

TABS

Published in the interests of the Amateur Theatre
by

The Strand Electric and Engineering Co., Ltd.

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EDITORIAL

Australia seems to be very much in our news, this issue. As it happens, the Chairman and Secretary of this Company have recently returned from a flying visit "down under." While they were away we received the January issue of Swindon Theatre Guild's *Spotlight* which contained the pathetic account of the efforts of one of their late members, newly arrived in Australia, to find an Amateur Dramatic Society which she could join. (Details appear on page 25 of this issue.) After reading this we fully expected our emissaries to return with their tails between their legs and their hearts in their boots. But no, they came home delighted with the growth of interest in the Theatre in Australia and it is, therefore, a real pleasure to be able also to print in this issue an article on the success of Melbourne's Little Theatre. This article, which appears on page 26, gives, we feel, a much truer picture of the state of affairs in Australia than does the tale of woe from Miss Harris on page 25. We feel that she must have been the victim of a most unfortunate set of circumstances and coincidences, and if this should catch her eye and she should still be in difficulty we suggest that she gets in touch with Mr. Alec Brown, Manager of our Melbourne Branch, the address of which appears on page 2 of this issue.

* * *

The Half Hearted Amateur

The following recently appeared in *Crescent Curtain*, the Bulletin of the Crescent Theatre, Birmingham. It is an extract from a letter of resignation from a newly joined member who was fortunate enough to find himself cast in a production.

"I greatly regret that I must relinquish the part of — in " —." Perhaps you remember that last week, you mentioned two hours as the probable duration of each rehearsal? I was alarmed at the inordinate length of last night's session and feel that I cannot stand the exacting pace you set.

"Frankly, there is little pleasure for me in amateur dramatics when time cannot even be spared for normal social relaxation—a tea-break for instance. I regard dramatics as a leisure-time activity and find it impossible to treat them in such deadly earnest after a heavy day's work, and I cannot allow a hobby to impair my professional efficiency.

"Moreover, the method of splitting the play into two parts and of calling all the actors in a particular section will entail an enormous wastage of time for some people. This, I have found in ten years' experience, can be the curse of amateur theatricals—and my spare time is too precious to fritter away."

Lectures

During 1955 nearly a thousand people attended lectures and demonstrations at our Head Office Theatre. Approximately another 1,400 attended lectures given by us elsewhere up and down the country. From the booking figures available at the time of writing it appears that another 600 persons will have attended in London between January 1st and May 2nd of this year. When one considers that in any one society there are usually only a mere handful of people interested in stage lighting (or at any rate sufficiently interested to go to a lecture on the subject), the number of Groups represented in the above attendance figures must be not inconsiderable.

* * *

A Cautionary Tale

The verses below are an extract from a parody which appears in full in "Sonnets and Verse", published by Duckworth and reprinted here by kind permission of the executors of the late Hilaire Belloc.

Nothing, probably, could have been further from the poet's mind than the electrician in the Amateur Theatre, but his remarks apply so aptly that we make no apology for bringing the lines to our readers' notice once again.

NEWDIGATE POEM

A PRIZE POEM SUBMITTED BY MR. LAMBKIN, THEN SCHOLAR
AND LATER FELLOW OF BURFORD COLLEGE,

to the examiners of the University of Oxford
on the prescribed poetic theme set by them
in 1893

"THE BENEFITS OF THE ELECTRIC LIGHT"

Behold, the Electrician where he stands:
Soot, oil, and verdigris are on his hands;
Large spots of grease defile his dirty clothes,
The while his conversation drips with oaths.
Shall such a being perish in its youth?
Alas! it is indeed the fatal truth.
In that dull brain, beneath that hair unkempt,
Familiarity has bred contempt.
We warn him of the gesture all too late:
Oh, Heartless Jove! Oh, Adamantine Fate!
A random touch—a hand's imprudent slip—
The Terminals—a flash—a sound like "Zip"!
A smell of burning fills the started air—
The Electrician is no longer there:

Hilaire Belloc.

Decent Behaviour

The following paragraph appeared recently in the Bulletin of the Scottish Community Drama Association.

"In 1730 Sir John Clerk of Penecuik (*on the outskirts of Edinburgh*) wrote 'Sir, I send you two of my sones, and commit them to God and your care. . . . I approved much of your methods to make your boys once a year act a play in publick. This gave them a decent behaviour and seem'd to prepare them for the business of the world. . . .'"

Not so many years ago we heard of mothers sending their daughters to certain Dramatic Schools in order that they should learn speech, deportment, make-up and dress design, but for social rather than dramatic purposes. To-day the outlook and standards of our better Dramatic Schools are so high that we think that a candidate would have little chance of entry if it were known that the goal was that of a debutante socialite rather than a dramatic star.

* * *

THE SHAPE OF THEATRES TO COME

Although there has been little building of new theatres in recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about the shape of the ideal theatre and the relationship of stage to auditorium. There are some who see only vice in the existence of a proscenium arch and others who see no virtue in its abolition. Others desire the best of both worlds. These discussions are restricted to the comparatively few to whom the theatre is something more than a place of entertainment. Those engaged in professional or amateur "show business" would be rather at a loss to understand what all the fuss was about if they overheard such a discussion.

The proscenium abolitionists are often inclined to make extravagant claims for the particular form of theatre they favour, which may be theatre in the round or some adaptation of the Elizabethan type of theatre. In a booklet issued by Studio Theatre Ltd., its author, Mr. Stephen Joseph, is very reckless in his diagnosis of theatrical malaise and in prescribing theatre in the round as the elixir of life. He says that "The cinema, television and sport provide better entertainment. Perhaps the theatre is out of date. Or perhaps it is only the way in which we present plays that is out of date. . . ." He then continues, rather rashly, "The first thing to notice about theatre in the round is that it offers an alternative to many of the conventions that have made present-day theatre a place seldom visited by most people. . . . Our theatre conventions ensure a small regular audience who are for the most part incapable of criticism and attend more from habit and social obligation than for the joy of

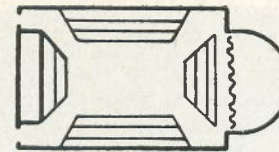
it." The italics are mine. I suggest that it is not the "conventions" of the theatre that have reduced professional theatre audiences but the counter-attractions of the cinema and television, both of which have the convention of an audience in front of a picture frame.

Another extravagant claim is that theatre in the round, because its production costs are less, would provide new playwrights with stages on which to learn their job. There are stated to be 30,000 amateur societies in this country. Any playwright who wants to learn his job by getting his plays produced could join a suitable society. There have been various competitions for new plays, promoted by professional and amateur organisations, with money prizes and guaranteed productions, but the majority of the entries have been worthless. Would producers of theatre in the round accept lower standards?

