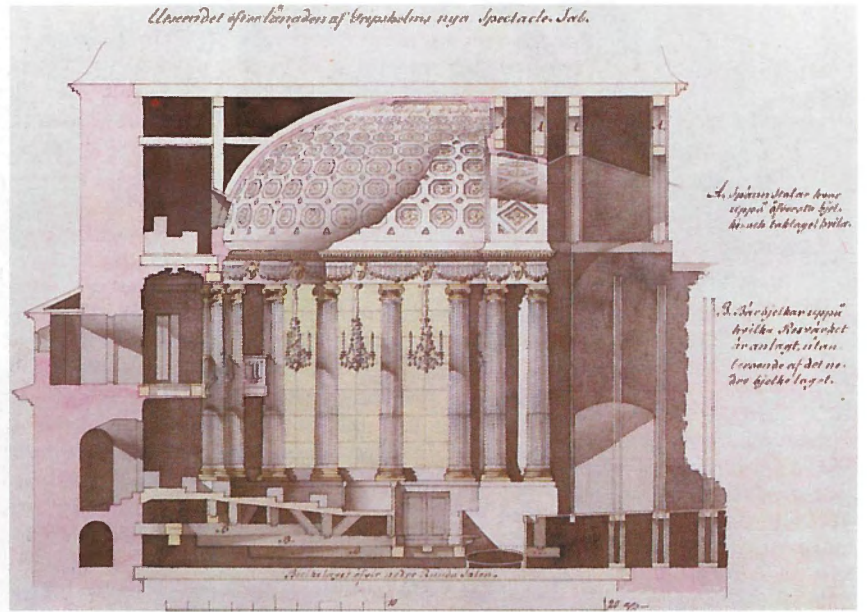
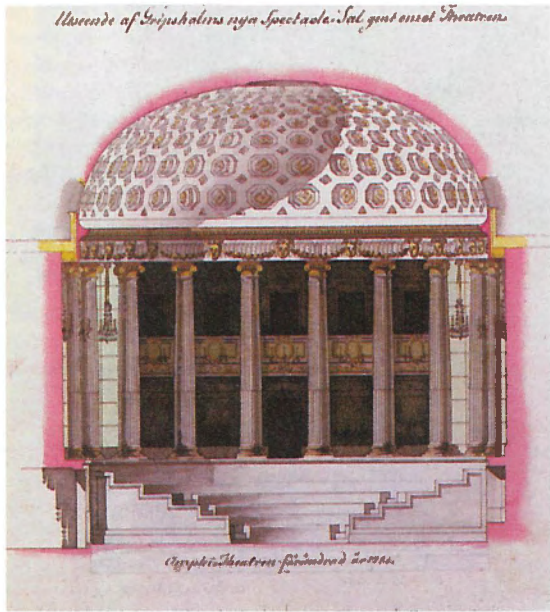
The Gripsholm stage set with the original scenery design by Louis Jean Desprez for Queen Christina in 1785.

form of the tower, and allowed the architect to pursue the then current neo-classical ideal that harked back both to antiquity and to Palladio.

While the semi-circular seating tiers, Ionic columns and coffered domed ceiling belong to the neo-classical revival, the painted decorations and the use of mirrors to magnify and distort space belong to the

techniques of baroque illusion.

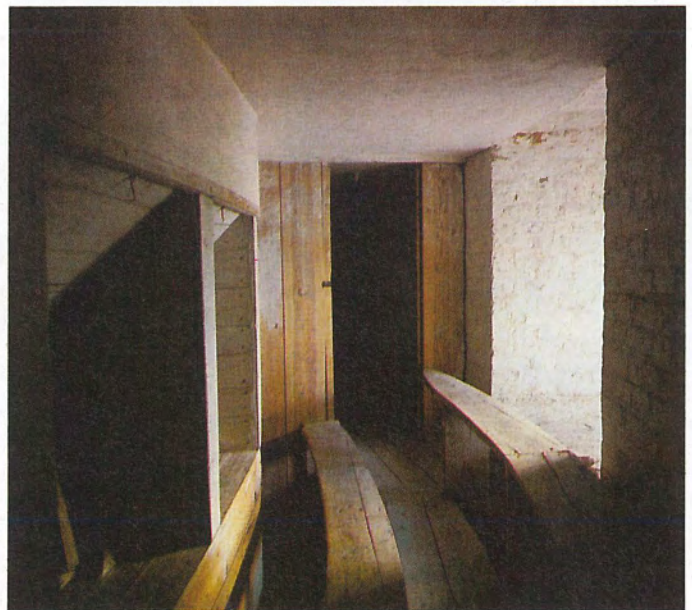
The problem commonly facing theatre architects is achieving intimacy in a large auditorium. In tiny Gripsholm the need was to make the auditorium seem larger without destroying the intimacy of contact with the stage. The solution is extremely elegant with each mirror segment set at slightly different angles to return images of varying aspect.



