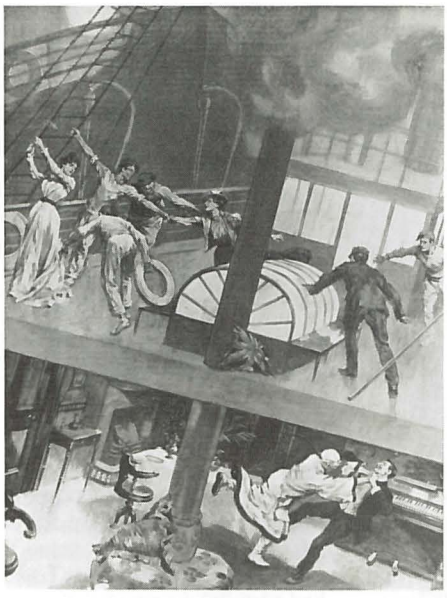

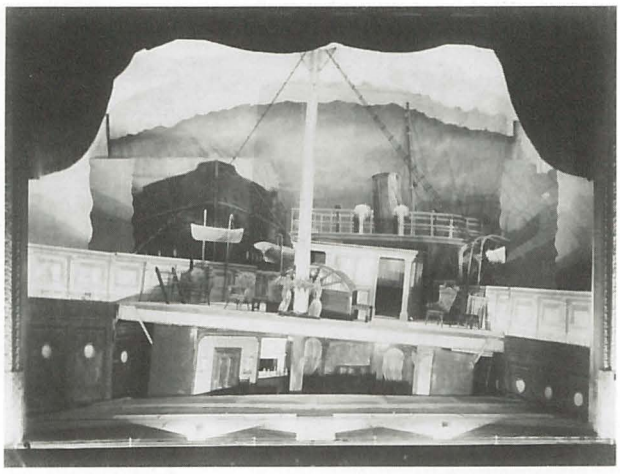

Two of the illustrations from Victorian Spectacular Theatre *showing the sinking yacht scene from 'The Price of Peace' as portrayed by the 'Graphic' artist, and for comparison a photograph of the actual set at Drury Lane.*

one of its activists was E. W. Godwin whose credo was that

> We do not go to the playhouse merely to observe the passion of the actor or listen to funny speeches, 'but to witness such a performance as will place us as nearly as possible as spectators of the original scene or of the thing represented, and this result is only obtainable where accuracy in every part is secured.'
>
> He argued that comedies of manners and customs require exact archaeological treatment, not to mention the artistic treatment of costume, scenery, and properties demanded by the higher poetical drama represented by Shakespeare. Godwin even suggested that the critic ignore acting and 'give undivided attention to the externals of architecture and costume.'

Much of the flavour of this approach to historical plays comes through in a quotation from William Poel's ironical advice to Shakespearean producers:

> Choose your play, and be sure to note carefully in what country the incidents took place. Having done this, send artists to the locality to make sketches of the country, of its streets, its houses, its landscapes, of its people, and of their costumes. Tell your artists that they must accurately reproduce the colouring of the sky, of the foliage, of the evening shadows, of the moonlight, of the men's hair and the women's eyes; for all these details are important to the proper understanding of Shakespeare's play. Send, moreover, your leading actor and actress to spend some weeks in the neighbourhood that they may become acquainted with the manners, the gestures, the emotions of the residents, for these things also are necessary to the proper understanding of the play. Then, when you have collected, at vast expense, labour, and research this interesting information about a country of which Shakespeare was possibly entirely ignorant, thrust all this extraneous knowledge into your representation, whether it fits the context or not; let it justify the rearrangement of your play, the crowding of your stage with supernumeraries, the addition of incidental songs and glees, to say nothing of inappropriateness of costume and misconception of character.

The core of the book is two case history chapters devoted respectively to *Irving's Faust of 1885* and *Beerbohm Tree's King Henry VIII of 1910.* The contribution of Goethe and Shakespeare to these productions was not unlike that of a novelist to the Hollywood screenplay of his bestseller. Michael Booth attempts *production logs* but, unlike Jim Hiley at the NT who was what we might term a *primary source fly on the wall,* Michael Booth has to be a secondary fly – perhaps a *fly on the library wall.* Nevertheless be has uncovered excellent primary material from the time of these productions: prompt books, programmes, prints, photographs, autobiographies, letters, newspapers, reminiscences and plots of all kinds (scenic, prop, wardrobe, lighting). He fits the jigsaw together and the production comes alive.

Michael Booth is writing about a high-technology theatre. But unlike today's theatre where the technology is essentially a labour saving device, the Victorian spectacular theatre used its technology to serve its visual credo. The 1881 pantomime at Drury Lane required a running crew of 50 carpenters, 30 prop-men, 15 gasmen, 18 limemen and 10 firemen. Tree's 1910 King Henry VIII used some 28 limelights backstage plus a further two in the dome – a sufficiently new use of foh for Tree to feel the need to explain that they were 'a device for throwing the light upon the faces of those on the stage.'
(Michael Booth uses the word *lime* throughout but presumably the 1910 follow spots were Digby Arcs. Just as we still refer to the latest discharge lamp follow spots, and their operators, as *limes.*)

The book describes the lighting of the various scenes with these resources and a picture emerges of rehearsal methods in a pre-union world where dress rehearsals would start in the morning and go on until two or three o'clock the next morning if things went well. If there were problems it could be five, six or seven with virtually no breaks. For a week!

> The men at their posts on the limelights would drop off to sleep, and the actors would lie about in the circle or in the boxes. Tree would disappear for hours to have supper or talk over some problem of the play, and return at three or four in the morning. The limelight men would spring to attention, the actors rush down on the stage, full of apologies for daring even to feel sleepy in his presence. And he would be as bright and energetic as ever. (*Constance Collier*)

One wonders how today's *Health and Safety at Work* inspectorate would regard this bit of 1885 technology from *Irving's Faust:*

> Two iron plates were screwed into the floor of the stage, to which two wires from the 50-cell Grove battery were attached. Faust and Valentine each wore a metal sole in the right boot, and insulated wires were run up the clothing of both men to an indiarubber glove in whose palm was a metal plate. When each duellist had the correct foot on the plate on the stage, a 90-volt intermittent current was generated and an eerie blue fire flowed from the small saw-teeth on the sword blades when they clashed. Playing Valentine, Alexander received a nasty shock on the first night when he grasped an uninsulated part of the sword hilt.

Apart from the two production logs, there is an account of the costumes for the Drury Lane 1886 *Forty Thieves.* More general chapters describe production techniques of Shakespeare, Melodrama and Pantomime plus an introductory *The Taste for Spectacle* to set the production information in context.

Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910 is the first of a welcome new series of *Theatre Production Studies* with a stated aim of presenting a clear idea of the various styles of production developed in the great theatres of the past. The second volume, published concurrently, is *The Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933* which will be reviewed in the next Cue.

THEATRE AT WORK. The Story of the National Theatre's production of Brecht's *Galileo.* Jim Hiley. Routledge & Kegan Paul. £9.75 (cloth) £5.95 (paperback) (UK)

VICTORIAN SPECTACULAR THEATRE 1850-1910. Michael R. Booth. Routledge & Kegan Paul (Theatre Production Series) £12.50 (UK)