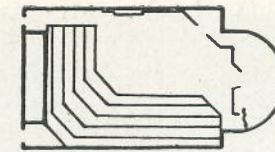
Theatre in the round has been adopted in many places in America. It is interesting to read what was said about it by Kenneth MacGowan in the *New York Times* in 1948: "It is not at all unlikely that central staging will spread out to the smallest of 'little theatre' groups, beset as they are with economic and production problems. Frankly, the results may be fearsome. For, though central staging can be an aid to better performance under proper direction, it is, of course, no substitute for good acting. It demands greater skill on the part of the director. . . . Central staging has its dangers as well as advantages."

Mr. Ralph Freud, one of the pioneers of theatre in the round, with which he has been concerned since 1925, wrote in *Players' Magazine*, also in 1948: "But at best, the fixed-focus central stage performance is merely a play-reading with the lines learned and some planned movement, almost invariably on one level. Visual statement is entirely neglected as a factor in the design of performance." Mr. Freud, in his little theatre at the University of California, Los Angeles, has adopted a very interesting flexibility, providing for complete interchange between auditorium and stage. Both are varied to suit each particular production. The theatre is an adapted class-room, with movable seating, and Fig. 1 shows a variety of arrangements of stage and audience. In a review of "The Flexible Theatre in America," published in Volume IV, No. 3, of *World Theatre*, it is stated, of Mr. Freud's theatre, that "the staff of the theatre concedes that the use of this area is largely expedient, but that its appointments have been stimulating and the results novel." Fig. 2 is a photograph of a setting for a play in this theatre. One can well believe that an imaginative producer and his company could thoroughly enjoy working there.

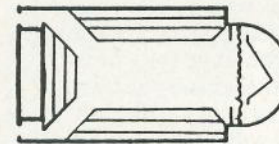
In the same issue of *World Theatre*, an issue devoted exclusively to theatre architecture, there is an interesting summary by Norman Marshall of the replies given by thirty-four well-known producers from many countries to questions about the desirability of providing open stages. Although there were apparently strong opinions for and against proscenium stages, nearly everyone agreed that adaptable



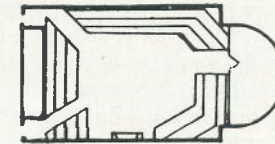
The Cherry Orchard



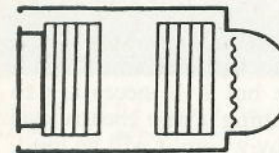
Blithe Spirit



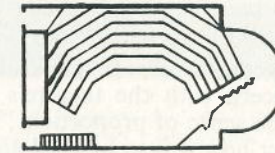
Ah, Wilderness



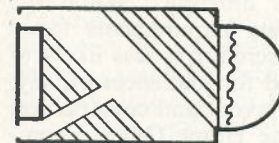
Suspect



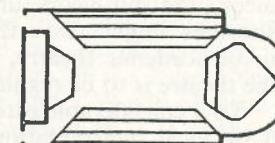
Mourning Becomes Electra



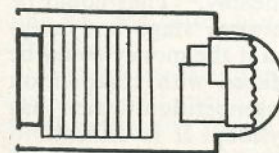
The Late Christopher Bean



Volpone



Twelfth Night



The Great God Brown

FIG. 1. A variety of alternative arrangements of stage and audience for different productions. Theatre 170, University of California, Los Angeles. Illustration by courtesy of University of California Press.

theatres should be built. Mr. Marshall concludes his summary with the sound impartiality one would expect from him :

“ Most of the directors who have replied to the questionnaire show a considerable reluctance to take a realistic play out of the picture stage for which it was written, but possibly they underrate the ability of a good play to stand up to different methods of production, each of which may reveal more clearly than before certain facets of the work. For over two hundred years Shakespeare’s plays have been successfully produced in a kind of theatre entirely different from that for which they were written. Recent experiments in producing Shakespeare on an open stage, as like as possible to the stage for which he wrote, have convinced many people that this is the best way of producing Shakespeare, but it would be foolish for anyone to argue that this is the *only* way of producing Shakespeare. There have been many memorable performances of his plays on the picture frame stage to disprove any such argument. So it is unwise to be dogmatic and declare that there can only be one sort of stage for the realistic play, and another sort which is the only one for the ‘ unrealistic play.’ ”

The extremists provide a useful stimulus to those who have a realistic concern with the theatre’s welfare but it is necessary to preserve some sense of proportion. In planning a new theatre one must consider how it is to be used and also by whom it will be used, in order to judge what degree of flexibility is required. If the theatre is to be used experimentally and educationally with provision for small audiences, the scope for adventurous planning is wide, but if the main purpose is that of providing popular theatre for larger audiences, the problems are quite different. While the licensing authorities might relax their safety requirements for a small amateur or academic theatre, their discretion is less likely to be liberal if the theatre is to be regularly used for audiences of, say, 400 or more. To a considerable extent, the layout and construction are governed by local interpretations of the Home Office recommendations—not regulations—and there is an unfortunate lack of consistency in the interpretations.

At present it is clear that whatever type of planning is most favoured, there can be little building of new theatres. Old theatres in many towns could probably be bought cheaply. They could be converted to provide new relationships between stage and auditorium if the licensing authorities agreed, and if the money could be raised. But such theatres would still be faced with competition from the newer forms of entertainment, competition which has caused the old theatres to fall by the wayside. It is difficult to believe that changes in the shapes and positions of the stages would justify the wishful-thinking of those who over-simplify the problems.



FIG. 2. UCLA Theatre Arts production of “ Papa is All ” by Patterson Greene. Directed by Edward Hearn. Designer John J. Jones. Illustration by courtesy of University of California Press.

Most of the people of this country are deprived of the best that our present theatre can offer. Television, Radio and the Cinema can take their best (and their worst) much more cheaply to practically all the people. And their best frequently presents the best actors of the theatre, who can be permanently resident in London, except for occasional tours of the large cities to try-out their plays intended for the West End. Would physical changes of theatre form really meet this competition? It is the drama that makes the theatre, and changes of form and shape of stage will not make poor dramatists and indifferent actors into good ones. Genius is not created by externals. The would-be dramatists who moan about the restrictions of the modern stage are finding excuses, and there seems to be little justification for the assumption that they could become better playwrights if their stages could return to the auditorium.

Theatre in the round and space stage productions provide interesting and exciting possibilities, but those who see in their adoption the cure for all the ills the theatre is heir to are deluding themselves; they are running round in theatrical circles and getting nowhere.

“HAMLET”—LONDON VIA MOSCOW

The Peter Brook—Paul Schofield Season

by Joe Davis

Lighting Engineer to H. M. Tennent Ltd. since 1936

This production was presented on November 23rd, 1955, for twelve performances on the stage of the Philial or Second Moscow Art Theatre. The main stage of the Premier Art Theatre situated nearby was occupied with their repertoire season. Theatrical history was in the making, for this was the first English Company and Production to appear in a Russian theatre since the Revolution.

The permanent setting by George Wakhavitch which had been used in the prior-to-London-production tour had been duplicated and sent ahead by sea. The only electrical equipment sent from England with the production were practical fittings, bomb tanks and sound equipment.

