

REIDing SHELF

I have never worked at the Royal Court—and with my romantic leanings on the matter of colour filters (reflecting my attitude to theatre in general) it is rather unlikely that I ever shall. However I was interviewed by George Devine in 1958 for the job of DSM on *Live Like Pigs*. This interview seemed to be going rather well until Devine commiserated with me for having worked on several pantomimes. I hastened to reassure him that *all* forms of theatre, including pantomime, are valid—indeed essential—audience experiences. At that point the atmosphere cooled noticeably and we embarked upon a swift fade to ‘of course, I’m seeing another two or three people and we’ll be in touch’.

However, as a member of the audience, I was almost in at the beginning. I saw the fifth performance of the opening production (*The Mulberry Bush*) and the second production (*The Crucible*) is an event engraved on my heart: this was the first evening out with the lady for whom my silver bells ring out just 358 days after the jubilee which has prompted the publication of **AT THE ROYAL COURT 25 years of the English Stage Company**.

I mention all this personal background because it illustrates that one of the functions of this sort of book is to stimulate the recall (pleasurable or otherwise) of those who shared the period. For those who reached their age of theatre awareness during the period, such a book should supply a knowledge of the roots of the performance styles that they are now experiencing. And finally, for future generations—including researchers at work in a future when certainly the building and possibly even its ideals will have crumbled—there should be an accurate picture of *what it was like*.

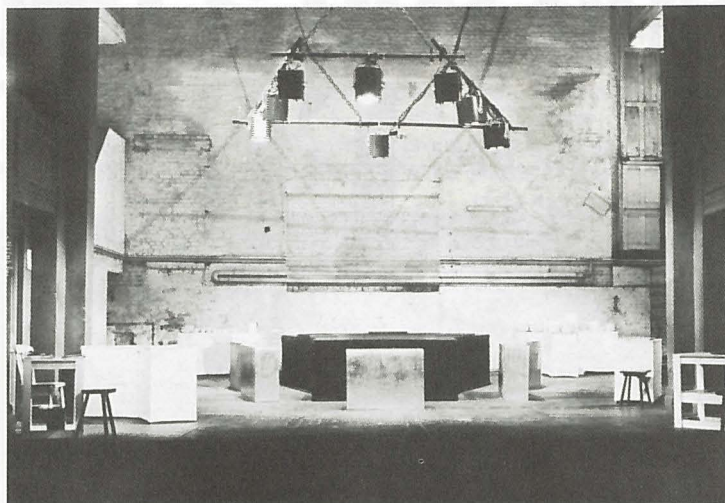
This book seems to score high marks in all of these requirements. I cannot testify to the accuracy of its picture of what it was like to work at the Court, and I suspect that there may well be considerable disagreement among past Courtiers. Certainly the working atmosphere seems to have been tense rather than cosy. And probably deliberately so, for it usually is in a doctrinaire environment. As I read the book I lost any residual ambition to work at the Royal Court: I have never flourished in an atmosphere where creativity stems from crisis and collision. But I do acknowledge that fine work can be achieved by this method although I prefer to appreciate the results from the safety of a seat in the stalls.

The Court was founded as a writer’s theatre and its concentration on text has been a major influence on the development of British scenography towards a style of representational realism where the actors’ environment is established by a statement of essentials rather than an accumulation of detail.

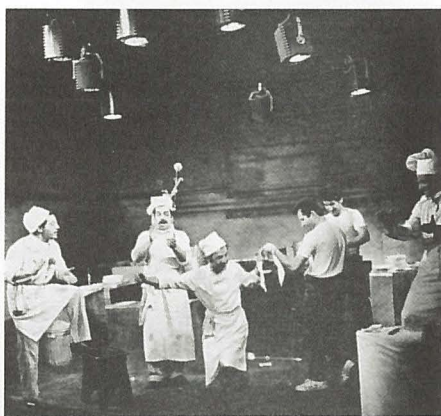
This scenic clarity called for a corresponding lighting style and the text

became exposed to a lot of light and very little shade, with white taking on a status hitherto only accorded to virgins and detergents. The exposed lighting rig became part of the scene design with its shape following the contours of the design and thus helping to delineate the acting area.

An encyclopaedia has two uses: reference and browsing. I find that looking up a reference usually leads to a browse. If the encyclopaedia is illustrated it is usually the pictures that trigger off the browse. **ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF WORLD THEATRE** has a lot of pictures



Wesker's The Kitchen, 1961. An early example of the developing Royal Court design style with the shape of the lighting rig following the shape of the scene design. (a) under working light (b) In performance



Paradoxically, therefore, a Royal Court production is often more recognisable by its scenography than by its text!

Much of the English Stage Company’s work is over: the revolution that was sought has been achieved. The aims of George Devine and his founding team are now incorporated in the policies of many theatre companies from the NT to the Fringe. The 25 years of this jubilee may well neatly enclose an era.

At the Royal Court is cleverly laid out: the factual chapters covering each period of two or three years are interlaced with memoirs from Courtpersons like Osborne, Olivier, Gielgud, Gaskill, Beckett, Fugard, Lindsay Anderson and Jocelyn Herbert. Richard Findlater links it all together and appendices list all the plays and their casts plus fascinating box-office returns. All definitely good reading—both now and for the future.

and they are set across the right hand two columns of each right hand page. This makes them leap out while one is seeking an alphabetical reference—whether searching from the front of the book or, like me, flicking from the back. The pictures, and there are about 420 of them, contain many familiar ‘standards’ but nothing amiss in that, provided they are printed to illustrate a point and not as mere graffiti. In fact the illustrations often make more point than the text—if only because the text is necessarily restricted with 2000 entries to be accommodated in 290 pages (ie about 600 CUE columns). However, many entries end with bibliographical references to point possible directions of further enquiry. Emphasis tends to be on names rather than subjects and there is a separate index of play titles (5000 of them) leading to author entries. The book is based on the German language *Friedrichs Theaterlexikon*, first published in 1969. Martin Esslin’s English language edition of 1977 is now made more accessible by publication in paperback.

AT THE ROYAL COURT. 25 years of the English Stage Company. Edited by Richard Findlater. Amber Lane Press. £12.95(UK).

ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF WORLD THEATRE. Based on *Friedrichs Theaterlexikon*. English language edition adapted and amplified under the general editorship of Martin Esslin. Thames and Hudson. 1977 edition now available in paperback. £5.95(UK).