

Be Prepared

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Yes, I was a Girl Guide! Indeed, as I remember it, my entire personal war-effort was geared towards out-badging the number of medals I once saw displayed on Goering's chest. I had no idea in those young days that 'Be Prepared' was a motto worthy of adoption by most backstage theatre workers. I think that most SMs realise the importance of being prepared for all eventualities within their own particular jobs. In this hiatus of theatre preservation and expansion caused, we are told, by 'economic difficulties', I would like to suggest that now is an excellent time for us all to take a close look at our past achievements and prepare for a much better future. The buildings and management of the theatres already in existence leave a lot to be desired. Now is the time to prepare for better things if our jobs are to be preserved and the conditions of employment improved in the future.

If a theatre is pulled down in our Capital City for any reason, it has to be replaced – but how? The Prince Charles is a cinema; the Royalty (where more money was spent on the projection room than on the stage equipment) can hardly be said to replace the old Stoll; the New London is fast becoming nothing more than a conference centre and an extra outside broadcast TV studio. What hope is there for the Criterion and the Shaftesbury when their turn comes to join the good old theatres in the sky?

When I was living and working in Canada in the 1950's, I met a young architect who was anxious to join the, then semi-professional, Montreal Players. He just wanted to learn about the theatre – anything about the theatre – and meet some theatre people. At the time he was one of the architects working on the new and very big Canadian National Railway Headquarters in the bustling centre of down-town Montreal. His name was Sean Kenny. What a pity that one of the last things that he worked on, the New London Theatre, is wasted as far as the theatre is concerned. It needed a Sean Kenny of the management world for it ever to have realised its potential. My experience of management has led me to believe that there is no such animal. Consequently we, those of us who prefer to work in ordinary theatre situations, were better off with the old Winter Garden.

The old Stoll was considered uneconomically large and old and impersonal. A new theatre was welcomed by many who thought that the Royalty was modern and the right size for companies somewhat smaller than Kismet. It has not proved to be the outstanding success it should have been. The Prince Charles, I can recall, was to be cheered as a suitable Leicester Square

alternative to the Fortune. The kindest criticism I heard offered twelve months after its opening was that it was most 'unFortunate'!

I concede that many of the problems in these fairly new theatres are in-built. Everyone is very ready to join a 'bash the architect' campaign. For the past twenty years it has been a favourite backstage sport. Twenty years is long enough. It's time that we started to look elsewhere – management perhaps? – for the cause of the cynicism which now automatically arises out of the knowledge that a new theatre is about to take shape. I have never worked in any theatre where everything backstage was exactly as I, personally, would wish it to be. Theatre buildings are very personal things and we all have our own ideas of the ideal concept. Those of us who have to make them work as well as possible for a company deserve to have all the mod. cons. available at the time included in them for our own help and convenience. Thank goodness that some of the worst

mistakes gave birth to the ABTT consultation body. What a pity we cannot encourage more people to consult before the event and not during or after the plans have been drawn up and the idea has already taken 'concrete' form. Before money is once more released in the direction of 'The Arts' in this country, I suggest that we all need to study closely the mistakes of the recent past and make sure that the money of the future is not wasted on what can only work in very rare circumstances.

The future managements have a great number of headaches in their inheritance already. Don't let's add to them by our mistakes in the future. I find it very refreshing that one of the newest members of management (I nearly called him newest management, but he's my age and therefore far from new!) is turning one of the oldest theatres in the country into a success. He even likes his old building. There must be a lesson to learn from this example alone. Let us not wait too long before we learn it.

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