The morning after our arrival in Moscow on November 15th, Mr. Peter Brook, our producer, with Ian Dow, our production manager, and myself (we had flown ahead of the Company who were playing at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham that week) went along to the Theatre to discuss the fit-up arrangements and times of rehearsal with the Theatre Staff. As a result of this meeting, we had to have the booms and ladders* made in the Theatre's main workshops, as this type of equipment is never used in Moscow.

During the discussion, the Electrician explained that he did not normally work to a system of Cue lights, but during the Rehearsal period of a new play he sat with the producer planning the layout and various lighting changes required for the play. In this way he learned the lighting operations as a member of the Company would learn his lines, so that during the performance he operated the lighting changes by sight and not by cue or signal from the Stage Manager. (I have to point out, however, that the rehearsal period for a new play may take from six months to a year before the first performance!)

The Lighting Installation

The Philial Theatre seems to be typical of the other theatres I visited in Moscow.

The stage voltage is 127 volts. The switchboard has 120 ways with the control panel mounted in three banks, i.e. forty ways per panel. The master wheel and locking device for each bank was on

* **Boomerang (Boom).** Vertical barrel carrying spotlights at the sides of the stage behind the wings and fixed to the floor.

Ladder. A hanging frame with several lanterns mounted one above the other; it is often used in preference to a boomerang for side lighting as the stage floor is left clear.

the right-hand end of the board and each dimmer handle was fitted with a locking device for master dimming. The Auto transformer dimmers of 5 kw. each were controlled from the main board by a tracker wire system and were situated in a room behind the main board. The switchboard is placed underneath the stage with the panel facing down-stage. The operator sits under the footlights and can watch the action of the play through a small slit cut in the stage similar to a prompter's box. The stage equipment consists of five magazine-type battens using 500-watt mirror-backed lamps, so each batten in effect became a miniature flood bar. Fitted on number one bar between sections of the batten were four 500-watt spots. Each side down-stage six 500-watt spots were fitted on brackets and used as perches or booms. The main stage lighting for windows, exterior, moon or sun effects was of a mobile nature and set by the stage electrician for each scene as per plot. The main acting lights came from a twenty-way 1,000-watt Lighting Spot Bridge in the auditorium ceiling approximately 20 ft. forward of the proscenium opening on a level with the gallery front. Also just forward of the main proscenium was one box each side on the gallery level, and in each box were fitted two 2,000-watt spots and one 300-watt projector lamp with a very efficient lens system and used as a follow spot. Throughout the performance the operator in each box set the lamps and changed the colours as required.

In the middle of the front-of-house they had fitted five 500-watt spots on each side for general apron stage lighting. None of the 500-watt and 1,000-watt spot units, all designed and manufactured by the Stage Lighting Department of the theatre, were fitted with shutter control, and the only beam adjustment was by means of a slide tube which allowed a movement of the ball lens forward or backward about 2 in. They gave a very good light, but with a very restricted beam control.

Lighting of the Production

When they are lighting a production, it appears that they first set the general lighting of the scene using only battens and stage equipment. The acting areas are then lit by the front of the house spot bar and box spots as required. The front-of-house angle is such that it is possible to light the actors and avoid light spilling on to the set.

In a production of “Uncle Vanya” which I saw, during the oil lamp scene the entire acting area was lighted excellently with the side box spots and they were very expertly used as follow spots when the oil lamps were used and carried about the stage during the action of the play. It is the usual practice for the operators in the boxes to go up if necessary between the acts and reset or recolour the bridge spots. All this front-of-house equipment was controlled from the main switchboard.

As the theatre was occupied with its own production until after

the performance on Sunday, November 20th, our problem was, after they had dismantled their own settings, to light *Hamlet* with about fifty difficult lighting cues in two rehearsals. Clearly there was no time for the stage staff to "learn their parts" in the manner they were accustomed to, as outlined above, and instead they had to work to our method of cueing by signal. It was very fortunate that Mr. Peter Brook was able to speak Russian and our interpreter proved to be first class, and very soon was explaining the cues to the switchboard as if he had been a stage director all his life. In fact, Mr. Brook had to check his enthusiasm when he started elaborating too much on our requests. We had one full day lighting and in the evening had a technical rehearsal with the company. The following day we spent rehearsing the cues until the house opened for the first performance.

The theatre staff in Russia do not normally work through the night, but as a gesture to us they agreed to do so, but pointed out that there was a definite trade union ruling that if the staff worked continuously for twelve hours they must be given a complete break for at least six hours. The twelve hours, of course, would include the usual breaks for lunch and refreshments.

I suggested to the electrician that he should number his board as it would be easier for plotting. I discovered during the lighting rehearsal he had done this, but instead of numbering the panels from left to right in rotation he numbered the circuits as various lanterns had been plugged up, so that the numbering of the board was staggered and this added quite a bit to the confusion when calling for circuits. Somehow or other we got through the rehearsal and the First Night went very smoothly by using the interpreter in the prompt corner with the stage director. He passed the cues on verbally through the intercom system to the switchboard. Some amusing incidents occurred during the lighting due to their system of working a show. For instance, in the Ghost scene, irrespective of cues, they would not "fade in" the ghost lighting until the ghost actually appeared, and if at the end of a soliloquy an actor was left on the stage, they hated blacking out until he left the stage!!

Once the operators had learned the show they proved very efficient, and the fades were operated very smoothly. At the end of the performance they would stand in their little box and applaud the actors during the calls and on one or two occasions they put their hands through the slit to shake hands with them.

A very satisfactory thing, too, was the testing of every circuit in use in the play every morning and replacing lamps, etc., if required.

For anyone working in the theatre in any capacity it is a full-time occupation. They usually remain with the same company and theatre all their lives until retired with a pension.

We were able to visit the famous Bolshoi Theatre to see Ballet and Opera performed. The staging and effects were exciting and spectacular and, in the three productions I saw there, extensive use

was made of optical effects. The only front-of-house lighting in the Bolshoi Theatre is three arc lamps each side in the top boxes, just forward of the proscenium opening. Again the board was in the float position, the only difference from the Philial board being that the shafts were motor driven and the variable speeds were controlled by a rheostat type of control.

Effects using any kind of explosive material had not been permitted in the Russian Theatre since the Revolution. The Fire Authorities were very worried about our using maroons during the action of the play. When first a maroon was fired for them as a demonstration, however, they seemed to be convinced of their safety, but as a precaution two very anxious firemen stood by at each performance until they had been used.

In Moscow there are over thirty theatres. Only two, oddly enough, are State subsidised. Each theatre has a different production each night, and is open seven days a week so the theatregoer has quite a selection to choose from, but such is the interest that it is difficult to book seats.

* * *

LIGHTING CONTROL—I

In the last issue, we covered the various forms of dimmer commonly in use to-day and we now have to consider how these may be combined to form a stage control board.

The permanent need is group movement, it does not matter whether the cue is a switching or dimming one. The odds are that several circuits are involved and these will be a different set from the predecessors and successors to that cue. This problem of variable group working has exercised several minds (including that of the present author) in various countries for many years.

