TABS

MARCH 1965 VOL. 23 No. 1

TABS

VOL. 23 NO. 1 MARCH 1965

Published in the interests of the Theatre by

The Strand Electric and Engineering Co. Ltd.

29 King Street, Covent Garden, London, W.C.2

Strand Electric (Australia) Pty, Ltd.
212 Graham Street, Port Melbourne
Victoria

Strand Electric Limited
261 Davenport Road, Toronto 5
Ontario

CONTENTS

Cover picture: Playhouse Nottingham, photo by courtesy of the contractors, W. J. Simms Son & Cooke Ltd.

The Theatres' Advisory Council

Nearly four years ago, against a background of theatre closures and of new theatres built, or in project, incorporating bad mistakes, the Theatres' Advisory Council (TAC) was formed. Under the chairmanship of the late Lord Esher the various organisations representing the players, the managements, both commercial and civic, the technicians and other interested bodies came together as delegates in Council every two months. At the end of last month the TAC, in conjunction with the Association of Municipal Corporations, held a conference in London on " Civic Theatres—Their Housing and Administration ". In consequence we have taken this opportunity to devote this issue of TABS to Civic Theatres.

In doing so we are aware that some of our readers may well think that recent issues have been overdoing the subject of theatre planning and architecture. They may be pining for advice on lighting the stage, for example. However, we hope that they will note that we do not rely on architects' views alone, and in this issue there is criticism and informed advice on this subject from at least two important men of the theatre—the users of the buildings.

It should not be necessary to excuse this devotion to planning at this moment of our history. If the buildings and their equipment, be they full blown theatres or school halls, are not right, then nothing else can be right, and buildings, even temporary ones, have a way of lasting a very long time indeed. On the other hand, if our drama, opera, and ballet is badly lit, then this can be remedied in time. The truth is that if there is one thing the present activity proves, it is that in a world full of tough problems to solve, a theatre building presents one of them. We would, therefore, be failing in our duty if we did not use our special position to further the exchange of information and discussion on this subject.

* * *

How many seats? *or* What chance have I got?

Just after her appointment at the Ministry of Works Miss Jennie Lee said, " I am one of the privileged minority who has been able to go to concerts and opera. And that is privileged, as you know. It's not just a question of being able to pay for the seats, it's often knowing someone who can get the tickets for you." Never mind the political affiliations, there is something very significant in this for all of us who work for, or in, the theatre. Miss Lee said that in her view not enough was going on outside London and that even in London it was only a privileged fraction of the people who would like to go who could get to, say the National Theatre. Those of us who know the ropes may manage to see the Olivier *Othello*, the Callas *Tosca* or *My Fair Lady* before it has run a year or two and so on, but what of the others. Potentially the National Theatre is likely to have a lot of people wanting to see most of its productions so how are they tackling the problem. Investigation of box office and booking systems proceeds but what of the seats themselves. Mr. Tynan, lecturing at the Royal Society of Arts last year, said that he had in mind two theatres of 600 and 800 seats respectively. Six hundred seats may be all right for the smaller, experimental theatre, but 800 in the other house is far too small. Already as these lines are written the National Theatre has another winner. How are we going to see it?

It is one thing to talk of 500 seats or so for a civic theatre, though even here thoughts about larger capacities are creeping in, but the National Theatre's home in London, drawing an audience from our greatest city in the most populous corner of the island

must have a large capacity. What of the visitors from the rest of the country and from abroad? How are they going to get in?

One means of obtaining a large capacity is to adopt the peninsular or thrust stage of Chichester, and indeed the transfer of productions to Chichester does help, but this form would not suit much of the repertoire, one reason being that scenery obstinately refuses to die, indeed at the moment, in spite of all this *open stage and the actor is the key* talk, productions carry more and more elaborate décor.

It is obvious that one of the National Theatre's auditoriums must be designed for a proscenium stage convertible when required to an open end stage. Nottingham and Oxford have shown this to be possible without much difficulty; the real problem arises over seating capacity. Architects nowadays regard a theatre seating about 800 as a large theatre and prefer to aim at something less. Then again it is claimed that the auditorium feels dreadful when half full, this last being an argument directed against the idea of an occasional large theatre here and there in the provinces. But there must be some large theatres to take visiting companies and surely it is not impossible to convert a large auditorium into a small one. Any house designed on more than one level has an easy solution. A circle is put out of bounds and possibly, but not necessarily, screened off. There are simple lighting methods to assist in the reduction of apparent size of auditorium—for example, a decorative row of blinders along the circle front and no one would know there was an empty circle.

The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in days gone by is said to have re-spaced its rows of stalls seats according to demand. Reduction is no problem, what of the large auditorium itself. Two questions arise, maximum distance from the stage and sight lines. Distance from the stage gives rise to the difficulties of hearing and appreciating subtleties of visual expression. It is time that the bogey of hearing was dismissed once and for all. Sound reinforcement is perfectly possible and there is no excuse for the crudity with which it is usually done in the theatre. If one can hear with ease then the barrier of distance is greatly reduced. The difficulty of seeing could be dismissed if more light were used. Not more lanterns, but less use of dimmers to reduce their intensity. Just as an actor must speak out for a large audience so the lighting man must forswear dimmers in the lower levels; obfuscation with degrees of darkness must be replaced by illumination. The switchboard could have a cut-out automatically to raise in proportion the plotted levels of stage lighting when the full auditorium was in use. What total capacity should be aimed at in these show houses? At least 1,600 even for drama. Drury Lane, as redesigned in the early twenties, seats 2,238 in a not too unreasonable relationship to the stage. Surely today we could cut out the gallery, with its 435 seats, take out a further 200 for good measure and tackle the remainder with every hope of success.

Photo: Philips, Holland

A YEAR AT NOTTINGHAM

by John Neville

Interviewed by Martin Carr

In our December 1963 issue we published an article by Peter Moro, F.R.I.B.A., in which he outlined his expectations for the Playhouse, Nottingham, which he had designed and was then about to open. This theatre had been built with an attempt to include a reasonable but not extravagant scale of facilities. Whether or not the building can strictly be called a Civic Theatre, due to the rigorous rate of repayment insisted on by the Nottingham Council, there is no doubt that it represents a first-class example of the type of building we should expect to be covered by the term. John Neville is the resident director at Nottingham and is, of course, a distinguished actor as well. Martin Carr is the Hon. Secretary of the A.B.T.T. and has had considerable experience in stage management.

Martin Carr: *The first thing which comes to mind is the question of seating capacity. Do you feel with 750 seats that you have the right number? Would you like more or less seats?*

John Neville: First of all, if I may take the time, might I preface my remarks by saying and emphasising that in no sense would I like it to be thought as a result of this interview that I want to tear this

place to pieces. I admire a great deal of what the architect has done and I enjoy working here. With regard to the seating capacity, I would certainly like more seats. I think that in any theatre nowadays one has to be realistic and recognise that even if one is in an artistic sweat shop there is a need for the number of seats that will bring in the monetary return. That is to say, one does not always want to be thought to be just resting on subsidy, much though it is needed. I would like to see in the region of 900 seats because, when you've got something that is a box office success, it can help pay, not only for a less popular play, but for a less popular night. If we are playing, as at the moment, *Treasure Island*, which is capacity business, we could run it even longer into say February if we had more seats simply because, although by then perhaps the Monday and Tuesday audiences would be getting lower, we would still be packing them in at the week-end.

What sort of capacity do you average?

It is difficult to say what we've been doing this season, but in our first season we did an average of about 86 per cent, which is phenomenally high for any theatre in the country. Over this season, at a rough guess, I should think we are in the high 70's.

If you had a larger capacity obviously your percentage would then drop. Would this be damaging in the sense that with empty seats audiences would feel that perhaps business wasn't so successful?

Yes. I think this in a sense proves that percentages are not always the thing to aim for. What one is aiming for in this particular kind of theatre is to widen the audience over the region that it is supposed to serve.

How do you feel the auditorium works for its 750 seats?

I think it works extremely well. I am looking at this from the audience point of view. It is very comfortable indeed to sit in, and it appears to be a much larger building than one might expect for 750 seats. There is ample room between the rows for you to walk through without people having to disturb themselves unnecessarily. It's really very comfortable. Everything is spacious here, including the foyer. The auditorium I think works very well for the audience.

If you had your 900 seats with these standards of comfort, would you lose in contact between actors and audience?

In my previous remarks about having 900 seats I was not confining myself to this shape of auditorium. What I was saying was that in a theatre of this kind, ideally speaking, I would like as many as 900 seats.

As an actor how do you find it to play here?

I must say in all honesty that along with a lot of modern thought I do not like two different levels. I lean heavily toward having one auditorium level for many reasons; not the least of which is to

avoid any impression of different classes going in through different entrances. In this particular theatre I think that the two levels are too far apart. This is something that worries me constantly as an actor and as a director here. I have to remember as an actor that my line of sight, of playing, has to be pitched somewhere between these two levels, and they are very wide apart. You feel as an actor that you're playing in a theatre that has stalls and a gallery with no circle, and one has to learn to play to this.

The term " adaptable " is frequently used in connection with this theatre to describe the stage arrangements. Do you feel that the two forms of staging available to you do provide true adaptability, or would you say that the one is simply an extension of the other?

I think that you're putting me on a spot here, but to be quite honest, I think it is an extension. It is not true adaptability, but I do not think that the architect should be blamed for this at all. I don't think it was meant to be anything more than an extension of the proscenium arch. In fact, I think I am the only director that has worked here and used the full extension on both lifts.

Have you used the apron by itself with only a backing at the proscenium line?

As near as possible. I used the full apron in a play called *The Mayor of Zalamea* and I am going to do so again in *Richard II*. In such cases I have everything set very far down stage. The line of scenery that we will use in *Richard II* comes very near the proscenium opening and therefore pushes the actors forward into the auditorium.

Do you have any preference for either form?

What we do in this building is to try and use what we have been given and exploit it in a variety of ways. As for matters of preference, I like the open stage.

Is that preference as actor or as director.

It is as both, but I suppose first of all as an actor, which is the way I first learned to use it. Years ago I worked several times at the Edinburgh Festival in the Assembly Hall—the hall from which Sir Tyrone Guthrie garnered the ideas which resulted in Stratford, Ontario, which then led to Chichester, a less good example of that form. I like working in this way, particularly for Elizabethan plays.

In the proscenium form, do you find that the shape of this auditorium and the wide proscenium lessens the feeling of physical division between stage and audience?