Eric Palmstedt's sections of the auditorium, drawn in 1785.



View of the stage from the "invisible" upper gallery through an opened ceiling panel.



The upper gallery from where servants watched the performance through the ceiling ports.

And reflect the candelabra.

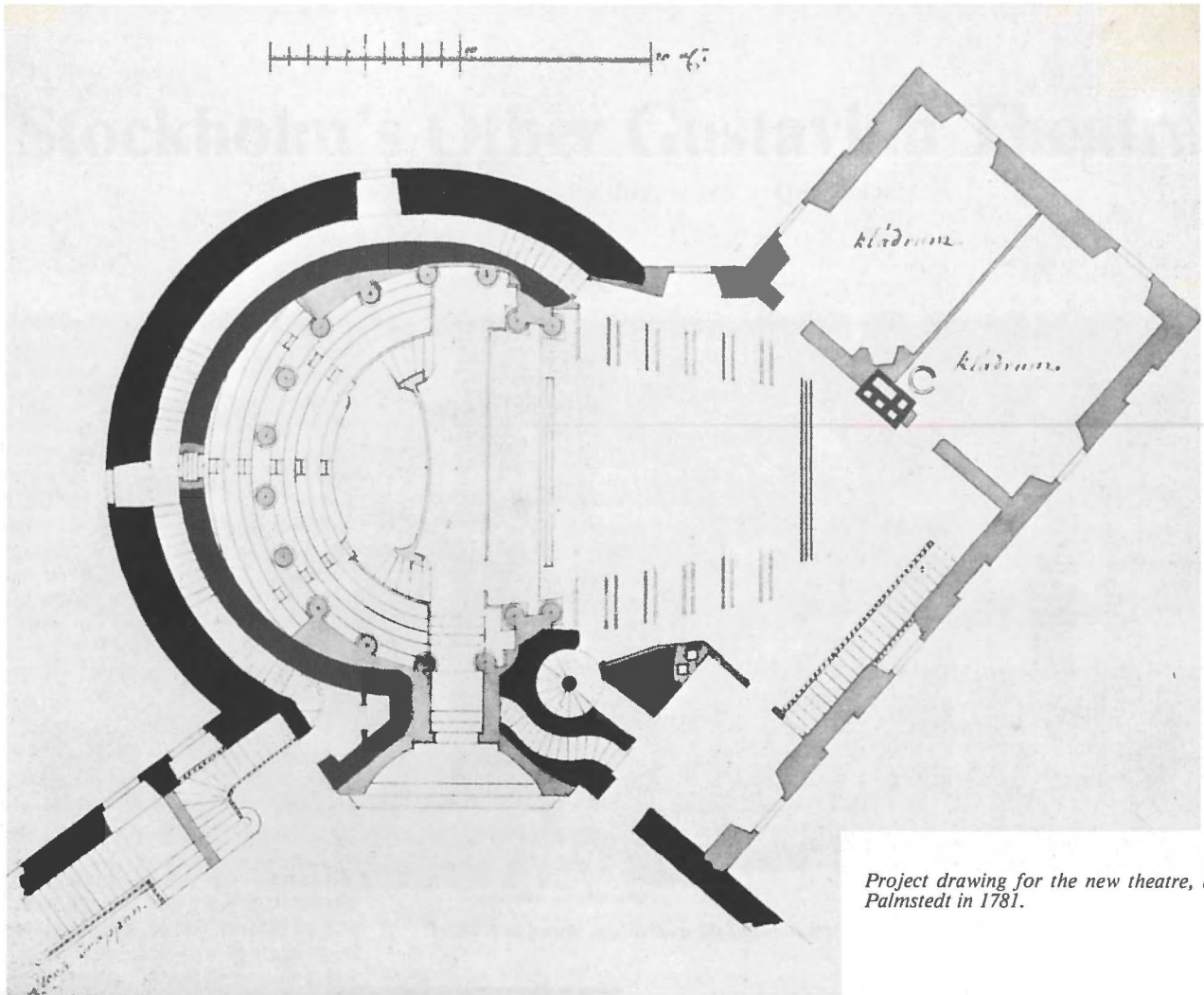
A Gripsholm audience can enjoy the theatricality of spacious splendour combined with an intimacy of contact with each other and with the stage action that is normally only achievable in theatres which choose to place quality of sightline as a low priority.