Fig. No. 1 shows an old stager and it illustrates quite a number of principles which are applicable to-day. Along the top panels, which in those days would be slate and very handsome panels indeed, are rows of circuit switches, in this particular example rather advanced back-of-board type. Actually, contemporaries about this time would more usually have had the "open knife" switches on the front of the panels, the current being DC and comparatively safe. As the dimmers on this board were liquid dimmers, they were operated by means of tracker wires from the wheels and handles below. The dimmers therefore were remote and as in those early days dimmers were commonly liquid, remote control began very early in the theatre.

The shafts divide into four groups, the top row left and right and the bottom row left and right and here is a very early principle, the allocation of controls to a particular group of circuits often identified by colour. A shaft would be known as the white shaft, the red shaft, the blue and the amber shaft. Later on the number of

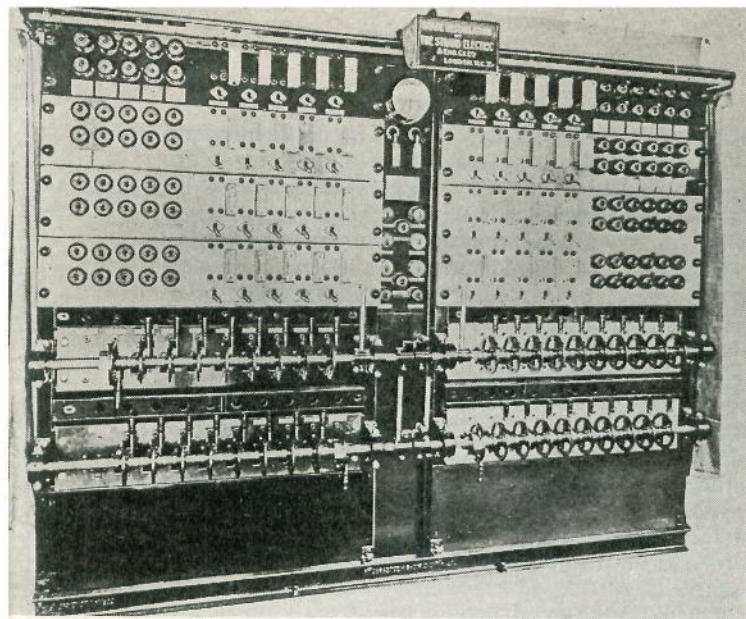


FIG. 1. An early type of stage lighting dimmer board using liquid dimmers at a remote point controlled by tracker wires.

shafts was increased by black ones (known as independents) for the spotlights, for which colour was considered inappropriate.

I wish I could always record that more modern boards could do all that this one could. It is a fact that many of the old switchboards (including the one only removed from Drury Lane in the last six years) were installed in the early 1900's and had many facilities which were later omitted for many years. This may have been due to the fact that owing to the liquid dimmers, remote control was present, i.e. liquid dimmers were messy things and simply had to be put in a room to themselves in the basement. At the same time, much ingenuity in mechanical interlocking was exercised and gears fitted to the dimmer levers, so that a group could travel up and a group down on the same shaft for the same cue. Early stage boards were often very well made and built to last for ever, though not to survive the change from DC to AC or the increased regard for human safety.

The switching side of the board in Fig. 1 is less happy, each circuit has a simple switch which is either "on" or "off". The busbar for each colour group of switches has a master switch known as the colour master. Each of these masters is a remote controlled contactor and their operating switches are in turn mastered by a "DBO"—dead blackout—switch. Thus one can blackout a whole colour, but once lighting has to be grouped outside these primitive set groupings, an impasse results. For example, bring in a couple of blues out of the blue row, a couple of reds out of the red and five out of the amber row, and remove some of the other circuits similarly

scattered—all this to happen simultaneously. Such a cue is quite impossible yet colour lighting is a matter of contrasting colours.

Fig. 2 shows simple methods of switch grouping, in this case for contactor coils, though in point of fact the circuits could equally well be applied direct to lamp filaments. At (a) two-way and off switches enable circuits to be grouped on Master A or Master B. The two masters feed busbars and it follows that we can form two groups of lighting and we can also leave some circuits off entirely.

This group movement of lighting is absolutely basic, and if more than two groups are required then the circuit on the right has to be used. In this case, each lighting circuit is merely represented by a row of miniature switches and there can be as many rows as needed. The switches are energised by multi-contact relays and then the other side of the switches run back to common contactor coils, a very important form of switching (i.e. the isolation of all feed lines). If the ends are not untied in this way there will be runnings. Thanks to this provision at (b) we can have some circuits, common to all three groups, whereas in the previous diagram at (a) a common circuit would make the two busbars run together.

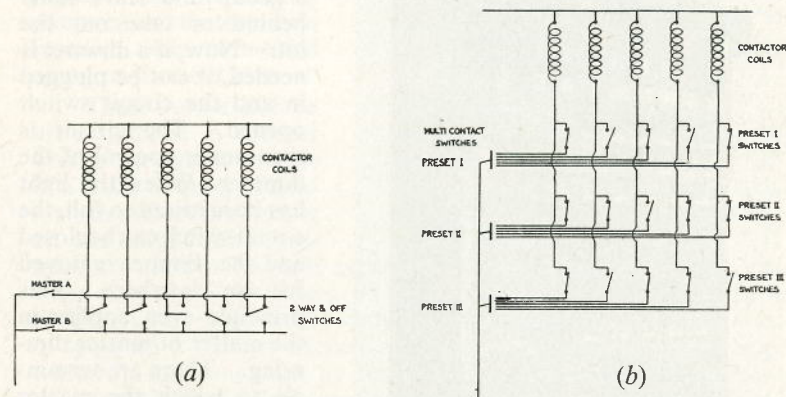


FIG. 2. Simple methods of switch grouping.

This is very elementary preset switching, but very useful. The snag comes in the duplication (or whatever word is appropriate) of all circuit switches; thus for ten changes there will have to be ten switches to each. Panel size and visual confusion compels the use of other methods which are more complex mechanically and will figure in a later article.

In Fig. 3 we have a relatively modern board neatly encased in sheet metal but the dimmers have no means of interlocking so we

have no possibility of operating several together, and if we want to run our lighting to a series of marks, the result is utterly impossible. The switchboard also illustrates another crime—to wit, no scale to the slider dimmers. Without the scale we have no means of plotting intermediate intensities. It is a Strand board and the reason for the lack of these facilities is solely cost.

In consequence some six years ago the present writer tried to solve the problem of adequate control facilities at reasonable cost and the result was the now well known Junior slider board (Fig. 4). The diagram (Fig. 5) shows the facilities provided by the circuit. There are two rows of switches, one a simple on-and-off (at the bottom just above the lamps) and the other a two-way shown at the top. The reason is that it is cheaper to use the ordinary commercial AC switches in pairs per circuit than to provide a special two-way-and-off switch. The switches along the top are to connect to, or independent of, the master blackout busbar. Thus group switching is possible. The second circuit switch is connected across the dimmer sockets.