I think that the shape of the auditorium goes a long way toward cutting out the division. However, having settled for the drum shape of auditorium, the people who sit on the perimeter of the drum have a less good seat than those who are in the centre for obvious reasons. The sight line problems start coming in. They're not insuperable,

but they are there, particularly if you use a proscenium type production.

How do you find the acoustics, and do you find they change with the form of staging?

I think they do. From the experience we've had, if one is using just the proscenium with neither of the forestage sections, if an actor is in absolute profile to the audience, and therefore speaking towards the wings, there is a slight danger of inaudibility. We have to allow for it and we have to do what an actor should always do, speak clearly, articulately. When you come forward onto the two forestages I think there is practically no problem at all.

Are the loges in the side walls of the auditorium popular?

No, they are not popular and they're used only as a last resort.

How do you find the decoration of the auditorium? Do you find the place is gay enough with its lighting slots, and how about the effect when the house lights are out?

I have become convinced that all this works to a good end. When I first saw the auditorium I was shocked, because, I suppose, I like red plush and the warmth and colour that goes with the conventional decorations. But we find that this auditorium decor does work. The black walls when unlit help to concentrate on the proscenium opening and on what is going on on the stage. When all the small lights behind the black slats are alight there is a feeling of gaiety, even though the auditorium is black. There is a feeling of presence about it when a performance is about to begin.

Just to finish a detail in the auditorium, how do you find the seats?

I like them. I find them very comfortable and we've not had any complaints about them either.

Going on to the stage, have you any comments about the size?

Well, it is a very good size really. Being a realist about this and thinking of budgets, of course what worries us considerably is that the size of scenery we have to use is enormous and therefore this puts our budget up. This should not be taken as a criticism of the stage, but it just so happens that in having to think so hard about budgets and cost, as we do at the moment because we are not in good financial straits, it does worry me about the size of scenery that we have to use. What I think ought to be said here, going off on a slightly different tack, is that although visitors to the theatre think that it's a marvellously big stage, and of course it is, and the wing space is quite big, especially on the one side, we still have not got anywhere near enough storage space for working in repertoire*

* " Repertoire ": The system of running several productions simultaneously instead of weekly or fortnightly rep in which productions vanish after a daily presentation for a set period.

as we do. This is something that I think architects must remember, although in this instance repertoire working was outside the brief for Peter Moro. I do think that it is now being demonstrated that repertoire working is the coming policy for the provinces, and I for one firmly believe in it.

How many productions do you keep in the repertoire?

We probably keep in more than most people. We've had as many as six in at once, which is an awful lot.

Do you find the lighting layout you have adequate for repertoire working?

No, I do not. I think it leaves a lot to be desired. Obviously, the very fact that you work in repertoire reduces the ratio of how well you can light a particular show, because of the demands that other shows make on the equipment. We have adopted the system in which certain of the lights are fixed and are never moved, and then we have a small number which we do move from production to production. The pressure of work here is so great that one simply cannot saddle the electrics department with moving the whole shoot for every show, just before the " half " every night. This is sheer impossibility.

Have you any solution to this problem? Would you like to see an increase in the number of lanterns?

We do have a lot of lanterns here, and I don't think it is a question of numbers; it is a question of where they are put. This is something on which I would challenge the architect very strongly. I do think that architects say, " I want this shape and nothing must get in the way." I think that the lights could have been hung in different places in the auditorium, positions which he, in fact, would not allow.

This, I take it, is a criticism of the ceiling lighting drum?

Yes. I think this is not a good place to hang the majority of our front of house stage lighting. Most of our useful lights are concentrated in that lighting drum, and really we can only light the tops of the actors' heads from there, particularly if we are using the two forestage lifts.

I imagine you also suffer from a lack of variety—all your lanterns concentrated in a very small area, and all at near enough the same angle?

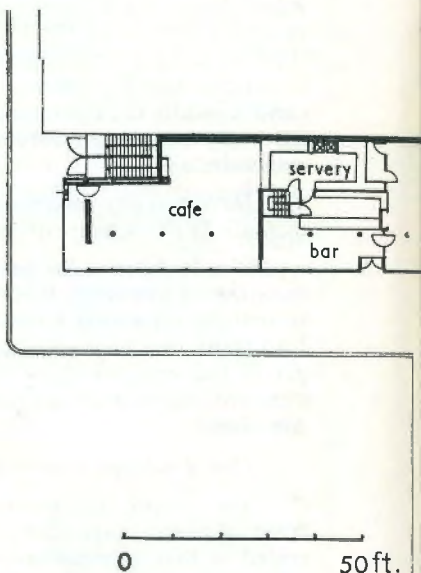
Indeed we do. I also feel that the drum is a little obtrusive for the audience in the rear part of the circle. When alight the lanterns can be seen through the slats of the drum, and the whole thing is only just out of the sight line.

Whilst on the subject of lighting, there is a big debate as to whether one should have a lighting bridge on the stage or not. Some

people say it clutters the downstage area too much. Have you found that your lighting bridge is a useful acquisition?

It is most certainly useful from the lighting point of view, but I must say I don't know the answer to this problem because we have often found that we want to hang things other than lights in that area of the stage, and the bridge blocks anything further downstage than No. 4 line.

There is a feeling that this kind of bridge must really be part of the auditorium, incorporated in the top of the proscenium arch itself. Things like the fire curtain and house tabs must fly higher, past it.

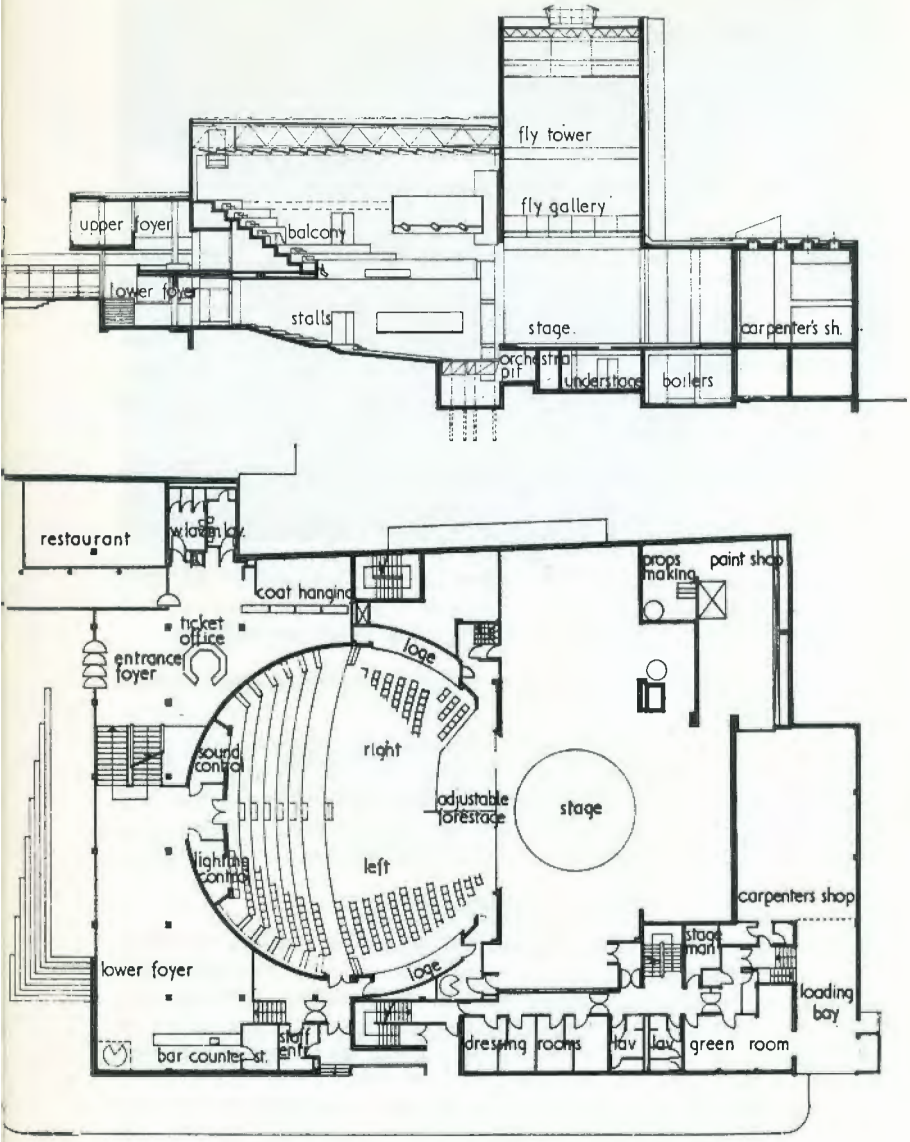


Plan and Section, Nottingham Playhouse

I agree entirely with that, and we would like it continued at the sides to provide the perch positions which are lacking here and for which we long.

Do you find the revolve useful?

We've made a great deal of use of the revolve, though it ought to be bigger in diameter by at least 4 ft., and further downstage than it is. However, I think we have come to the point now after a year when perhaps we've outgrown the revolve a little, although I'm not saying we won't use it ever again.


fly tower
fly gallery
upper foyer
balcony
lower foyer
stalls
stage
carpenter's sh.
orchestra pit
understage
boilers
restaurant
wardrobe
coat hanging
ticket office
entrance foyer
loge
right
sound control
adjustable forestage
stage
lighting control
left
props making
paint shop
carpenters shop
stage mgr
loading bay
lower foyer
loge
staff ent.
bar counter
dressing rooms
lav
lav
green room

Originally wagon stages were to have been installed. Do you ever regret that they were dismissed in favour of the revolve?

I think that a wagon system can be very useful indeed providing the wing space is big enough to take it, and I would prefer the system to be inset flush with the stage, and not surface mounted. Our wing space here is not really large enough, and the wagons would take up much needed stage storage space.

Do you find the flying facilities adequate?

That all seems to work very well. There is one big disadvantage —the fly tower does not go far enough back. In this theatre the upstage area is roughly proscenium height and we can't fly anything there. We have great trouble in getting our skycloth, for example, far enough upstage. As a director, I would also like to have a quicker-moving front curtain.

How about your other backstage facilities, the production departments for instance?

These seem to work well on the whole, though again we do get into trouble with storage in the workshops, and these could be bigger. For instance, the carpenter finishes working on something and then he has to get it moved into the paint shop, and the paint shop gets crowded because the carpenter gets ahead of the painter. I do not think that either the workshop or the paint shop are big enough, and there is a shortage of space for property making.