While in no way suggesting that this

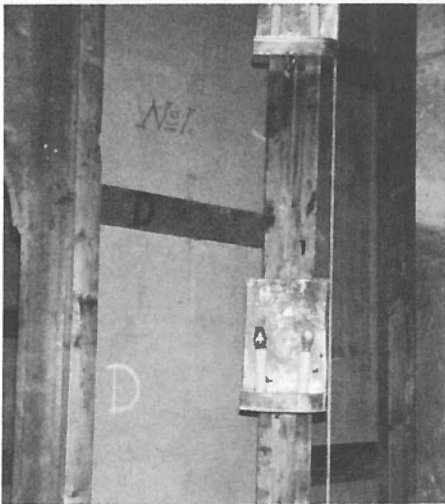
theatre would still work if scaled up, I am tempted to suggest that the use of auditorium mirror could perhaps be explored, or at least considered, by contemporary architects unwilling to hang audiences on the side walls. Gripsholm and Berlin's Komische Oper are the starting points for contemplation.

The mirrors occupy the three pillared bays

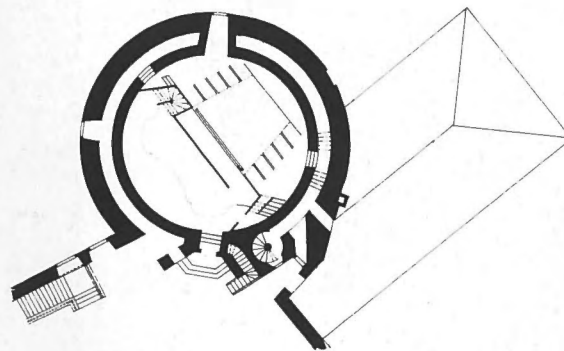
nearest the stage on each side. The remaining five bays contain boxes at two levels. These extremely shallow boxes have access from a curving stair corridor between the stone wall of the tower and the timber structure of the auditorium built within. This corridor gives alternative access from either foyer areas or from backstage. Gustav could watch the play yet nip speedily back to make his



Project drawing for the new theatre, drawn by Palmstedt in 1781.



Wing pole for candlelight with reflectors running in groove and hoisted by rope.



Plan of the first theatre at Gripsholm, fitted out in 1773 by Aldecrantz, the architect of Drottningholm.

own entrance as an actor.

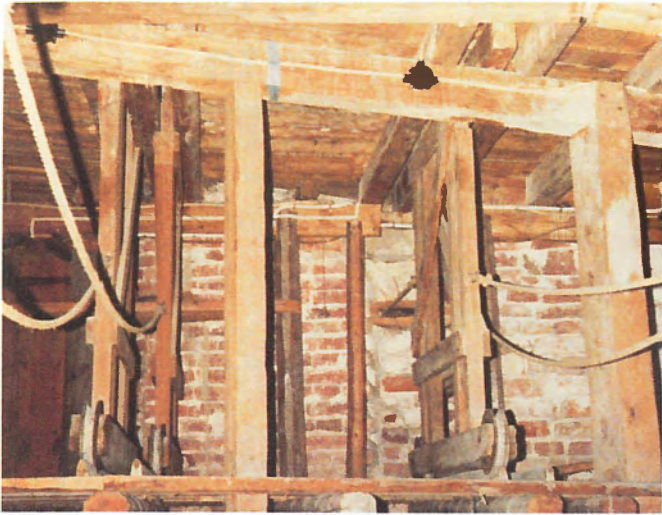
The upper gallery is concealed. The servants remained discreetly hidden until the performance started. In Drottningholm this was achieved by having a roller curtain which could mask the rear seating while the audience assembled. In Gripsholm, the device is the opening of some fourteen of the octagonal panels which form the coffered

cupola of the theatre ceiling. Behind these ports is a servants gallery with a single row of benches with standing room behind.