So far, without any dimmers at all, we can switch on circuits and can group them for master operation from a single switch. We can take out a group and leave some behind or take out the lot. Now, if a dimmer is needed, it can be plugged in and the circuit switch opened. The circuit is then under control of the dimmer. When the light has been raised to full, the circuit switch can be closed and the dimmer removed for use elsewhere. This principle even applies in the matter of master dimming. There are terminals to which the master dimmer could be connected and using the master dimmer in place of the blackout switch, we could then dim a whole group of lighting, leaving some behind.

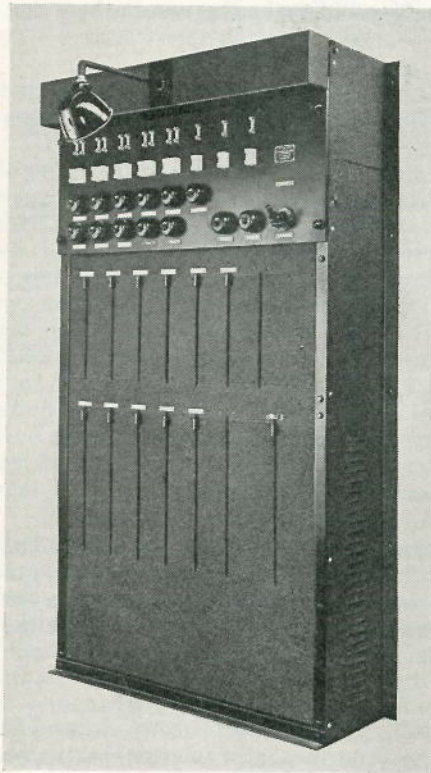


FIG. 3. A simple type of stage switchboard without any facilities for interlocking dimmers.

Fig. 6 shows a bigger board and in it we illustrate another principle—standardisation in two sizes; one unit of eight circuits with four dimmers, the other of twelve circuits with six dimmers, the two being bolted together, to make larger boards. The dimmers here are slider dimmers (previous article, Fig. 1) and scales are fitted so that intensities can be plotted. The blackout switch is at the right-hand end of the board. The reason for placing it on the end is to make the maximum use of standardisation. When two boards are butted together the blackout is removed and the terminals revealed are connected along to the next unit.

These Junior boards are of interest in another way as they show the use of a lesser number of dimmers than there are circuits on the stage. The dimmers are always the most expensive part of the switchboard, even when they are only sliders, and consequently the control facilities of the Junior system are only obtained by avoiding the waste of tying up a dimmer exclusively for each circuit. This principle will crop up from time to time in these articles and, depending on context, the weight *pro* or *con* will shift, but here and now there is no doubt all is *pro*. A dimmer cannot be allowed to idle because its circuit is either full on or blacked out during this production. It must be inserted in some other circuit.

Switchboards which allow a lesser number of dimmers to be shared out among a larger number of circuits are known as “flexible boards” and the Junior slider board is but one example of this type.

As stated earlier and the diagram Fig. 5 shows, a master dimmer can be used across the blackout switch for a general fade in or out. This is possible on the comparatively small total loads covered by the boards at present under discussion, but as installations

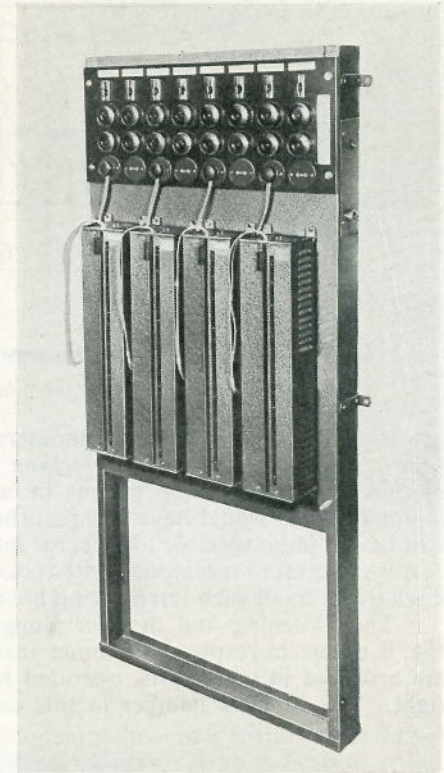


FIG. 4. A “Junior” type of dimmer board with fewer dimmers than switch circuits.

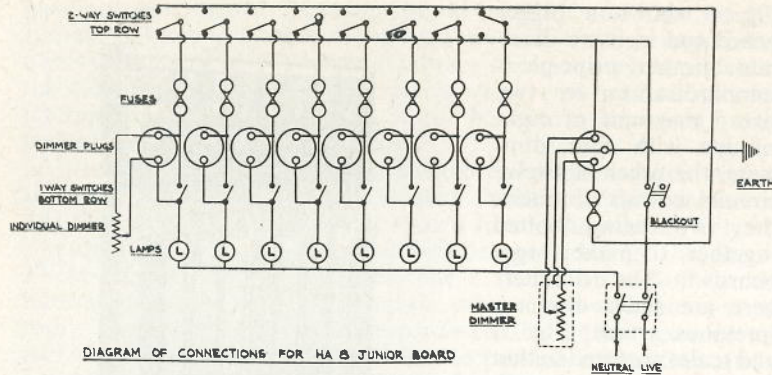


FIG. 5. The wiring diagram of the "Junior" type dimmer board.

get larger and the number of dimmers increases we must provide some means of actually interlocking the dimmer handles. The master dimmer principle cannot be adopted because the master dimmer, which would have to equal the total wattage on the stage, and have a large variable load factor into the bargain, would be too costly; therefore mechanical interlocking is used and Fig. 7 shows a relatively small such interlocking board.

The switching and dimmer plugging are exactly the same as Fig. 5 except in respect of dimmer mastering. The dimmer levers are arranged in two shafts, operated by the master wheels on the right. The dimmer handles in this case screw down to the shaft

FIG. 6. Two standard sizes of "Junior" dimmer board bolted together and interconnected to form a single board of larger size.