Do you have any noise problem with the workshops being so close to the stage?

We do indeed. This is quite serious, especially in a modern theatre that has just been built. I think that it was meant to be soundproof, but this was probably one of the economies that had to be made during the building. We can hear all the electrical drills and stuff going on when we are rehearsing, through the roller door.

How about wardrobe and dressing-rooms?

The wardrobe facilities are far too small, and I think that it is just plain damn silly if you are building a new theatre not to put windows in the dressing-rooms. We are civilised human beings just like everyone else even though we are actors. You know, a lot of belly-aching went on in the old theatre about us taking our clothes off in dungeons and in cells, which were next to the boiler room, and you come into a brand new theatre and find that the dressing-rooms haven't got windows. It's absolutely stupid. I mean, one floor of dressing-rooms is above ground and it is simply an architect's whim that there are no windows on that particular wall. Also, we have not enough dressing-rooms for repertoire working, and actors are always having to move their make-up, etc., from room to room.

John Neville and Ursula Smith in "The Birdwatcher" at the Playhouse, Nottingham.

Is your rehearsal room adequate?

No, not adequate at all, because it in no way resembles the size of the stage; even remotely. If you are going to build a new theatre there is no point in including a rehearsal room unless it resembles the size of the acting area. This one is much too small. We use it, and it saves us going outside the building which saves money.

In these working conditions would you like more than one rehearsal room?

Oh, yes. This would be a luxury of course, but there are often occasions when we have more than one rehearsal going on at the same time.

How do your audiences react to the general scheme of foyer accommodation, bars, and so on?

I think that the facilities here that are presented to the public are probably the best in England. I think that the foyer space is magnificent. It's comfortable, it's spacious, you can walk about in the interval and discuss the play, you can come before the show and meet people. It's a nice place to meet. You can get drinks easily, coffee, the lot. It is warm, and I think it is absolutely wonderful.

But I gather there is a shortage of office accommodation?

Yes. For the size of organisation that we are, some eighty people, and committed to repertoire playing, the sheer administration does become rather big, the office accommodation is therefore totally inadequate. This, I would again repeat, is not the fault of the architect. I think he worked to his brief and he was told to make that number and that size of office. There is certainly no Parkinson's Law here, but I think his instructions came from people who worked in the old theatre, where we did have one small office for the director, one for the front of house manager, and that was about it. But here, you see, it's a vastly different theatre. What one has constantly to remind people, both ourselves, the people who work here, and the public, is that this place may have grown out of the old theatre, but it is a very, very different theatre.

From what you have seen during the past year, do you feel that the new building is a draw in itself?

Yes. I think partially it is drawing people. It must be; because the percentage of attendance we are doing here is so high and so far in advance of what we did in the old theatre which only had 460 seats. There the percentage was often frankly low. Ironically though, I think that the building alienates certain people, certain people that I would like to see in here. And I mean, for want of a better word, the horrid expression, the working class.

It is too sophisticated for them?

Yes. Certain people like this and, of course, once you get inside the building it is very comfortable. It is marvellous to be in, but the people looking in through the glass from outside, initially, before they've even visited the place, think perhaps that it is too " posh ".

* * *

How many seats? Again!

Under the heading " The National Theatre out of London " the theatres they will visit in March/April were announced in the press. The seating capacities of these theatres provide an interesting postscript to our editorial on page 3.

Kings Theatre, Glasgow,	1,841
Coventry Theatre, Coventry	2,010
Hippodrome, Bristol	1,993
Theatre Royal, Nottingham	1,531

The temporary London Home at the Old Vic incidentally has approximately 1,000 seats.

THEATRE PLANNING

by Basil Dean C.B.E.

We have asked Mr. Dean, whose distinguished and long career in the theatre uniquely fits him for the task, to review the A.B.T.T.'s Theatre Planning in particular and to give his views on the subject in general.*

The Association of British Theatre Technicians, who were the original sponsors of these information sheets, came into being as a result of the many mistakes that had been made in the designing and equipping of new theatres since the last war. Knowledge of the technical requirements of the modern theatre had been accumulating during the previous decades, most of it due to developments in electrical and mechanical engineering, although some was based upon the hard-won experience of practical theatre men. But the sources of this knowledge were scattered and, when the time came, they were not tapped or, if they were, certainly not at the right time and in the right sequence. In view of the rising demand for civic theatres it became obvious that means must be found of collating information on the many branches of this complex subject, and placing it at the disposal of the architects so as to cut down the incidence of error in the future.

Theatre Planning is a compendium of this knowledge drawn from many sources, all of it set out in precise technical terms. There is a refreshing absence of jargon, though I must confess to a chuckle when I read the description of a dressing-room as " a room for actors and other performers who require provision for applying make-up and for changing into costume ". Its publication is a complete justification for the foundation of A.B.T.T. However, just as the possession of an Oxford Dictionary does not justify a claim to authorship, so this publication is not the whole of the story by any means. In other words, the application of theory to practice in building a new theatre is subject to many imponderables that do not reveal themselves at first sight, nor even after careful study. Because the theatre is a living, sentient thing human factors often influence fluctuating and sometimes contradictory decisions.

Sins of Omission

The tale of past errors and omissions in this field is almost legendary. Two historic examples of forgetfulness may be quoted here. When the Lyceum Theatre was rebuilt after a disastrous fire in 1834, Beazely, the architect, was so careless of essential requirements that he forgot to provide a staircase to the gallery. The omission was not discovered until the theatre was virtually ready to open, so a wooden staircase had hastily to be built for the ascent to " the gods ".

---

* *120 pages A4 SfB size fully illustrated with many photographs and specially drawn diagrams, published by the A.B.T.T.—9 Fitzroy Square, W.1. Price 1 guinea post free.*

Similar forgetfulness was disclosed years later when W. S. Gilbert provided the means for the building of a theatre for his friend, John Hare. This was the Garrick Theatre. In this case it was the dressing-rooms that were forgotten until after the site had been cleared and building begun.

In recent times one supposes that each new project would have been approached with at least a determination to profit by past mistakes. So far the record discloses a distressing reluctance to do just this. Indeed, the persistence of shortcomings, first in one particular, then in another, is puzzling and invites enquiry. It is as though the theatre refuses to give up its secrets to all save those who live its life and learn how to present its mysteries. But there is no need to pursue that mystical line of enquiry. Lack of experience supplies the main reason.

During the nineteenth century the theatre reigned supreme everywhere, careless of outside competition, its needs fully understood by those who managed its concerns. The coming of the music-hall challenged that hegemony. Then twenty years or so later the cinema arrived to triumph over both theatre and music-hall. A long night of economic surrender followed as the provincial theatre fell into disfavour, its shabby surroundings and dull, dispirited acting ceasing to charm the oncoming generation. Meanwhile, motion pictures were no longer being shown in converted theatres or music-halls, but in picture palaces embodying all the latest American ideas of comfort, including soft music from " mighty Wurlitzers " that rose and sank into the orchestra pit, and carpets that bounced underfoot like feather mattresses. In such circumstances the building of commercially viable theatres in the provinces came to an end, and it is unlikely ever to be resumed under private enterprise, save perhaps in cases where a theatre is included in a complex of commercial redevelopment to meet the requirements of local authority. Whether the spirit of theatre can survive in an atmosphere of computers, telephones, typewriters and car-parks has yet to be proved. The result so far achieved at the Royalty Theatre, Kingsway, does not encourage one to think so.

Opposite Requirements

The cinema boom provided the architects with some much-needed experience. Unfortunately, it proved to be the wrong sort of experience so far as the legitimate theatre was concerned. The cinema was calling for a head-on view of the screen for each person, or as nearly so as was possible, to avoid distorted viewing. Furthermore, since visual comfort is, roughly speaking, in inverse ratio to the distance from the screen the higher-priced seats had to be placed at the back. In the living theatre the seating requirements are exactly reversed. Under the influence of the cinema design favoured an auditorium rectangular in shape with the screen occupying the greater part of the width at one end, while for the stage all that was needed was a narrow platform with little or no provision for the manipulation of

scenery. Hence the legitimate theatres that were built or reconstructed during this period were given oblong-shaped auditoria, which the actor detests because of the difficulties of projection.

The end of cinema building brought no alternative experience to the theatre architect. The business of housing the repertory movement in converted cinemas and chapels was largely a case of " make-do-and-mend " so far as audience accommodation was concerned, while the " know-how " of the stage was largely forgotten. Even in the commercial theatre technical equipment was gradually whittled down as production requirements in respect of scene-making, painting and fitting passed out of the hands of theatre staffs into those of outside contractors. Concentration of technical knowledge in the hands of a few experts followed, and the facility with which the old stages were worked, their advantages and shortcomings exploited, was lost. Inevitably, therefore, when the new dynamism after the last war found expression in the demand for new theatres the architect was singularly ill-equipped to face the challenge.

At Whose Door

Not all the blame for omissions or changes of plan should be laid at the door of the architect. His client is usually either a committee or trust, the composition of which represents an attempt to reconcile various local interests: civic dignitaries, social consciences, local men of business and enthusiastic amateurs hoping for the financially impossible. These committees may depute one or more of their number to reconcile their conflicting views with what the architect considers to be feasible with the means at his command. Sometimes the director of the theatre is appointed in time to look after these matters for them. But his position is a difficult one, since he has to steer a course between the competing demands of the members and the architect hoping, at the same time, to obtain the inclusion of some at least of his own ideas. This calls for qualities of tact, firmness and authority in dealing with committees that the average director does not always possess. If the director is changed after plans have been completed, as happened at Nottingham, the new man's ideas upon technical matters may be different from those of his predecessor, which leads to a considerable waste of time and money. Sometimes the appointment is not made until a site has been chosen and preliminary plans drawn up, when it is extremely unlikely that the director will be able to secure any major alterations. Young men of enthusiasm initiating new projects, have found themselves passed over in consultation while the theatre was being built. In one such case the young director who had supplied the first impetus for the scheme was not appointed to the post he had made for himself until the theatre had been completed, when, to his astonishment, he found that the auditorium had been so designed that the sides could be opened out to provide a municipal banqueting hall, and there were many technical errors on the stage which severely

handicapped the progress of the enterprise towards full professional achievement.