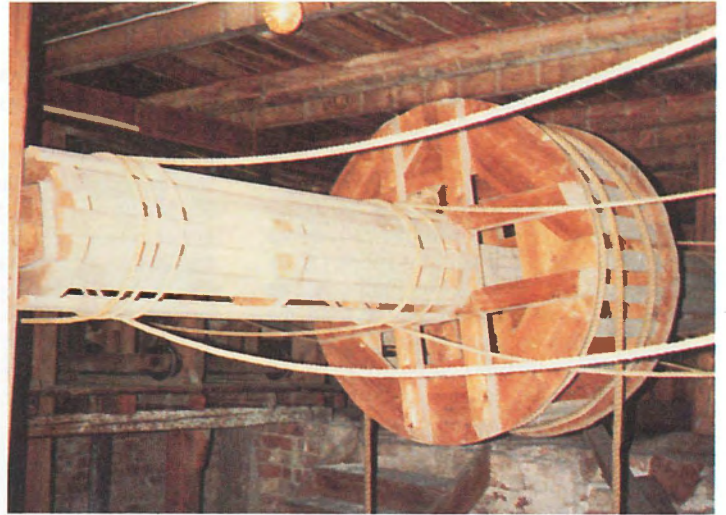
In this theatre, to stand at the pit rail gives neither the best feel nor impression. That is best from the boxes or the rear rows of the tiered stalls. And, not surprisingly, the gallery is dramatically exciting in its own specialised way. To stand on the stage is to

command — and to acquire the distance to appreciate the symmetry in a way which is impossible from the closeness and lowness of the pit rail.

No photograph can possibly convey the atmosphere of this theatre. The ambience produced by the lighting — accurately simulated in placing and candlepower — requires evocation by a painter rather than a camera.



Wing carriages in cellar.



Drum and shaft for instantaneous scene changing by substitution of wings moved by understage carriages.



The flies with rolled front curtain.

Gripsholm was a winter palace and the lake outside freezes from autumn until spring. Castle life must have been cold, so the actors no doubt appreciated the two towering stoves at the back of the stage. There are seven sets of grooves for wing flats, each groove being a pair to allow for one change.

Lighting is by footlights and candlepoles

upstage of each groove set. The original reflectors have been fitted with electric candles, although these are still the traditional big candle lamp rather than the small wavering cima candle bulbs which are installed at Drottningholm. The candlepoles are fixed: they cannot be turned away from the stage to effect a fade. However the reflector holders run in a groove and are hoisted up

the pole by a rope. Presumably this was to light and trim them without requiring a ladder. But was the lowering device also used to fade? Even if this was not actually done, it certainly strikes this lighting designer as at least feasible.

The original flattage is packed at the rear of the stage, with rolled cloths and borders piled on the stage behind the backcloth. This makes the backstage area seem particularly genuine, even homely: the whole stage has a feeling of use rather than museum preservation. The scene painting is in near monochromatic style using strong line to respond to the low intensity warmth of a candlelight source.

The flies have drum and shaft for simultaneous instant changeover of borders, while backcloths have conventional sets of lines and cleats. To fly in the gods, there is a central cloud chariot with access bridge from the fly tower.

In the cellar below the stage, the original carriages are operated simultaneously from a central drum by means of a vertical pull on a rope loop.

Having influential friends among Swedish theatre technologists, I was privileged to strut the stage, explore the flies and descend to the cellar. However, the auditorium is open to all casual visitors and a viewing window has recently been cut to allow sight of the cellar machinery. This view is from an anteroom in which hang paintings of the actors, some showing a background of the theatre. The subject of one painting is a dancer with a lighted torch(!).