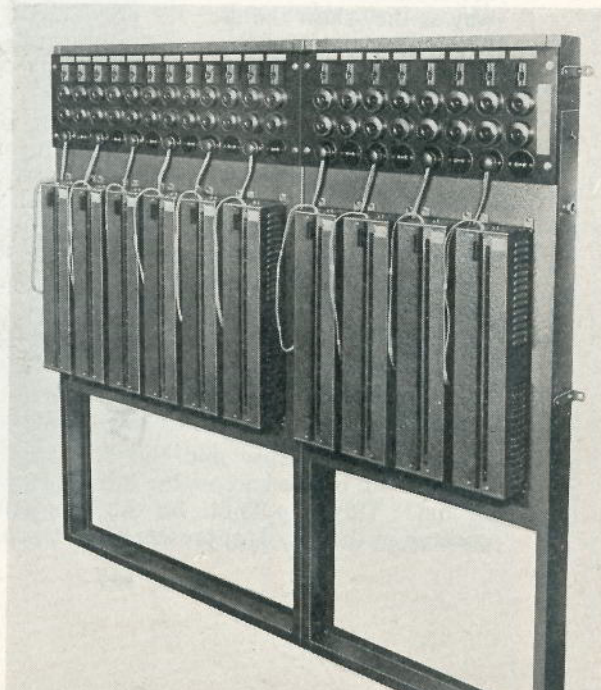
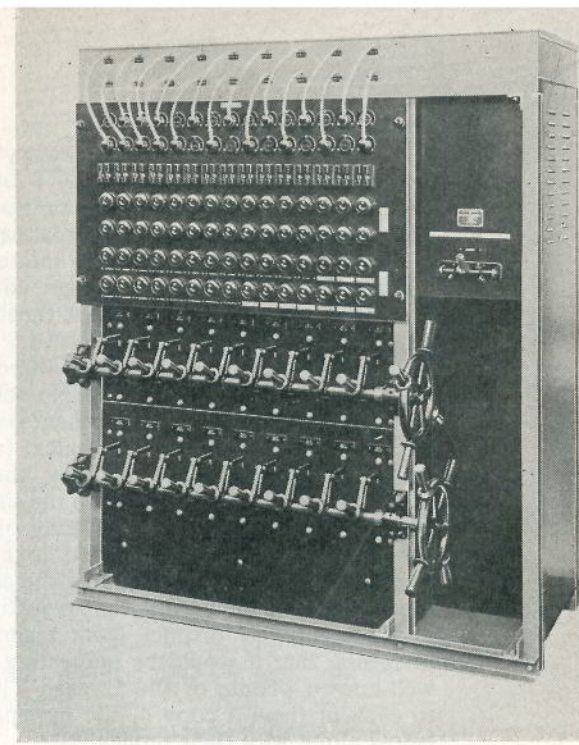


FIG. 7. A flexible-type Sunset dimmer board with facilities for interlocking and plugging dimmers. There are fewer dimmers than switch circuits.



and then the master wheel will operate them as a group. The drawback here is that the screwdown principle gives no indication at the handle that it has been locked down, but the principle is adopted because it is cheap. The dimmers are mounted at the back of the board and are of the radial type (previous article, Fig. 2). The actual plugging up of the dimmers is controlled by the plugs at the top of the board and circuits can be switched on or given a dimmer as required. In this example eighteen dimmers are called upon to work thirty lighting circuits.

The sharing out of dimmers takes time and severely limits the operation of the lighting so the next step, more usual in a theatre, is a switchboard with many dimmers, each dedicated to its own circuit; perhaps as in the case of the Haymarket Theatre, London, a grand master switchboard with eighty or ninety dimmers.

So now we have arrived at a switchboard not unlike the old stager at the beginning of the article, mechanical interlocking, but with the dimmers directly behind the board. This latter, advisable on account of cost, nevertheless brings severe limitations in control as we shall see when we consider these larger switchboards in the next article.

F.P.B.

Once again—

THE RAKED STAGE

A short time ago we were sent a cutting from the *New York Times* which noted a trend towards the return of the "raked stage" in the American Theatre. This interested us considerably because the trend here in England—if there could be said to be a trend at a time when there has been so little theatre building in the last quarter of a century—was, we thought in the opposite direction. As technically-minded people our interests and inclinations lie, of course, in technical directions. No one can pretend that it is as easy to set scenery and other equipment on a slope as on the flat. Far from it. Purely from the technical (and, therefore, perhaps from rather too narrow) point of view, the only justification we could see for the ramp was as an aid to the sight lines of the audience made necessary by the inadequate raking of the auditorium floor. This press cutting, however, referred to a raked stage as "projecting greater intimacy . . . and making the acting more dynamic." Here, then seemed to be an attempt to justify the raked stage on artistic and dramatic as distinct from technical grounds. We thought, therefore, that it would be interesting to obtain the views of a few well-known people of the English Theatre. Accordingly we sent to each of them a copy of the newspaper article which we reprint below along with their replies.

At this point a horrible doubt crossed our minds. Did our American cousins, or at any rate the author of the newspaper article in question mean the same by a "raked stage" as we did here in England? As will be seen from some of our experts' replies below, it seems most probable that they do not—or at any rate not necessarily. In England a raked stage is surely one which rises across its entire width from left to right hand wall by half or, occasionally, by five-eighths of an inch per foot of depth from the front. For the purposes at any rate of the American newspaper article it seems possible, if not probable, that the rake referred to was confined to the limits of the "scene" itself and consisted of a sloping platform laid on the flat floor proper of the stage. Not having established this distinction before approaching our experts, we feel that we might with some justification be accused of misleading them. Nevertheless, whether it is the permanent floor of the stage which is raked or only a sloping platform laid on part of it, we feel that the views expressed below will be of the greatest interest to our readers.

"NEWS AND GOSSIP OF THE RIALTO"

by Lewis Funke

A Trend towards Raked Stage Sets Noted

(Reprinted by permission of "The New York Times")

"When Sean O'Casey's *Red Roses for Me* bows at the Booth on Wednesday its participants will be walking

on a slant. Not, mind you, because one and all had tipped beyond their respective depths. But, rather, because they will be treading a stage that has been sloped, or raked—the section at the rear being somewhat higher than that near the footlights."

"The matter is presented this morning because the raked stage appears to be making a comeback in the American theatre. Designers like Howard Bay, who did the sets for the O'Casey play, and Jo Mielziner, always have held the raked stage in the highest esteem and every so often during their long careers have resorted to its use."

"But the rebirth has been most marked in the last two seasons. Last year, for example, Mr. Bay showed us a sharply angled stage in *The Desperate Hours* and there are currently on view four plays that utilise either fully or partially raked sets—*Inherit the Wind* (Peter Larkin), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Mr. Mielziner), *A Hatful of Rain* (Mordecai Gorelick) and *Tiger at the Gates* (Loudon Sainthill). In the offing is another from the drawing boards of Mr. Mielziner, *The Most Happy Fella*, Frank Loesser's musical version of Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*."

"ANGLE: What is the significance of the trend? Mr. Mielziner regards it as most heartening. "Perhaps," he was saying the other day "we are finally awakening to the fact that the theatre must start escaping from the naturalism imposed upon it by Belasco. The theatre cannot match the films with realism in the first place. And, in the second, it's remarkable what effects can be achieved simply. The raked stage provides a sense of depth and illusion. It's a step on the way back to theatricalism. With imagination and freedom, the theatre can beat the movies any day in the week."

"Mr. Bay agrees, and adds: "Besides the sense of depth, it seems to project greater intimacy, and it somehow makes the acting more dynamic. The players always seem poised for action. They always are ready to spring, as it were, and they always are completely visible. Somehow, too, I think it gives their performance added stature." Clearly, two strongly slanted votes."

Here are the experts' views given in the order in which they reached "Tabs."

It doesn't matter which way

"As long as people try to make the stage a world which is essentially stage, it doesn't seem to me to matter which way it slopes. I am not interested in historical motives—a return to this or that—but in the creation of a place which seems best fitted to present theatre to the modern public."