When the architect is given a list of stage requirements he should at the same time be given compelling reasons for them. Otherwise he is apt to regard the information as part of a rather foolish " mystique ", forgetting that theatre workers often cannot give precise reasons for the demands they make. This inclines him to discount their requests, especially if these should threaten his more showy expenditure in the front of the house. After all, his reputation is not made by designing an efficient stage. If money is short, and that condition is endemic in theatre projects, the tendency is to chop a few feet off here and do without something there, without realising the damage that is being done to the total efficiency. It is true, of course, that ultimately the theatre exists not for the actor but for the audience. In this sense it might be argued that the architect is right to give priority in planning to the auditorium and its accompanying amenities, but the validity of that viewpoint is vitiated as we remember that the audience pays its money to see plays well acted and well presented.

Civic Theatre Amenities

The first thing to be noted about the basic requirements for a civic theatre is that extra provision must be made for amenities, such as promenades where audiences can meet their friends to discuss the plays and matters of local interest, and a restaurant to supply the wants of those coming from a distance. A successful civic theatre will soon attract patrons from a considerable distance away. For that reason it is misleading to advertise a theatre restaurant if the space and facilities provided are those of a roadside café. The amount of custom it can attract will be restricted, as has happened at the Belgrade, Coventry, first of the new civic theatres. For precisely the same reason lavatory accommodation should be on a more adequate scale than is usual in a theatre, and waiting lobbies should be provided. A similar comment applies to cloakroom space. Here the Continental system of one numbered space for each seat in the house should be followed. All of these are essential elements in the creation of that mood of occasion which is the theatre's answer to the competition of the television play in the front parlour.

The shape of the auditorium is a matter for decision between the architect and his clients. Here the architect can ride the hobby-horse of a new idea too hard, so that other things suffer in the mad gallop. Too rigid adherence to an architectural concept may land him in a predicament so far as lines of sight are concerned. The circular auditorium of the new Nottingham Playhouse is a case in point.

Adequate Stage Facilities

On the stage, too, greater facilities must be provided than are considered necessary for the older type of theatre, because presumably the civic theatre will be in constant production. That is the

next fact that has to be faced, and it applies to whatever type of stage may eventually be decided upon. Whereas the size of the auditorium must be governed by the size of the site, so also must the dimensions and equipment of the stage be governed by the demands likely to be made upon it, and not by the estimated amount of money likely to be left over from front-of-house amenities. In commercial language, a theatre that is making and presenting its own productions embraces both the factory where the goods are made (to the author's specification, so to speak) and the shop where they are later sold " for consumption on the premises". Broadly speaking, the factory area should occupy at least one-third of the total site. If this basic fact is not appreciated the manufacturing facilities which the architect has to provide (the stage, workshops for scene-making and painting, wardrobes, rehearsal rooms, etc.) will almost certainly be inadequate, with the result that neglected items such as the cost of transport will hit the finance committee squarely between the eyes when they appear in the first year's balance sheet, by which time it will be too late to alter things. This is what has happened at Coventry, where so much money was spent on front-of-house amenities that not enough was left over to meet the factory requirements. The height of the stage roof had to be kept down, so that scenery cannot be raised out of sight of the stalls, while the inadequacies of the carpenter's shop and the paint-room have resulted in their total abandonment for these purposes. Scenery has now to be made elsewhere, and backcloths painted on the stage, usually at night, because of rehearsals, all of which adds enormously to the production costs.

The stage requirements are really very simple; plenty of space and height, with walls at right angles to each other and free of all obstruction above and on and beneath the stage level. The more completely these simple requirements are met the more efficient the stage will be. A working cellar is essential; but, just as Nature abhors a vacuum, so apparently do the designers of new theatres covet the clear spaces they have created on the drawing-board. Before the theatre is ready to open all kinds of last-minute encroachments are liable to make their appearance on or beneath the stage, especially the under-stage which is a favourite dumping ground for boilers, pipes and what not, that with forethought could have been placed elsewhere.

Stage Machinery a Mixed Blessing

The Germans were the first to bring modern engineering into the theatre. By 1914 they already possessed revolving stages and wagenbühne (waggon-stages), and soon more complex machinery was developed. Now some of their modern stages are so full of mechanical and electrical contrivances that they tend to smother the play rather than to help it. Already we see signs of revolt among the more imaginative artists, who reject the restrictions which the fretwork of steel construction beneath and above the stage places upon design, realising perhaps that the spirit of make-believe that lurks about a

theatre cannot be wooed by machinery alone. It is disconcerting that directors of our new civic enterprises should only now be casting longing eyes at these mechanical aids to efficiency when their German opposite numbers have already begun to question their usefulness. While on this subject a word of warning about the revolving stage. This piece of equipment is obsolescent. Before the last war I brought over an extremely ingenious revolving stage, German patented, which could be laid in four hours and struck in one hour and operated by a portable electric motor. After its successful use in several productions I finally abandoned it because of the compulsion that a revolving stage lays upon the shape of the scenes and the movements of the actors. Plaster domes for use as cycloramas are similarly out of date; they take up too much room, and obstruct the free movement of scenery. I installed a very fine one at the Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, as far back as 1913, but for the reasons I have just given it had to be taken down a few years later. If a cyclorama is asked for it should be made of canvas, hung from the grid and attached to an endless line controlled by an electric motor, so that it can be fully or partially set from either side in a few seconds. Remote control should be in the prompt corner.

Amenities for Actors

Theatre Planning rightly stresses the importance of the provision of natural light and ventilation in dressing-rooms. At Nottingham, the most important of the new theatres, none of the dressing-rooms has any natural light, and all depend for their fresh air upon a system of air ducts fed by a ventilating system. At Coventry the dressing-rooms are so cramped that, upon one occasion of which I have personal knowledge, the leading actor, admittedly of ample build, but not a Falstaff by any means, was forced into the passage outside his room to put on doublet and cloak. One wonders whether the designers of theatres ever pause to reflect how much time the actors of a producing theatre spend in their dressing-rooms. At a modest estimate it must add up to an average of eight hours out of the twenty-four. It seems as though architects or their clients will never learn consideration for the actor. Fifty years ago when the old Actors' Association was campaigning for the reform of conditions back-stage, one of the main planks in its platform was the abolition of underground dressing-rooms. Although mechanical ventilation can now replace the stuffy conditions of those days, it is not the final answer. There are psychological reasons why the actor should be able to get a glimpse of the sky and snuff the fresh air, especially during protracted rehearsals.

The Order of Priorities

What is the order of priorities for local committees in formulating their plans for a civic theatre?

First of all, there is the general line of approach. Too many theatrical enterprises, born of fine words, have died from neglect of

the economic facts of life; so in any preliminary discussion business commonsense must occupy a prominent place—after all it will be the ratepayers' money!—to which we may add a rider, conned from past and present example, that neglect of the basic technical requirements leads in the long run to unsatisfactory and expensive compromise. Although the commercial principles for running a theatre are similar to those that govern any other industry, this fact may properly be held in the background when attention is focussed upon more important matters, such as the theatre's policy, its artistic standards, its functions in relation to the community and so on; but it should never be lost sight of.

Next, there is the question of size. Here I join issue with a statement made in the general introduction to the book that " if a theatre is filled to capacity at week-ends those unable to get in will be diverted to the less popular days of the week, thus filling the theatre more evenly throughout the entire week ". Every experienced manager knows that while some playgoers would return on other days of the week many would not do so. It is generally accepted that, although the seating capacity provides an over-all limit to attendances, lack of size does not have the persuasive effect which this statement suggests.

Too often projects designed to serve the community as Civic Theatres have been initiated in buildings too small for the complete fulfilment of that purpose. There are various reasons for this. To begin with, the differences both in capital and running costs are not in direct proportion to the differences in seating capacity; in other words, the bijou theatre is proportionately more expensive, assuming that normal stage requirements have been fully met in both cases. Next, a small theatre has no chance of putting by useful reserves in times of success. All managements walk a weekly tightrope between success and failure, and the box-office has a very quick pulse. If there is not enough capacity for the storage of success, equally no reserve for failure is possible. There is, too, a risk of the enterprise becoming a coterie theatre, with all the best seats occupied by staunch supporters on their favourite days of the week. Thus, the small theatre imposes a physical limitation upon the increase in the number of its patrons. To be enduringly successful a civic theatre needs the widest popular suffrage. Finally, tiny stages are bad for the actor, cramping his movements and reducing his acting in scale to something approximate to Theatre Royal, Back-Drawing-Room. With these facts in mind the temptation to accept any site, however small and awkward in shape, just because it is on offer at a reasonable price, should be resisted. A theatre seating less than three-hundred people in a city the size of Leicester is an inadequate " point d'appui " in the advance towards popular acceptance of the place civic theatre should occupy in these days of increasing leisure. No city of importance should contemplate the building of a theatre with a seating of less than 700–800.

These remarks do not apply to theatres-in-the-round. Whatever

arguments may be advanced for or against their substitution for more conventional types of theatre, the fact remains that they are of inestimable value in providing facilities for university students to participate in the making of drama as well as in its enjoyment. Personally, I should like to see experimental " do-it-yourself " theatres established in every technical college and secondary school where they do not exist at present. They may not present theatre in the conventional sense, but they do provide acting spaces where drama can both happen and be seen to be happening.

A Success with a Handicap

The opening of the new Nottingham Playhouse was an event of major importance. Here in scope and intention was a full scale civic theatre of the right size, worthy of the city that built it. Already the company has recaptured the audience from its old playhouse and increased their numbers, and the high proportion of young people among them is the most heartening sight of all. Yet local misconception of the fundamental purposes of a civic theatre has continued. High rental charges for such a theatre, calculated to secure amortization of the capital expenditure, impose a financial handicap upon the management, and thus restrict its policy. This is a case of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face, for the eventual sufferers must be the community which the theatre has been built to serve. Furthermore, the procedure is contrary to the intention of the 1948 Act, which was designed to assist playgoing and not to make the running of civic theatres a commercial enterprise.

Finally, I come back to my first thoughts as I sat down to write this review. Although the book seems to have thought of everything, right down to the kitchen stove, in the words of the old advertisement " supplying a long-felt want ", there still remains the risk of mistakes in almost every department, sometimes due to clash of conflicting opinions, sometimes due to the failure to balance the demands of one technical expert with those of another, as, for instance, in the recent refusal of an acoustical expert to allow spotlights to be placed in the only place in the auditorium where they could be fully effective because it might affect the sound. So it seems what is needed for the successful carrying out of any new theatre project is the appointment of an experienced director able to act as an ombudsman not only at the time that the project is first discussed, but to continue with it through the design stages right up to the time the theatre is ready for occupation by the actors.

Phoenix, Leicester—Setting for " All in Good Time."