The Gripsholm Slottsteater is one of the great masterpieces of our international theatric heritage. Stockholm is indeed blessed to have such a pair of complete eighteenth-century theatres. Drottningholm is a joy in that it enables us to understand the nature of that century's theatrical experience. But the Gripsholm auditorium is surely an architectural masterpiece by the standards of any age.

REIDing Shelf

From Australia comes **BASIC STAGE LIGHTING**, a concise hundred-page introduction to the aims, means and methods of lighting design. With straightforward clarity, Mark Carpenter describes the hardware and the procedures to make that hardware serve the play. He writes with the confidence of one who is familiar with his subject from exposure to the stage action, although he does seem to be a braver fellow than me ("Safety chains are used in some theatres" he says, without further comment). Its all the usual familiar basic stuff well explained — and universal, apart from that marvellous Australian device the piggyback plug whose delights we British lightpersons have been denied by some of the occasional pedantry which peppers our otherwise sensible safety regulations.

Many of Pirandello's plays are about theatre, exploring the meaning of theatre and examining the interacting roles of the participants whether playwright, director, actor, technician, critic or audience. But while still being valid at this surface level, theatre is also used as a metaphor for the function of art in life, and ultimately of life itself. Many of the plays have had surprisingly little exposure in the English-speaking theatre: perhaps Susan Bassnett-McGuire's concise **LUIGI PIRANDELLO** in the Macmillan Modern Dramatists series will encourage a re-examination and revival of works which are responsive to a wide range of approaches, both mainstream and alternative.

In the same series, Denis Calandra discusses the work of seven **NEW GERMAN DRAMATISTS** whose work is principally in that vein favoured by the more experimental German-speaking drama theatres — non-naturalistic treatments of the political and social issues of the day. Plays where people tend to be symbols rather than recognisable individuals. Plays in which I, for one, keep wondering if I am really understanding the hidden depths; plays where my self-questioning is on the lines of "is this play really as simple/complicated as it seems". But Calandra convinces me that we should see more of these playwrights translated beyond their German-speaking homelands.

Although **BACKSTAGE AT THE OPERA** is a picture book about the San Francisco Opera, it has an international flavour because virtually all the featured singers are the itinerant superstars who fly the circuit of big league houses. Even the productions will be familiar to international opera buffs since the directors (or producers as they still remain in most of the opera world) are also on the circuit, often taking along their designs — or at least their ground plans.

Ira Nowinski's photographs include all the expected glimpses behind the scenes that are the stock stuff of programme books. However, the publishers have done this photographer proud with quality printing on quality paper — such a relief at a time when muddy printing on cheap paper is reducing so much of one's reading pleasure.

Joan Chatfield-Taylor's text is cheerfully purple: probably just what a marketing survey would prescribe for the average subscriber to the San Francisco Opera Season. I am sure its slightly breathless air of wonder is just right for a backstage peep. It is a reasonably accurate account of operatic life — although, just occasionally, areas of not-quite-fully-received knowledge break through. For example, "Computers register the location, focus, intensity, and color of every light in the house." Now if I were to believe that, I (and a few others of my acquaintance) would catch the next flight to San Francisco. But it's still a book that any opera-lover will enjoy.

BASIC STAGE LIGHTING. Mark Carpenter. New South Wales University Press.

LUIGI PIRANDELLO. Susan Bassnett-McGuire.

NEW GERMAN DRAMATISTS. *A study of Peter Handke, Franz Xaver Kroetz, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Heiner Müller, Thomas Brasch, Thomas Bernhard & Botho Strauss.* Denis Calandra. Both in **MACMILLAN MODERN DRAMATISTS** £12.00. £4.95 (paperback) (UK).

BACKSTAGE AT THE OPERA. Text by Joan Chatfield-Taylor. Photographs by Ira Nowinski. Secker & Warburg. £7.95 (UK) (Paperback)

This lavishly printed booklet produced to coincide with the Theatre Design Exhibition presents a wide selection and a permanent record of British designers' work over the past four years. It contains more than 100 art reproductions of models of set designs, photographs of sets in performance and costumes, several in full colour.

A limited number of copies are still available at £4 including postage and packing from CUE, Kitemore House, Faringdon, Oxon. SN7 8HR.