GEORGE DEVINE.

An Actor doesn't Care

"It is very seldom that flats are built to the rake, and unless they are, there is, on a raked stage, a very irritating inconsistency between the illusory vertical line of the down-stage flats where they join the tormentors, and the genuine vertical line of the proscenium arch. Many a set, when viewed from the sides of the auditorium, is ruined when erected on a raked stage.

As for the idea that a raked stage has any connection with liberating the theatre from naturalism, or that it has the slightest effect upon an actor's performance, one can only regard such claims as springing from the very great sense of importance which transatlantic designers have for themselves in comparison to designers elsewhere. An actor doesn't care two hoots what is around and behind him as long as he can be seen clearly, and if he has any genius for his job he can be just as much poised for action on the stage of the swimming bath at Penge as he can be anywhere else. And it is a poor designer indeed who cannot 'beat the movies any day in the week' and 'provide a sense of depth and illusion' just because his stage is flat. Is the article in *The New York Times* a very subtle joke, or have American theatre people no sense of humour?"

JOHN FERNALD.

Flexibility is the Secret

"A rake on the stage, like any other visual device, is useful only when it is suitable to the play. In *The Desperate Hours* the steep rakes on the smaller inset stages added to the sense of desperation. In another play, the rake could be as unsuitable as it was suitable here. On no account should we return to the permanently raked stage, which shackled the designer as the flat stage does not—and never looked right from any but the centre seats in the house.

As for the escape from realism, I am all for it but I don't believe the rake will unlock the door—the most it can open is a very small postern. Flexibility is the secret: just as actors should be acrobats, designers should be able to turn cartwheels in every perspective, according to the character of each play and each production."

E. MARTIN BROWNE, C.B.E.

The Raked Stage an Essential

"Provided that the term 'raked stage' means the same on both sides of the Atlantic, that is to say, a stage which has a gentle gradient from backstage down to the footlights, so that there is indeed a gradient of some one in eight or ten feet, then the article is, to us in this country, an astonishing one.

I think it is reasonable to say that from the restoration of the theatres in 1670, no stage in this country has been built which does not contain some degree of raking. Certainly all the Theatres Royal, which were built between 1710 and 1850 and many of which are still in existence, have raked stages, and the outstanding examples in London are of course the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and the Theatre Royal, Haymarket.

I have not had time to go into this matter as meticulously as I should wish, but I am firmly convinced that all the early theatres which were built in America, certainly the Chestnut Theatre, Philadelphia, the Bowery Theatre and the Booth, and, in fact, all the American theatres of the last century, were possessors of raked stages.

There is no doubt that from the actor's point of view and from the scenic artist's, the raked stage is of inestimable value and contributes something to the play which a flat stage can never do. It helps to preserve perspective and also gives a sense of illusion. It enables the audience to get a far better view of the stage, it provides depth, reality, fantasy, and everything that can be truly called 'theatre' in the best sense of the word. It assists intimacy, and that intangible electric current between audience and actor, without which great acting is impossible.

When America discarded the raked stage I have not been able to discover, though it is a matter which will give me some research when I have the time to devote to the subject. I imagine it may have been when the great song and dance shows first captured the American public.

In my opinion the raked stage is an essential."

DONALD WOLFIT, C.B.E.

Raked Rostrums—Not Raked Stages

"The rake referred to does not mean a raked stage but sets which use raked rostrums in the way that they were used in *Tiger at the Gates*—not to rake the whole stage but in order to get various different levels."

NORMAN MARSHALL.

A Sop to the Stalls

“I think that Mielziner is absolutely right.

In any well-designed production the floor is a considerable portion of the stage picture and can be used to heighten the effect of the design. The old idea of raking a stage is a very sound one: it is a cheating device that enables the stalls to share to a certain degree what the upper parts of the theatre get. In fact the raked stage is based on the discovery that the snob division of a theatre into cheap and expensive seats is completely topsy-turvy. There is no doubt that the best place to view any play from, for the stage picture, the choreographic effect of the actor's movements, the patterns thrown by the lights and shadows, and, of course, for the clearest acoustics, is the back of the gallery. The front row of the stalls is where you hear worst, and have the illusion most mercilessly shown up. The idea of raking a stage is a partial compensation to the stalls for all they lose in paying higher prices.”

PETER BROOK.

Talking of Something very Different

“I think there is the possibility of a confusion here. It seems to me that when anyone talks of a *sharply angled* stage, or of *either fully or partially raked sets*, they may be talking of something very different from what we mean by the traditional raked stage. I would gather that what they meant was a special, ramped floor to the scene, put in for the occasion of a particular play and to be removed when that play was finished.

Such a sloping acting-area has of course its special effect: something similar was used in the production last year of *Troilus and Cressida* at the Schiller-Theater, Berlin, where the acting-area was not only sloped, but sloped in a curve so that it got steeper as it went back—ending nearly vertical.

As may be conceived, this sort of sloped acting-area may have its special effect for a particular production. But it involves something very different from a return to the traditional raked stage where *the whole stage floor* was gently, but permanently, raked. Indeed, the sloping scene-floor probably calls more urgently than ever for a *flat* stage to stand upon—because the supports underneath the slope can be more easily made if they can rise vertically from a horizontal base, instead of having to be carefully shaped so as to stand upon a rake.

It might be added that in a scene with a ramped floor, normal scenery may still be set as usual on the flat stage roundabout, with the ramped floor built inside it and free of any naturalistic connection with it.”

The majority opinion seems therefore to be in favour of a sloping acting area, provided that the parts of the stage on which scenery is set can be kept flat. H.C.

Mr. Southern is Director of Theatre Planning Dept., British Centre of the International Theatre Institute. All the others write with considerable experience of production and acting. Mr. Fernald is Principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Mr. Martin Brown is Director of the British Drama League.

* * *

ON THE TRAIL OF DRAMA IN AUSTRALIA

The following is an extract from a letter from Miss Pat Harris, of Westcott Evening Institute, who has recently arrived in Australia. It is reprinted by kind permission from “Spotlight,” journal of the Swindon and District Theatre Guild.

“I have been trying to track down a Dramatic Society which I can join. Surprising though it may seem, I haven't tracked one down yet. My first enquiries were at the Council for Adult Education which I thought was a logical enough choice, but they didn't agree with me. They directed me to the Victorian Drama League. I found it eventually after going down a dirty cobbled street called Turnbull Alley which seemed to be the back entrance to several cafés. Just as I was giving up hope, I saw a green wooden door with a card pinned on to it with V.D.L. in small black letters. I was beginning to feel like a Girl Guide on a tracking expedition but, undaunted, not to be out-done, etc., etc., I opened it—but all I could see was a kitchen and some wooden stairs with some dish-cloths draped on the bannister drying. I couldn't see any connection between these surroundings and the Victorian Drama League and I began to think that maybe all those years spent following knotted grass and chalk arrows had been wasted. I had just decided to be un-English and admit defeat when I saw a girl coming down the stairs—the first human being I had seen since I entered Turnbull Alley, incidentally. In answer to my enquiry she said with some vigour that it had taken her half an hour to find it and that it was the Victorian Drama League. I went up, and all I can say is that any similarity between the Victorian Drama League and the British Drama League is purely coincidental. It consists of a moth-eaten library and two pleasant but vague girls who look like undergraduates on a vacation job. After all that, they knew there *was* a Dramatic Society in Northcote, but they just couldn't lay their hands on the address. So for the moment I've lost interest.”