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES AT LEICESTER

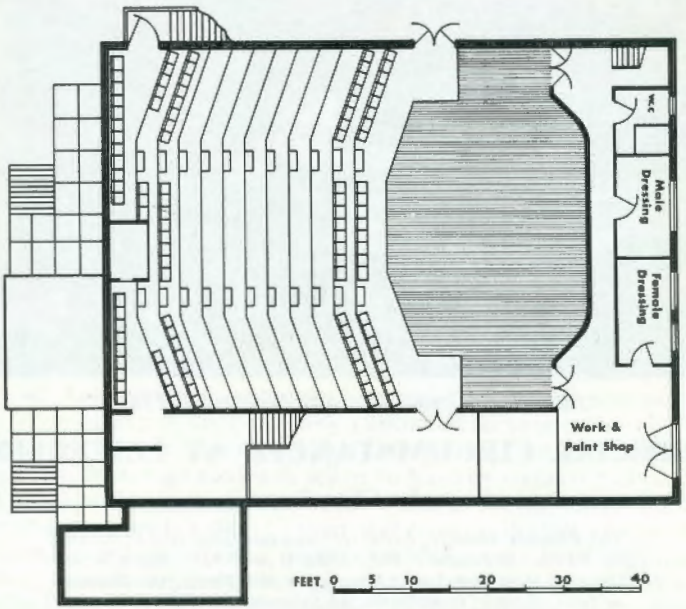
by Clive Perry

The Phoenix Theatre, Leicester, was described and illustrated in TABS, December 1963, when it was very much a new theatre. Now just over a year later Mr. Perry, the theatre's artistic director, contributes the following.

To show that a theatre can be built and put into working operation for a little under thirty thousand pounds is perhaps the main contribution that the Phoenix has made to the present crop of new civic theatres. There is, however, a great danger in that there seems to be too widespread an opinion that simply because one theatre has cost relatively little there is no need to spend larger sums on theatre buildings. Nothing could be further from the truth. The circumstances of the Phoenix are special.

At a time when most new provincial theatres built or being planned are costing around £300,000, the Phoenix offers a notable alternative model, useful for communities which cannot afford to spend £350,000. Deputations from many other towns have already visited the theatre. Of course, as was foreseen, the small size presents some difficulties. There is too little working-room backstage; and the small seating-capacity limits the potential income, so that, if the theatre is to maintain a wide-ranging repertoire and not confine

itself to the cheapest possible productions, it must run at a considerable loss. To increase the size of the building and consequently the seating capacity would not add greatly to the initial cost and certainly would not affect the overheads particularly. The size of the building, as regards Leicester, was unfortunately limited by the amount of land available in a central position in the middle of the town. To remedy the first of these difficulties, workshops have been rented nearby, where scenery is made and stored. The only remedy for the second is subsidies, whether derived from official bodies,



Composite level plan showing revised stage layout at the Phoenix, Leicester.

firms, or private individuals. Two other problems seem more intractable: our actors have much less dressing-room space than we would wish, and our patrons have to queue too long for their coffee and drinks.

The building itself has made an important contribution to the widespread interest in this new enterprise. Designed by the City Architect and his staff in remarkably little time, and built by Messrs. M. J. Gleeson of Sheffield in a mere six months; it must be the quickest-built and cheapest professional theatre erected in Britain for a long time. It has been reported on very favourably in the national, as well as local, press; a lengthy study in the *Architects' Journal* (December 18th, 1963) praised the architects for their skill in making the most of a compact site: "The use of space in such a small building is most exciting—one indication of the obvious care devoted to the design of this theatre." At a cost of only £21,175, the

theatre provides 274 seats (all with adequate knee room and near-perfect sight-lines), a stage larger than the ordinary, three dressing-rooms, three refreshment bars, offices, and other essential accommodation. There was installed on the open stage an 18-foot revolve, which has added much to the flexibility of scenic presentation, and stage-lighting equipment that compares well with most provincial theatres. The total cost of the theatre, including all furniture and fittings, was £29,180.

The theatre opened fifteen months ago on October 8th, 1963, and during its first season played to an average capacity of 90 per cent. During the closed period last year certain structural alterations were made to the stage. The most important of these was the removal of the permanent side wings that had tended to restrict the scope of the designer. The stage when empty of scenery is now completely open. Further improvements in the offing include an office block which will be completed this year at the front of the building, which will serve to ease some of the congestion back stage. The cost of this will be in the region of £2,300. It is proposed to make further alterations to the permanent cyclorama in order that central entrances on stage at varying heights can be brought into use*. The theatre has, since Easter of last year, been presenting plays at three-weekly and four-weekly intervals rather than fortnightly, in response to the demand for seats.

---

* *It appears that the cyclorama has not been found of value as such in this type of stage. It forms an architectural background and is painted accordingly.*

PENULTIMATE THOUGHTS ON THEATRE DESIGN

by Peter Moro F.R.I.B.A.

The crux of theatre design is the relationship between the actor and his audience. This may be obvious, but although it is easy enough to demonstrate by examples where this relationship is such that the vital rapport cannot exist, it is difficult to give a short answer as to how it should be achieved.

Various solutions are put forward from time to time by those who claim that they have solved the problem, but as these solutions tend to differ basically from one another they are only partially useful as a pointer towards the direction in which theatre design should develop. While certain tendencies emerge it is obvious that an ideal and universal solution to theatre design is unlikely to be found. In theatre architecture we have the intricate and unusual situation where one art form is not only housed in another but is strongly dependent for its proper functioning on its architectural setting. Today our theatre is dominated by the producer and, because of this, dramatic presentation has become more idiosyncratic and subject to change and fashion. The striving for

novelty in presentation has its repercussions on theatre design and architects are asked to provide a flexible setting where anything can happen. The architect, who, by the very nature of his profession is concerned with a degree of permanence, must decide for himself whether he should provide a negative setting which imposes no limitation on the production or a strong architectural setting which makes its own contribution to the theatrical experience.

The general impression today is that new forms of theatre are desperately needed and that the theatre as we know it has outlived its usefulness. The conventional proscenium theatre is coming into disrepute with the theatrical *avant garde* and is held to be an encumbrance to future development. What should be put in its place is far from clear. The problem is obscured by the use of misleading technical terms, particularly those referring to the enclosed stage as " picture frame," " proscenium arch," etc. If one could only look at the problem of theatre design in a less emotional way, free from prejudice and association, the tiresome argument as to whether the open stage is preferable to the conventional stage could give way to more constructive thoughts.

Instead of debating the merits and faults of preconceived ideas based on known examples of theatres, it would be far more useful to the architect to hear the basic requirements for today's theatre. He must be told whether the action should take place amongst the audience or separate from it and he must know whether it is important for the audience to encircle the acting area wholly, partially or not at all. It is also of vital importance to the geometry of theatre planning to know whether scenery is to be used or whether it has no place in the modern theatre. All these factors are basic to the planning of a theatre and have a profound effect on its design.

It is fairly safe to say that nobody today wants a peepshow and if the proscenium arch or picture frame means this and suggests a hole in the wall with or without frame, then the sooner we drop these unfortunate terms the better. Even the term " enclosed stage " (as opposed to " open stage ") has little theatrical meaning and merely refers to a stage which, because it uses scenery and is equipped to change and store it, may have to be capable of being sealed off from the auditorium in case of fire.

But theatres designed to face a fully equipped stage still have enormous support from those who believe that the great focusing power of such a theatre is of importance. If one also accepts that a dramatic performance involves a form of confrontation and has, or should have, a directional quality and that some degree of separation between the stage and auditorium (however subtle) is the essence of theatre, one would obviously favour an arrangement where this is possible. The stage which is set apart from the audience also lends magic to the performance and often significance to the most trivial action.

Those who prefer the performance among the audience and support the open stage would argue that this intrusion of the action

into the auditorium is a unique sensation which neither film nor television can provide and which involves the audience more than any other form can do. They claim that an open stage production is essentially 3-dimensional as compared with the 2-dimensional character of television, film and, they say, the proscenium stage.

It is questionable whether in fact the open stage achieves a more 3-dimensional appreciation as each member of the audience from his fixed seat sees no more, except perhaps other parts of the audience opposite, than he does in the conventional theatre form. However, if one accepts the argument that the greater degree of encirclement by the audience of the acting area, made possible by the open stage, gives the performance a 3-dimensional quality and that this gives such a performance its unique character, then it is difficult to understand the enthusiasm shown by the protagonists of the open stage for such theatres as the Mermaid, the Phoenix, Leicester, and the Hampstead Theatre Club. In these theatres the encirclement is nil, the audience face the acting area which is placed across one end of the auditorium. If encirclement is not a requirement and the end stage an acceptable form, I cannot see why a theatre designed on similar lines, but using wing space and flying facilities, is not. After all, what is an end stage but an ill-equipped proscenium stage with a maximum opening. If we add wing space and flying facilities does this necessarily alter the character of such a theatre? If not, it suggests that, and I have often suspected this, the dislike for the proscenium theatre is largely irrational and is based on association with bad examples, and the fact that a great number of proscenium theatres have been designed badly and often by people who do not understand what theatre is about. It is also a fact that a bad proscenium theatre is much worse for acting than a space which has not been designed at all. To conclude from this, however, that we should exchange such theatres for a barn-like space is defeatist and could prove a fatal step.

Whether it is true or not that playwrights, actors and producers are crying out for new forms of theatre in which to present plays, it is certainly a fact that the public's attitude towards the theatre has changed considerably in the last twenty years or so and that this makes it possible to reconsider certain aspects of theatre design. I am sure that a number of important evolutionary steps can now be taken in the planning of our theatres which I think the public are ready to accept. For instance, the modern theatre-goer knows that theatre is neither concerned with reality nor illusion and this change in attitude should open new fields of production techniques and suggest an entirely different approach to scenery design. If we abandon the unequal struggle of producing a semblance of reality we can open up the stage and, if necessary, reveal some of its works, remove the proscenium frame as we know it and waste no more time and money masking this and that with tatty drapes. If we do away with the thirty-foot limit of the masked opening based on old-fashioned ideas and box sets, we have a stage capable of adjust-

ment by the use of light and pieces of stage design and which can expand or contract as desired. This will enable the audience to be arranged in a wider fan than was possible with a conventional box set stage and this will allow a certain degree of encirclement and closeness. Such a theatre would have good audibility, would allow for controlled stage lighting, the use of changing scenery and, perhaps more important, the use of varying stage levels and contours. It would enable the architect to use his skill in devising a transition from stage to auditorium unencumbered by technical limitations. If it should continue to be a requirement, as it frequently is today, to alter the relationship between the stage and the audience for different productions the future of such adaptability lies in this direction. Instead of the often insanely elaborate efforts to shift the acting area and regroup the audience, different nuances of production can be achieved by the far simpler device of manipulating the character of the transition from the acting area to the auditorium. Adaptability thus becomes part of stage design and a convenient aid to production instead of a feat of hydraulic engineering, which, as far as the producer is concerned, merely allows him to exchange one set of limitations for another.