Letters to the Editor

From Mr. Frederick Bentham

Dear Editor,

I was honoured to find myself featured in Walter Plinge's column in the last issue and intrigued by his conjectures on my estimation of the relative rating in importance of the Patt. 23 and the Light Console in the development of stage lighting. My answer has to be that the Patt. 23 is the more important.

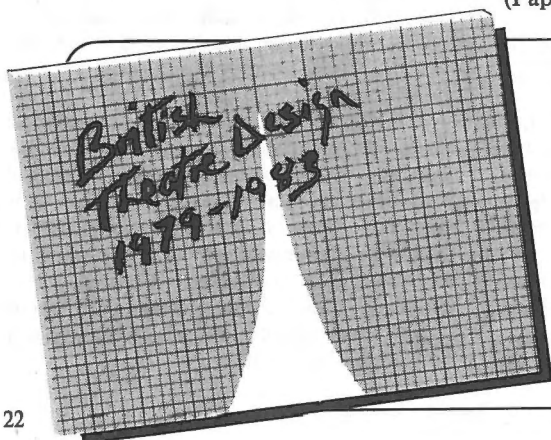
That spotlight lies in the mainstream of world stage lighting development, whereas the light Console represents a diversion only. Of course the Light Console remains nearest to my heart. It was a work of art intended to further an art which was *not* stage lighting. An art of moving light which was not to be shackled for ever to the accompaniment of — the illumination of — actor, singer and dancer.

As it turned out, it was fortunate for Strand Electric that we had the Light Console when in the early 1950s the promise of our first real advance in control for stage lighting, the Electronic-Preset, evaporated. In a matter of weeks only, we were able to create the Systems C and CD which scored such a success in television and theatre. Nevertheless the electro-mechanical techniques we used were the equivalent to the days of steam and have little relevance to mainstream development of all-electric lighting control — no moving parts. The story of that electro-mechanical by-way I have told, in some detail, in the Spring issue of the ABTT's *Sightline* and will conclude it in the Autumn one.

Back to the Patt. 23. After a false start as Patt. 74 in my brand new Strand Electric catalogue of 1936 due to the lack of suitable lamps, it got going in 1953. At which time it was the first stage spotlight designed and tooled for mass production in the world. The leap was from batches of fifty or one hundred or so to five thousand. The sad thing is that nobody knows, or is prepared to estimate, how many were produced in the thirty years that the design was in production.

FRED BENTHAM.

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Middlesex UB2 4HH

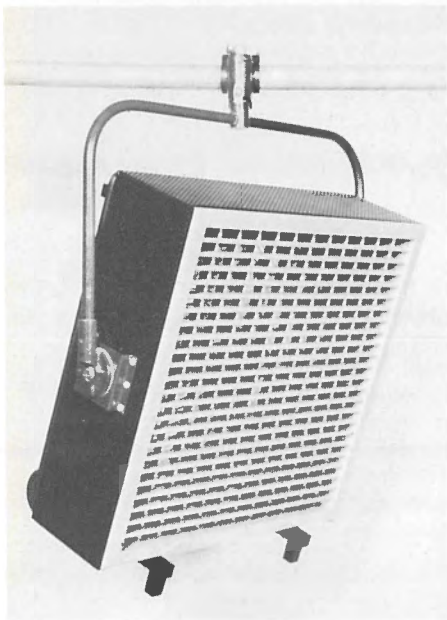


PRODUCT NEWS

Redesigned Wind Machine from Cinebuild

Finer control of wind-speed, less noise and individual adjustment of louvre angles are practical improvements in the redesigned Cinefex 24" wind machine. This one is wheel mounted for floor use, it can also be stand mounted or suspended (hanging weight 35 kg). A remote control lead is an optional extra. Specials include 30" and 36" models. All models conform to Health and Safety Act requirements.

The Cinefex 24" illustrated costs £725 excl. VAT or can be hired from Cinebuild Ltd., 1 Wheatsheaf Hall, Wheatsheaf Lane, London SW8.



