REIDing SHELF

From time to time magazines like the late *Theatre Quarterly* carry 'production log' type accounts of a play's day-by-day gestation in the rehearsal room. These observations tend to concentrate on the play's text and interpretation. They are written by a fly on the rehearsal room wall. Now such a fly has been given unrestricted access to the walls of every department, workshop, office, room of the National Theatre – including the corridors of power which we learn are situated on *the fourth floor,* an area which the fly came to regard with a sinister respect.

The privileged fly on the N.T. walls is called Jim Hiley and his qualifications are that he 'studied Drama and English at the University of Birmingham and has since been involved in all aspects of theatre and community arts. He has been an actor in repertory and television, and has performed, written and directed in fringe and children's theatre'. His writing pedigree includes *Time Out, Radio Times, Observer, Guardian,* and *Plays & Players.* On the evidence of his book, these are exemplary qualifications. Mr. Hiley has done a good job and no single CUE reader can fail to be rivetted by a book which is surely destined to become an obligatory case-study for all theatre students – uniting actors, directors, designers, technicians, administrators, critics and audience in an examination of the interplay of their various roles in bringing to life the playwright's otherwise still-born concept.

Jim Hiley's **THEATRE AT WORK. The story of the National Theatre's production of Brecht's 'Galileo'** follows progress through the N.T.'s 22-week cycle for a new production in the Olivier Theatre:

Week 22 play decided on

Week 20 director, designer and lighting designer chosen

Week 16 outline design for set and costumes proposed

The National's staff would then have a fortnight to discuss with designer and director the likely cost of what had been put forward, and to work out amongst themselves how the new show would fit in practically with others in the repertoire – how easy storage and change-overs would be, for example.

Week 14 final design arrived at; by now a model of the set would be built and budgets agreed on.

Week 12 drawings of the set with measurements submitted by designer; from these, much more detailed drawings of each component job would be made for the benefit of the theatre's workshops.

Week 10 making of set, props and costumes commences

Weeks 2 and 1 the now completed set installed in the rehearsal room for the use of actors and director.

Week 0 Production Week

In *Theatre at Work* Jim Hiley guides us through this production cycle, the detail increasing as the pressure intensifies during the later weeks of the countdown.

The core of the Galileo team were Howard Brenton (translator), John Dexter (director), Jocelyn Herbert (designer) and Andy Phillips (lighting designer). All key figures from the more influential periods of the Royal Court. Reviewing in last CUE that theatre's silver jubilee book *At the Royal Court,* I noted that although the Court had been founded as a writer's theatre, a Royal Court production is often more recognisable by its scenography than by its text. Jim Hiley gives us the basis of this philosophy in Jocelyn Herbert's words:

> What interests me is to put as little, not as much, as possible on a stage, to evoke a period rather than present reality. If you need a chair, and the play is set in a particular period, you try to have just one chair, beautifully made, that truly represents that period.

This philosophy is central to much of today's scenography. And it is indicative of the importance of the designer's influence in establishing the concept of the production. The inevitably for practical reasons of our theatre being, at least in part, a designer's theatre, is explained by Hiley:

> In the preparatory phases of a large theatre operation, design – rather than casting – is the practical activity that serves as a medium for exploring interpretations. Things might be different in the best of all possible worlds, or even in the event of a true, permanent theatre ensemble being created. Then the evolution of performances and design would happen simultaneously and collectively over a sustained period. But in the present reality, actors can only be available for a few weeks before a show opens, whereas the design scheme for that show – costumes and stage furnishings as well as scenery – must be determined months ahead. As an embodiment of the director's ideas, the design pre-empts the work of the actors. A scale model of the set, and sometimes costume drawings are presented to the cast at their first rehearsal. The director must either persuade them to fit in with this scheme, or expect a disharmonious end-product.

We are shown the process of casting followed by the month of interpretative creativity in the rehearsal room. We are lead through the hassles of getting the design completed, budgeted, and agreed. We trace the problems of realisation of the designs in the various workshops. Then the fit-up, the dress-rehearsals and the previews. Throughout, Jim Hiley makes us aware that theatre is a people industry and lets us see all sides of the operation from the points of view of the actual people carrying out the various stages of the work. The tensions are not spared and the quotes are only too real. I have never worked at the National, but, from my experience of other production organisations and given the circumstances of this particular production, *Galileo* proceeds through its 22 weeks in precisely the way that I would have expected.

A final quote provides a text for yet another debate on the extent to which the costs of experiment are an acceptable feature of the production process. It also illustrates Jim Hiley's readable and perceptive style:

> But the major event of the evening occurred during the first interval. While the choir rehearsed and the electricians raced about with tallescopes, Dexter bounded on to the stage and started pulling around various of the benches and candelabra that had been set for the ball scene to come. Nobody knew what was happening. Roy Bernard's crew had been trundling the balustrade forward with some awkwardness, but now Dexter waved it out of the way. After a few words with Herbert, he stepped off the stage bristling exultantly and declaimed 'Light that, Phillips!'. Those in the stalls who had been gawping, in one or two cases quite apprehensively, now realised that Dexter had completely changed the setting for the ball. The balustrade was axed, as was the large candelabra with its 'National Theatre wobble'. What remained was skeletal and spare, but more in keeping with the overall design.
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> Later, Jocelyn Herbert explained that she and the director had discussed the change over tea. The balustrade had been mentioned in the text, and she originally intended to reinforce its appearance with clouds and cherubs on a back projection. This had been dropped when they decided they were using too many slides, and the balustrade was left as a bit of an anomaly. The large gold candelabra had been meant to contrast with the slimmer, dowdier models in the preceding scene. But metal benches featured in both scenes, and indeed travelled 'anonymously' through the course of the play, so it was not illogical for the more ascetic candelabra to reappear in the ball sequence, too. At this stage, Herbert commented, you always pare things down. At a stroke, two of the most troublesome scenic pieces had been dropped. Weeks of labour had gone into that candelabra, as well as much heartache. Roy Bernard thanked Dexter for relieving him of the hassle of shifting the balustrade, but everyone agreed that a production in the Cottesloe could have been mounted for what it had cost. John Malone later calculated that labour charges run up by Kemp's to finish the chassis in a hurry, added to the cost of materials, could bring the bill up to £3,500. Rodger Hulley said that he had persuaded Herbert to accept a two-dimensional balustrade at first, but she had changed her mind in favour of the three-dimensional model moulded in glass fibre. His version, he claimed would have cost £40.

If you wish to consider these figures in relation to the total budget, there is an interesting appendix on *The Cost of Galileo.* However it deals only with material costs: there is no assessment of production labour costs, or the performance labour costs which are consequential upon decisions reached during the production period.

Galileo was a critical and audience success. I wish I had seen it. I hope to catch it on revival.

On page one of his **VICTORIAN SPECTACULAR THEATRE 1850-1910,** Michael R. Booth summarises today's pare-down staging style:

> Actors move in an empty space defined and limited by light, against a selective and non-representational scenic background (if any), whose materials and textures are closely related to the world of the play.

The theatre of Michael Booth's book was a theatre of archaeological accuracy and