Although it would perhaps not satisfy those who believe that nothing less than an audience encirclement of 180° (as Sir Tyrone Guthrie) or 360° (as Stephen Joseph) will do, such a theatre would have great possibilities and whether one calls it a proscenium theatre or a theatre with an end stage which is fully equipped is neither here nor there.

"BLOW WINDS AND CRACK YOUR CHEEKS"

by Frederick Bentham

A discursive review of
Sound Reproduction in the Theatre*
by Burris-Meyer and Mallory

There is a series of visual effects, clouds, storm, wave and other things mainly hallowed by a long tradition which are made and listed by Strand Electric under the heading of Optical Effects. In a period of over thirty years, during which it has been my fate directly or indirectly, to display them I never remember a theatre† director expressing anything except alarm at their powers of distraction. Would not the clouds draw the audiences' attention away from the play and players? So too the critics said of Basil Dean's German clouds at the St. Martin's in the twenties, thus proving that it is not Strand Electric clouds alone that have such hypnotic powers attributed to them.

Yet what the eye cannot be expected to take the ear can

* *Distributed by Theatre Arts Books, New York 14.*

† *Not an opera director, certainly not an opera director!*

apparently, for to visit any theatre today—" advanced ", " vital ", " cruel " or " trad "—is to have one's ears assailed with the whole range of sound effects from the conceivable to the inconceivable. Except in the death chair sequence in *Hang Down Your Head ana Die*, I cannot recall any use of absolute silence in the theatre in recent years. On the other hand, absolute noise (pandemonium) breaks out at the slightest provocation. What makes the noise of clouds beneficial to the drama while the sight of them is anathema? Nonsense, it will be argued, there is no such thing as the sound of a cloud. True, but this is where electronics take over and no such limitation now exists—we can quite easily have the sound of silence. But are not these sound effects the modern equivalent of what the musician has been doing for centuries with his incidental music? Certainly; and in consequence there is little chance that the director of today will be unaware of the peril. There is no risk of our ears being assailed in the theatre by Mendlesohn, Grieg, Sibelius—by music; but *musique, trés concrète*, that is different; the air is full of *plus grandes bruits* of the stuff.

Shakespeare's weakness for sennets and tuckets is the chink through which a flood of thermionic sound pours. One of the strangest manifestations is the way that the abstract cacophony gives way inevitably to complete realism in the matter of the birdies. Thus in a performance last year of *The Wars of the Roses* at the Aldwych the battle was accompanied by every conceivable audible abstraction evocative of *these wars* (including the falling of the petals?) plus an insistent 'phone bell, identified with difficulty as being in the nearby manager's office. Then there gently descended a few angle-iron or dexion tree trunks. This was the variant of John Bury's very effective set which successfully evoked " A Chase in the North of England " for King Henry to enter, " disguised with a prayer book ", but blow me down, hardly had the completely non-realistic trees hit the floor (what *was* that floor made of?) when the air was filled with chirping of birdies, obviously recorded from life in a Surrey wood!

One's nerve completely destroyed, one waited morbidly for the death of Clarence. Lo! when it came, and up-stage of course because visually it could not be effective, it was accompanied by a gigantic Hi-Fi splash, followed by outsize sloshings and gurglings which resonated round the theatre. It is a tribute to the actors and the wonderful atmosphere of the set and lighting that this scene managed to hold the audience nevertheless. But it was a near thing.

And so it goes on and on. The effects department of the now despised cinema organ (known to the initiates of those days as the toyshop) pales into insignificance. Yet those days at least had the justification that the show (the film) was silent and needed someone to speak for it. Our plays and players are not silent even in those cases where they do not have anything to say.

What a garden of opportunity the theatre presents, at any rate until John Connor and *Quiet Please* get busy. There are orchards

to be felled, ducks to go wild, Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* to be revived with full stereo sound. Why go on. Like Ko Ko, I have a little list. With my colleague Bear, I attended the National Theatre production of *Hamlet*. We had listed in advance all the sound cues of the first hour or so and did very well mentally ticking them off with a knowing nod to each other, but we were outsmarted, there was one we had omitted. There were soundful junketings in the old town the night Hamlet mounted the battlements to call on his (of course!) Lo-Fi Father, the late King.

In *Sound Reproduction in the Theatre*, Burris-Meyer and Mallory, like all American authors, cover their subject thoroughly. It is a technical book and those to whom "The Well-known Fletcher-Munson Curves" really are well known instead of merely being so described in a caption should enjoy it for its introduction to the world of the theatre. Theatre people will learn herein of the fundamental principles of sound, its effect on the listener and thence how it can be used in the theatre. It is not, thank goodness, a book on amplifier circuits, loudspeaker design, high compliance pickups and so forth; it is a book of theatre technique. Some of the commonsense phenomena to be experienced from sound are not surprisingly, in an American book such as this, cloaked in a pseudo science. Do you know what psycho-acoustics are, or is? Well a sub-division of this subject is "Startle", but fortunately the subject of psycho-acoustics, though hogging a main chapter heading, only really occupies a few lines in one column. There is a good chapter on Architecture and Scenery and their relation to acoustics, study of which should avoid the ghastly blunders of loudspeaker placement so common in theatres where the sound appears to come from anywhere but its supposed (or actual) source. I welcome the book as an addition to the range of technical literature for the theatre and cannot recall that this field has been covered before.

Will Burris-Meyer and Mallory do anything to improve the rendering of our National Anthem in our theatres? I doubt it as far as the West End goes. I suspect that the Queen, like the programmes and the tepid drinks, originates with the house. The production company keeps its super loudspeakers and amplifiers for the first cue in the show, the Queen is relegated to the house equipment. This also explains why the Anthem precedes the show instead of concluding it as it used to. As the attendant nowadays also doubles the role of ladies cloakroom attendant, she could never get to her post in the stampede at the end. Therefore, just before the curtain rises an aged female steals through the pass-door to some long forgotten back-stage eyrie. There she opens what appears to be an ancient, but large tin trunk. It is the house equipment—a genuine Brunswick Panatrope (*circa* 1928). On the turntable is the record which has without discrimination saved three kings (albeit ineffectively) and one Queen. But do not scoff for the strangled strains of this ancient record do what no other sound effect in the show is likely to do, they provoke a united response from the audience.

STRATFORD'S OTHER THEATRE

by Philip Rose

For several years the Stratford Shakespearean Foundation has complemented its season in the Festival Theatre with ancillary productions, mostly of a musical nature but also including several international film festivals, in the Avon Theatre.

The Avon Theatre, which is some little way from the Festival Theatre in downtown Stratford, started life under a different name in 1900 and as the " largest and finest theatre in Western Ontario ", became an entertainment centre and regular stop for touring productions. Sir John Martin Harvey played there as did Forbes Robertson. The theatre's first movie showing was *Our Navy* in 1901. The name of the house was changed several times and after some years with a mixture of vaudeville and movies it became almost exclusively a cinema in 1929. The first season under the auspices of the Festival was in 1956 when Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde of Montreal presented three farces by Molière. The first light opera was *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1960, directed by Sir Tyrone Guthrie.

The theatre left a great deal to be desired. The stage was and is quite small and on one side had no wing space at all. In fact, the stage wall was at an angle of about 20 degrees which made life very difficult. The wing space on the other side of the stage was all of 12 ft. The dressing rooms were under the stage where the head room varied between 4 ft. 6 in. and 5 ft. 6 in. As if all this were not enough, one of Stratford's main sewers, christened by some long-forgotten wit as the " Romeo " sewer, runs straight through the orchestra pit and the stage basement.

The auditorium was and still is asymmetrical, seating 1,050. Even its friends could not have called it an attractive theatre,

although signs of a forgotten elegance peeped through here and there.

In 1963 the theatre was purchased by The Stratford Foundation. A nation-wide campaign was launched to raise funds both to buy and completely renovate the building. The most pressing need was for some major improvements to the stage and attempts were made to purchase property adjacent to the stage in order to be able to widen and deepen it. Unfortunately, these were only partly successful and, whilst property at the side of the theatre was obtained, it was not possible to deepen the stage. Flying facilities had never been available; in fact, the grid was a collection of wooden beams accessible only from below, calling for a completely fearless stage crew.

Robert Fairfield, the architect for the Festival Theatre, with Miss Tanya Moiseiwitsch, one of its original design team, had to make a theatre out of the Avon.

It was realised that to renovate the theatre completely in one go would be an impossible task both as far as cost and time were concerned. It was decided to tackle the stage and auditorium first leaving the front part of the building for a future date. A drive was launched to raise $750,000 for the first stage of the work, including air-conditioning the building, to combat the summer.

Plans were more or less finalised by January 1964, bearing in mind that the theatre had to open for its 1964 season on July 3rd. On the side of the stage which had some wing space nothing further could be done because of a road, but property adjacent to the other side was purchased and demolished. This provided space for a scene dock and a room housing the air-conditioning and lighting control equipment. Eventually an intermediate floor will be built for rehearsal rooms. The stage roof was removed and another 10 ft. added. This involved a great deal of work as the original walls of the building are of hollow tile. Because of the increased height it was necessary to brace the building from within, which involved the installation of numerous steel columns from basement to stage roof. A steel grid was installed with full flying and counterweighting. The new stage floor eliminates the rake of the old. The orchestra pit was enlarged and deepened, but unfortunately nothing could be done about the "Romeo" sewer, doomed for ever to carry its burden to Lake Erie.

There was little, of course, which could be done to change the concept of the stage and no attempt was made to make it into other than a basic proscenium form. However, some fairly useless side boxes were removed, providing space for narrow front and side forestages with doors which add enormously to the staging potential.