Rank-Strand launch Plug-in Dimmer Units for Hotels

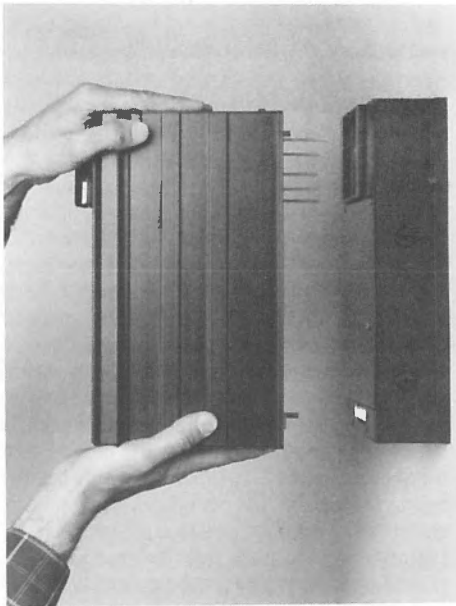
New plug-in dimmers for use in hotels, conference centres and art galleries are announced by the Rank Strand Commercial Lighting Division.

Environ 2 is a two-part system comprising a tough plastic socket or base incorporating feed and control cable trunking and the plug-in dimmer unit itself.

Both tungsten and fluorescent dimmers are offered in 1.5 kW, 4.0 kW and 8.0 kW capacities — fused to either U.K. or continental specification.

Because all capacities and both tungsten and fluorescent dimmers can be used in any combination, dimming installations can be matched to the requirements of a building without having to construct special "one off" racks.

Environ 2 dimmer circuitry incorporates new toroidal filters and dual range timing of fades. Fluorescent dimmers have a special electronic switch which automatically turns off the tube heaters when the circuit is at "full", thus saving significant current.



Environ 2 dimmers are controlled by the existing range of outstations. The fluorescent dimmers are fully compatible with the current range of dimmable ballasts. Further information from Richard M. Harris, Rank Strand, Great West Rd., Brentford TW8 9HR.

CCT introduces Axial Optics

CCT announce an important addition to the Silhouette system of Profile spotlights. It is an "Axial Optics" lamphouse which, like the base down 1000 W and 2000 W lamphouses, is completely compatible with the five Silhouette modular zoom lens systems and accessories such as Iris, Gobos and Colour Changers.

The combination of lamp mounted on the major luminaire axis and specially designed



reflector, maximise efficiency in terms of usable light collection. A novel system for moving the reflector control from peak centre beam to flat field, without the need to readjust lamp orientation. As far as is known, this is the only profile luminaire which gives beam quality adjustment without the need to adjust the lamp alignment.

Earlier this year CCT launched a range of new luminaires in Canada and the United States where the standard 120 V supply has historically encouraged the use of axial optics. CCT's new design now brings these benefits to the 220 V and 240 V markets.

More information, including photometrics, can be obtained from Eddie Hunter, CCT Theatre Lighting Ltd., Windsor House, 26 Willow Lane, Mitcham, Surrey CR4 4NA.

Watford Town Hall's versatile sound system by Stage Two Ltd

Stage Two Ltd., of Croxley Green recently won the contract to supply and install entirely new sound and lighting systems at Watford Town Hall. The wide range of entertainment events that take place there called for maximum flexibility in both systems.

The sound system comprises two arrays of Altec Lansing speakers all carefully concealed behind the existing wood panelling. The bass bins are model 817A enclosure with two 16" 515LFE speakers. A BSS crossover operates at 950 Hz to the Altec Lansing Mantaray horn model MR64A which is powered by a 291 compression driver. The amplification stage used throughout is HH Electronics and the total power handling of the main speaker arrays 580 W. Monitor speakers have also been provided for the benefit of patrons on the balcony and are fed through a Klark-Technik delay unit.

The mixer is a Yamaha 1602 stereo mixer and microphones feature the Shure SM59 and SM85 which is particularly suitable for vocal reproduction.

The amplification in the smaller of the two halls is centred around a Traynor 6400 mixer amplifier with new ceiling-mounted loudspeakers and five individual microphone circuits. A link is also provided from the main PA system to the smaller hall system.

The whole system is operated from a refurbished control room at the rear of the auditorium.

The lighting system consisted of a portable twenty-four-channel control desk operating sixteen front-of-house Starlette fresnel 1000 W spots with a further eight above the open-plan stage. These complement the existing follow spots which have been retained.