THE LITTLE THEATRE, MELBOURNE

The first live theatre to be built in Melbourne, Australia, for more than 25 years: what a wonderfully significant sign of Melbourne's cultural expansion and progress.

The new £50,000 "Little Theatre" building being erected in South Yarra, which will open in June of this year, is the factual answer to all the pessimists who sighingly ejaculate that the theatre in Melbourne is dying, or is dead. It proves that Australians are gradually leaning to overseas habits, where the theatre is recognised as a necessary amenity of town and city life, and has an important place in the community.

The Melbourne Little Theatre's entrance into the production field was an epoch making one in modern play presentation in Australia.

Besides developing theatre going, and pioneering many theatrical ventures, the "Little" has kept actors acting, been a proving ground for young talent and an incentive to Australian playwrights.

All this has not been achieved overnight, or without a struggle. The Melbourne "Little Theatre" has not always sailed along without failures, setbacks or worries.

The idea germinated during a conversation at the Green Room Club, Melbourne. It had been in the mind of English-born Brett Randall for a number of years. Brett Randall had filled almost every position in many theatres in the United Kingdom by the time he came to Australia in 1925.

By 1931 he determined to form his own "Little Theatre" although he had no money, players, or wealthy backers.

Nothing could shatter his wonderful faith—not even the fact that it was during Australia's lean years, and entertainment was a poor investment.

Brett Randall's dream became a reality when he and another visionary Hal Percy decided to join forces. They planned a theatre, and eventually rented the Fawkner Park Kiosk, previously used for dancing.

To augment the Building Fund they staged their initial play, *The Fanatics*, by Miles Malleson, at Central Hall. The play was a success and the company moved into the Kiosk.

Scenery, props, etc., were designed, made and painted by members of the company—one of the many things that has kept the "Little" together and developed its wonderful spirit.

After the second production a Little Theatre School of Dramatic Art was established. Operated by a unit of the "Little Theatre" it covered every branch of acting technique.

The theatre prospered, but membership had to be limited owing to limited seating.

Besides the monthly productions, which played three nights each week, the "Little Theatre" conducted Sunday Play Readings.

However, in 1933, after eighteen productions, the Kiosk became no longer available. Hal Percy, unable to maintain his family on Little Theatre finances, left to enter the field of Radio. But not the least bit disheartened, Brett Randall quickly began looking for a permanent home. He found this at St. Chad's, a vacant little church in South Yarra.

The Company moved to its new home and opened triumphantly in 1934 with "Von Morgeus bis zum Mitternacht," an expressionistic drama by George Kaiser. It was a great success, and the "Little Theatre" was really on its way.

By 1936 Little Theatre productions were so popular that the Commercial Managements invited Brett Randall to present his productions in their theatres. There was no doubt that the "Little Theatre" was meeting the growing competition from films and radio.

1940 was hailed as a record year for the "Little Theatre." But the War made serious inroads and even threatened to force its closure.

However, Brett Randall retained his faith and kept his company together by distributing handbills in the letter-box of every home within a radius of three miles of the theatre. For three years he was known throughout South Yarra as "Mr. Handbills."

Audiences maintained their attendance and at one of the leanest periods during the War, the Melbourne "Little Theatre" was the only theatre in Australia presenting a continuous programme of dramatic presentations.

It continued to prosper when Miss Irene Mitchell succeeded Henry Allen as stage manager. Miss Mitchell and Brett Randall continued to run the theatre with ever-growing success.

Soon after the War they were joined by Peter Randall, Brett's son, and a foundation member since 1931. The three worked together as a solid team of Directors.

The theatre then embarked on a series of Studio, later called Intermediate Productions. These were later abandoned.

Between 1944 and 1947, the "Little Theatre" produced the magazine *Foyer* which published news from theatres all over the world.

Plays were sent on tours all over Victoria, and a large number of artists were helped along the road to success in Australia and overseas. In two recent productions at professional theatres in Melbourne, the Princess and the Comedy, the casts included at least twelve well-known actors from the "Little Theatre." During last year the "Little" presented a minimum of 130 actors and actresses on its own stage.

Throughout the years, the Theatre has presented many Australian premieres, and brought light and heavy productions to Melbourne. One of its greatest successes was the world premiere of *Enduring as the Camphor Tree* by Australian playwright Russell Oakes.

Since 1945 Australian premieres presented at the "Little" have included such well-known successes as *Exercise Bowler*, *All My Sons*, *Sleep of Prisoners*, *Happy as Larry*, *Now Barabbas*, *The Cocktail Party*, and more recently, *Figure of Fun*, *The Living Room*, *The Burning Glass*, *The Prisoner*, *Winter Journey*, *Waters of the Moon*, *Serious Charge* and *The Secret Tent*.

A Theatre Players Club was formed in 1947, and has been functioning successfully with a membership of over 200. The Club Committee arranges parties, picnics and talks for its members who are all "Little Theatre" players.

The "Little" has a fine library service with some 4,000 plays.

Peter Randall has taken over much of his father's work, and has been responsible for many first-class productions. At present, all his efforts are necessarily concentrated on the building of the new theatre.

The present subscription list for "Little" productions is 2,500, with a long waiting list of would-be subscribers for the new theatre.

The completion of the new building will make it possible for the "Little Theatre" to continue its theatrical experiments and further the interests of Australian Drama. The theatre will have a seating capacity of 410, with modern continental seating, well equipped dressing rooms with showers, the latest switchboard and lighting equipment, and an attractive foyer and offices.

It will be possible to run a stock company of professional actors. With better stage facilities, Miss Mitchell plans to do a series of Shakespearean productions. The Studio presentations will be revived, the school will be able to operate again, and it is hoped to run a special Children's Theatre.

The name of the new theatre won't be changed. It will still be the "Little," but only in name, not little in the breadth of its theatrical horizons.

LESTER S. QUARE.

BOOK REVIEW

"Drama Festivals & Adjudications" by Christopher Ede.
(Jenkins) 5/-.

This latest addition to the Practical Stage Handbooks is one of the best of the series, as it should be, since the author knows his subject thoroughly from considerable personal experience.

The book is a model of sound, practical advice, intelligently and attractively written. It is thoroughly interesting even to those amateurs who are not concerned with drama festivals, and many critics might profitably study Mr. Ede's analysis of adjudication. To those who perform in drama festivals there is much valuable advice, and to those responsible for organising and conducting the festivals, the book is a necessity.

At the price it is a charitable gift.

P.C.