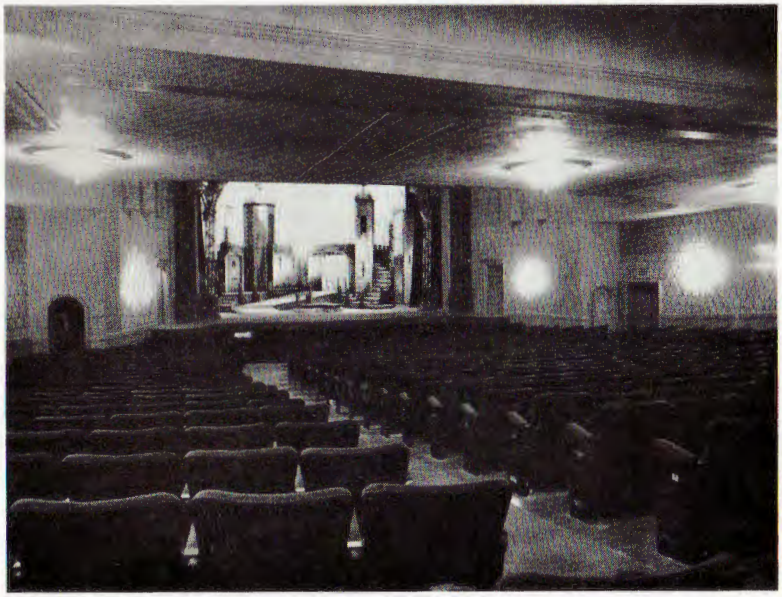
The main front of house lighting is provided by a mixture of 24 Patt. 263 Profile and Patt. 264 Bi-focal 1,000-watt profile spotlights mounted in a continuous slot in the auditorium ceiling. There is a complete catwalk and plenty of head room permitting easy access and adjustment of these spots. The slot is a little further from the stage than desired, but an intricate openwork plaster dome over the stalls had to remain undefaced. It was also decided to locate in this area a number of Fresnel spots merely to light the curtain when

the footlights are closed. Additional front lighting is provided from vertical booms over the proscenium forestage doors. There are two 6 ft. high booms over each door giving a total of 16 Patt. 23/S 500-watt Profile spots. These booms are located behind baffles designed to harmonise with the architecture. They are in no way a distraction and each spot can be adjusted to light any part of the forestage.

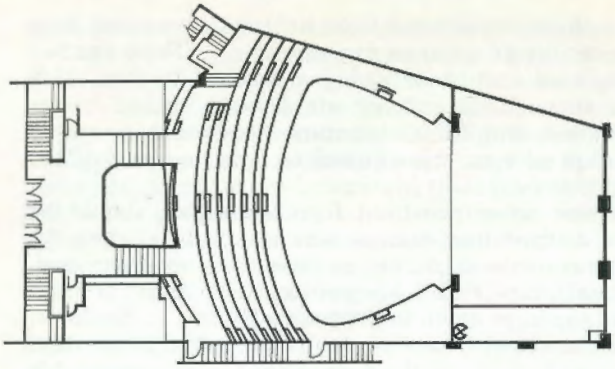
It was felt that some provision for footlighting should be made and so five disappearing sections were installed to follow the contour of the front of the stage. So far these have not been used.

The stage is still quite small. The proscenium opening is 33 ft. by 21 ft. high and the stage depth to the back wall is 31 ft. However, as there is no conventional means of crossover other than at stage level, the cyclorama is 4 ft. off the back wall. On the actors' left there is not much more than 12 ft. of effective wing space whilst on the right there is now 35 ft. The first spot pipe has 20 Patt. 223 1 kW Fresnel spots and 4 Patt. 264 1 kW profile spots; adjacent to this is a pipe with 15-500-watt floodlights. The second pipe has twelve Patt. 223 1,000-watt spots and nine 500-watt floods.

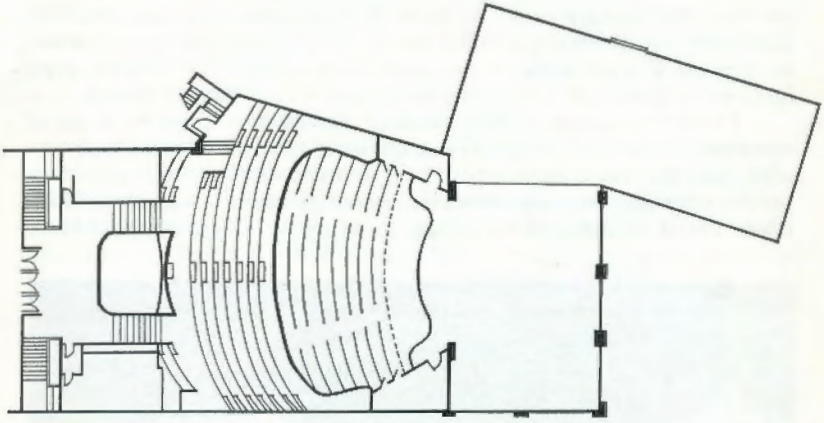
From the outset it was decided to try and provide a good working cyclorama. Originally a German type rolling cloth cyclorama was proposed, but eventually it was decided to install a sharks-tooth cyclorama with permanently curved ends and a height of 40 ft. which could be tumbled for flying. In going for a cyclorama of such



" Yeoman of the Guard " at the Avon Theatre from back stalls.



Plan and Section, Avon Theatre.



a height one correctly placed black velour border can provide all the top masking required. For top cyc lighting twenty-four 500-watt floodlights on four colour circuits are used arranged on a double pipe framework. The bottom of the cyclorama is lit by seven 6 ft. three-colour groundrow units each on castors, fed both left and right. Eighteen floor pockets are provided in addition to the groundrow pockets as well as receptacles at high level for additional special equipment. The cyclorama plugging strip has facilities for two optical effects projectors up to 5 kW each and similar.

The lighting control is the System LC having seventy-two individual dimmers and four scene pre-sets. The dimmer racks are in a room immediately behind the fly gallery on the actors' right, keeping all power distribution runs to a minimum. The control console is located in the projection room at the rear of the gallery and a large window provides excellent visibility.

From the outset is was important to remember that visiting touring companies would be using the building. More often than

not such road shows tour their own equipment and need nothing other than a power supply. Such a supply was provided at stage floor level, but it was also felt desirable to go one step further and make it possible for visiting companies to connect their portable control systems into the permanent wiring, if they felt the need to do so. All the wiring from the dimmer racks to the front of house spotlights, both in the main ceiling and over the proscenium doors, passes through a special connector box. This box is mounted on the proscenium wall at fly platform level. All the dimmer control channels terminate at the box in receptacles and the wiring from the lighting circuits terminates in pigtails beneath the receptacles. When the theatre's own control system is being used the pigtails are plugged into their respective receptacles. However, when a visiting company wishes to pick up the front of house wiring, all that is necessary is for them to remove the pigtails from the dimmer receptacles and plug up a feed from their own dimmers. All the connections to the spot pipes and flood pipes operate through similar plugging boxes mounted along the fly rail. Such an arrangement besides reducing the amount of portable cables visiting companies need to provide also permits the ready rearrangement and transfer of circuits as far as the theatre's own installation is concerned.

The renovated Avon opened with the *Yeoman of the Guard* and this was followed by *The Marriage of Figaro*, which will be presented again in 1965. Plans are going ahead to raise funds to complete the rebuilding. Now entering a new phase of its long contribution to theatre in Canada, the Avon is proving that, in spite of its famous partner around the corner, the proscenium theatre still has an important role to fill.

* * *

THE CRESCENT THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM

Graham Winteringham of S. T. Walker and Partners writes:-

In the December issue of TABS Frederick Bentham expressed his views on the new Crescent Theatre in Birmingham. As the architect responsible for this building I found his article interesting and indeed stimulating.

I can well understand Mr. Bentham's anxiety about the possible drawbacks of the form of revolve. His anxiety was, I think, shared by all of us here during the design process. The Theatre has now been used since October last and at least some of the misgivings have proved to be groundless. This applies particularly to Mr. Bentham's point about the two groups of audience. Theatregoers certainly have not noticed this, on the contrary many have taken the trouble to make unsolicited comments on the wonderfully intimate atmosphere in the auditorium.

The additional cost of making the revolve over that of building a fixed raked floor was remarkably little—something in the order of three-quarters of one per cent of the building cost. It is a smaller percentage of the gross cost. This is a small price to pay for the experimental opportunities which it will provide for all time. It must be remembered also that it is a *revolve* and need not necessarily be turned through 180°. Other forms of audience stage relationship can be created by a turn of less than this amount. It is for this reason that the side gangway steps are all turned in on the plan. This planning provides steps to the different levels of seat rows for nearly all of the revolve positions. Mr.

Bentham further states that with a complete half turn of the revolve " access to some seats will involve crossing the sides of the acting area ". If the 3 ft. 6 in. wide gangways are kept clear, as envisaged, then these are not within the acting area. Think how exciting it is for the playgoer to tread so near to the boards! There certainly need be no embarrassing moments during the play. There are lavatories backstage readily accessible to the public.

To say, as Mr. Bentham does that the revolve design reduced the number of seats is one way of looking at it, but other factors influence seat positions too. I refer to sight lines in relation to the minimum width proscenium. The brief called for a specific number of seats. The requisite number all affording an excellent view of the stage have been provided. So really there has been no reduction. The seats are merely positioned to suit all the requirements.

BOOK REVIEW

Actor and Architect, edited by Stephen Joseph.
Manchester University Press **25s.**

This book originated in a series of lectures given at a " Theatre Week " organised by the Manchester University Drama Department in 1962. It consists of characteristic contributions by Tyrone Guthrie, Richard Southern, Sean Kenny, Hugh Hunt and John English and an introduction by Stephen Joseph. In an appendix is the discussion of a " Brains Trust " in which two architects took part; incidentally the only place where the architects get a chance to answer back.

The theme is that we should build new theatres appropriate to our times and each contributor puts his case for what form the new buildings should take. From the list of authors it is hardly surprising that the emphasis falls heavily on open stages and theatre-in-the-round.

Stephen Joseph outlines a very convincing historical case and demolishes with relish some of the sillier arguments used by the dyed-in-the-wool supporters of the proscenium. His theory is sound, but the only true justification of open stage forms is artistic success which can only be tested in practice.

So far in this country, though much good pioneer work has been done, experience has been limited to an enthusiastic but impoverished fringe except for some rather doubtful essays at Chichester.

Tyrone Guthrie's delightful chapter manages to make a number of vital points in a most entertaining way. He is the rudest to architects, but has more useful practical advice to offer than the others.