Further details from Terry Douris, Stage Two Ltd., 197 Watford Rd., Croxley Green, Rickmansworth, Herts WD3 3EH (0923 776777).

Between Cues

The thoughts of Walter Plinge

Dressing the boxes

The house was nearly full but it seemed rather empty. Why? Because no one was sitting in the stage boxes. Why? Because they were too expensive. Surely filled boxes are so important to the "dressing" of the house that their price should be reduced, even to virtual zero, until they sell. Are courses in arts administration paying sufficient attention to a study of the paintings of Sickert?



Recalling the Piper

If there be any theatre archaeologist who is anxious to know what became of John Piper's statues for the premiere of *The Rape of Lucretia*, I bring news. I have just remembered what I did with them. I could not bear to throw them on the dump at the Aldeburgh Brickworks in 1957 (or was it 1958), so I planted them on a suitable ridge

overlooking the River Alde. There were no subsequent reports of mariners lulled to a classic fate, so I assume that the rotting gauze-encased plaster was soon absorbed into the landscape. The timber spines may still be there because the set was built at Glyndebourne where Jock Gough, like all the old master carpenters, preferred his timber to be properly seasoned by service in several previous productions. And I have seen him lovingly straighten historic operatic nails. Such memories do not clarify in the cluttered confines of the plingular mind unless its sensors are exposed to some appropriate external stimuli. In this case a small Piper exhibition in Aldeburgh, comprising items from the Britten-Pears personal collection. Including the original designs for *Albert Herring*: a production which was performed for nearly a decade before I assumed guardianship for the final performances — and then officiated at the laying to rest in the aforementioned Aldeburgh Brickworks. I knew the set intimately, but had never met the designs. Likewise the original *Turn of the Screw* represented by a preliminary sketch which captures the totality of the final design. If any theatre historian has read this far, I would welcome any news of the whereabouts of Piper's gauze design for *Il Ballo dell Ingrate* which as far as I know only had two (Cranko-directed) performances in the Jubilee Hall in 1958. The rest of the set was rostrumage covered in random-rucked black corduroy: a technique I have subsequently advocated freely, but without takers. All this is really rather rambling, but I felt a need to write something about Piper — and his visual language so transcends mere words that I cannot begin to explain why I think he is one of the great stage artists of our century.

The Old Pic

Ed Mirvish, saviour of that maternal home of our national drama, dance and opera companies—**The Old Vic**—included a chronology of the distinguished theatre in the press information pack announcing his reopening season when "only by subscribing will theatregoers get price reductions, but what's more it will be the only way of guaranteeing seats for a spectacular season in this spectacularly restored theatre". The forty-six dated events chronicle the Vic's significant ups and downs. The details of the ups are familiar but there is one of the downs, or rather potential downs, that just might have changed the course of our theatrical history. In 1847, Pickford's made an unsuccessful bid for the Vic as a parcel's office. I hope that Honest Ed will invite the Chairman of Pickford's to his opening night.



Ms in the Moon

I am a bit of a moony. I have no choice: no lightperson with a leaning towards real music (the stuff not dependent upon the more metronomic aspects of instruments of the percussive and plucking kind) can hope, or wish, to avoid the moon — that great cinemoid 61 factory in the sky. Or whatever your favourite moon cool is: even open white for those caught up in such dramaturgical cults as literalism or puritanism. (There is not much open white at the Berliner Ensemble because Brecht understood washing powder marketing rather better than many of his British disciples.) Now, astronauts notwithstanding, I know, I just know that there is a man in the moon. The evidence? Well, there is the 1518 Rosenkranzmedallion in Nürnberg's St Lorenz, or the 1870 mechanical toy in Munich's Puppentheatermuseum. And then there is my intuition. Which enables me to assure an equality-conscious world that there is now a Ms in the Moon. In June.



Love among the consultants

Now there goes a man who hates the theatre. What a pity — it hurts his work. As an eminent American designer once remarked to an eminent American professor about an eminent American theatre consultant. (Source: the eminent American professor speaking during an architectural debate at NoTT 83. Names were named but I shall respect the confidentiality of the conference room, even when in open session.)