Now a note of warning must be sounded. A great deal of valuable instruction in this book is addressed to architects, but it is dangerous stuff and could easily explode in their faces. Most architects want to keep up with the times and ahead of them if possible. Perhaps that is why in so many town development schemes one sees somewhere on the plan, a target shape labelled " experimental theatre ". It shows that the architect is progressive and after reading *Actor and Architect* he is reassured that it is only the hidebound and reactionary who reject theatre-in-the-round and cling to the old-fashioned proscenium. The committee to whom he is responsible also want to appear progressive, but insist that other forms of theatre must be accommodated, and so another architect succumbs to the fascination of mechanical flexibility and begins wasting his ingenuity and time trying to devise an adaptable theatre.

The missing link in this chain of communication is the man who is going to use the theatre. If the sponsor of the project wants an open stage he must at the briefing stage appoint an artistic director who wants to work in this form.

Sufficient is known about picture frame theatres for an architect, with the proper advice, to be able to design one that is acceptable to most of those who will use it. For open stage forms there is no set of accepted standards and it is not the place of the architect to impose them. Some of the leading advocates and practitioners of these forms have contributed to this book and, while they may agree in spirit, they disagree in important details. It is most unlikely that a building designed to the exact requirements of one of them would be to the liking of the others.

A close co-operation between a theatre's artistic director and an architect, with sympathy, understanding and imagination on both sides, is the way we shall get a really good theatre. Stephen Joseph's evangelism should be directed to the theatrical profession and its patrons. Most architects will be delighted to follow their lead.

RODERICK HAM, ARIBA., A.A.Dipl.

CONFERENCE ON CIVIC THEATRES

Held by A.M.C. & T.A.C. at County Hall, February 1965

Report by Percy Corry

It was clear from the published papers issued to the Conference at the County Hall, London, as a basis for discussion by the numerous delegates from municipalities and from theatrical organisations, that the British Civic Theatre has not yet acquired any specific plan of development. Following the traditional British practice of development by trial and error it is gradually—ever so gradually—becoming accepted as an imperfectly appreciated social amenity. There is an obvious need for some authoritative guidance of the ninety-five per cent of municipal authorities who are reluctant to be convinced that they should spend any part of their ratepayers' sixpences on promoting or sponsoring theatres.

The canny councillors who have so far resisted the mild clamour for theatrical culture are unlikely to succumb to airy-fairy schemes sponsored by well-meaning enthusiasts with but the vaguest of ideas about the sort of theatre they want or how it should be run.

Seventeen years have elapsed since Aneurin Bevan induced Parliament to authorise municipalities to spend their ratepayers' sixpences. His widow is now valiantly carrying the torch with which she seeks to spread more widely the fires of enthusiasm that are thinly scattered about the land. In her opening address to the assembled delegates, Miss Jennie Lee was obviously chafing at the parliamentary niceties which prevented her from disclosing the contents of the White Paper to be presented later in the day to our elected legislators. She made it abundantly clear, however, that the purpose of her policy was to infuse gaiety into the arts in general and into the theatre in particular. Our theatres must throw off their fustiness, they must be bright and joyful, with a darkness and gloom restricted only to the performance: a sly jibe, well taken.

Miss Lee was quite specific in her inclusion of the amateurs in her purpose; the policy should be to " sustain the professionals and encourage the amateurs ". She saw the most hopeful way of conversion of reluctant councillors to be the formation of local art groups who should create an appropriate social climate and exert the necessary pressure of public opinion. We must be bold; we must not be deterred by technical economic stresses; we must build for the future. There was an implicit hint of Government assistance. Theatre people and municipal representatives alike, seeing Miss Jennie Lee as a successful raider of the Treasury, speeded her on her ministerial way with an enthusiastic, audible exercise of their itching palms.

The authors of the published papers introduced by Lord Faringdon, the Chairman, were each allowed a short exposition of their own conclusions. Hugh Jenkins, M.P., pleaded that the basis

of providing each theatrical pound should be the contribution of ten shillings from the box office and five each from national and local government. A nice tidy arrangement that was not resolved in terms of pence per payer of rates and taxes.

D. S. Colley of Manchester argued that theatre must be a part of the whole relationship of the arts to the communities, avoiding definitions that were too narrow, catering for the general good with an aim just above and slightly left of centre. He wanted Government contributions administered by a ministry and not by an independent council whose snooty attitude could be suspect.

Alderman Waugh of Coventry warned against the " toffee-nosed snobbery and suspected queerness of the highbrow " and demanded the greatest good for the greatest number.

Reginald Birks of Sunderland claimed merit for the large theatre that could house opera, ballet, the classics, the pops—the lot—to attract all the people. This claim was supported by Stephen Arlen of the National Theatre later. He pointed out that large first-class productions could not be accommodated in second-class theatres with facilities inadequate by today's standards. There was significant further support in the suggestion that if the Coventry Theatre, with capacity of nearly 2,000, had to close down it would be necessary to take it over to operate in co-operation with the Belgrade.

Thus, a common outlook on the civic theatre's purpose, but all exercising in different scales. The greatest number whose greatest good is the aim is clearly a variable figure, dependent on the estimate of how many are willing to be done good to at one time.

There followed, during the two sessions, a continuous procession of delegates to the platform. Nineteen were municipal, and eighteen were variously theatrical, only one of the latter representing the amateurs. The municipal contributors were mainly concerned with their respective types of theatres and their divergent policies. Some have resident companies and others have theatres shared by amateurs and professionals. Some could boast of profitable theatres making substantial contributions to the rates. These of course at popular seaside resorts. There were those whose theatrical activities were interspersed with banquets, pop concerts, all-in wrestling and other cultural goodness for the greatest numbers. Barnsley claimed there was merit in thus keeping their multi-purpose hall occupied for fifty-two weeks in the year.

Chelmsford was violently amusing about the functional inefficiency of a multi-purpose hall that is " multi-everything and good for nothing ". Ill-equipped stage, flat auditorium, uncomfortable chairs. " Brand new and a dead loss." The need to re-interpret the meaning of multi-purpose was asserted.

Rotherham were delighted with their conversion of a non-conformist chapel into a civic theatre, highly successful with a mixture of amateur and professional companies, and the delegates were perversely delighted by a reference to exhibitions in the bar.

The lady councillor from Leeds was amusingly exasperated by

the frustrating indifference of her colleagues to theatrical needs. She pleaded for the permissive use of the ratepayers' pence to be made compulsive.

Scunthorpe, in justifying a catholicity of policy, warned delegates of the demoralising effect of subsidising empty seats.

Several delegates complained of the lack of co-operation between professionals and amateurs, but Kidderminster countered with proof to the contrary in their theatre which was operated by a Trust of amateurs for use by professional companies. Their only complaint about professionals was that too few of them were prepared to leave London to perform in the remote provinces.

A Salford councillor explained the difficulty of getting municipal support by the fact that " the Conservative councillors believed in theatres but not in subsidies, and the Labour members believed in subsidies but not in theatre ". Theatre enthusiasts were urged to get themselves elected, which, it was stated, was not very difficult. One of the new London boroughs called for a conference to discuss the possibility of groups of boroughs co-operating to provide theatres, say five theatres to be shared by the 32 boroughs. Their proximity to the West End made it impractical for each borough to contemplate the possibility of its own theatre.

The director of the Aberdeen Children's Theatre, established by the Education Committee, received considerable support for their idea of creating theatre-goers of the tender age of five, but the director of the Belgrade, Coventry, advocated throwing youngsters of three into chalk circles to learn about life, as one throws them into water to learn about the art of survival.

There were few supporters of the idea that the Civic Theatre should become wholly a department of local government with actors on the Town Hall salary list. In general, an independent Trust was favoured, with the municipality subsidising the non-profits.

The theatrical delegates were a broadly representative cross-section. Equity, the Variety Artists' Federation, the Musicians' Union, the Theatre Managers' Association, directors of Civic Theatres, and a few free-lance operators all got themselves into the act to good effect.

The V.A.F. were understandably concerned to press the need for catholicity of policy in Civic Theatres. Their pleas were, perhaps, a thought too tentative and deferential to legitimacy, except for the Edwardian gags that emerged from the celebrated moustache. The aspirant M.P. of Mirth supported the several who had decried use of the name " Civic " and suggested that it implied constant attendance of the Mayor. " Municipal " he rejected since it suggested lavatory. Good clean fun.

Basil Dean, the patriarchal pioneer of theatre, made a characteristic contribution. His views are given very fully in this issue (see page 15).

Margaret Rawlings, using platform and microphone with impeccable skill, pleaded for fine theatres to be built. She claimed

that this country had fine actors and fine directors whose talents are best displayed and developed in resident companies working in congenial environments.

William Kendall of the Theatres' Advisory Council wound up the session by proposing that the good work should be continued by further joint efforts to deal with the vital problem, a proposition carried with enthusiastic unanimity.

The theatre technicians were commendably restrained during the first sessions since they had a monopoly of the platform on the second day. Norman Marshall, in the chair, emphasised the enormity of offence in regarding theatre as a potential part of " multi-purpose " activities, condemned to suffer the indignity of the flat-floored auditorium. By way of administering calculated shock he suggested that for dancing, the flat floors of art galleries would be suitable and that the council chamber would be admirable for Bingo sessions. He stressed the need for expert advice in planning any form of theatre and offered the expertise and altruism of A.B.T.T. members.

Various aspects of theatre planning related to specific activities of production by five technicians, whose informative and authoritative papers are published for study at leisure. John Neville, polished performance as always, generalised on his problems of directing the Nottingham Playhouse and made a plea for repertoire. See page 5 of this issue for some of his comments.

A liberal selection of Strand Electric slides of existing theatres, civic and otherwise, with pertinent recorded A.B.T.T. commentary of recognisable authorship gave the delegates great stimulus; this performance, with smooth projection on twin screens, was obviously much appreciated. Pictures speak louder than words.

The conference ended with a Brains Trust which was not an unqualified success. There was an over-large assembly of assorted experts on the platform, most of whom regrettably failed to appreciate the rateable realities of minor provincial municipalities whose frustrated delegates were, at times, justifiably and audibly restive. They were patently eager to have expert comment on capital expenditures in the £75,000 range, but the platform pundits were unaccountably reluctant to cope effectively with what is to many of us a constant problem. Unfortunately there is no space left in which to amplify. It may be possible to do so in our next issue.

The conference ended with mutual congratulations and was voted a great success. It had been very well worth while. The universal civic theatre is on its way: a way that is steep and stony, long and arduous maybe, but the view from the top could be fine.