

stage, exactly what they could get away with, and just how tawdry they could be, and yet how magnificent they would seem!

The 'specks and motes', the 'thick softness' of it, was in fact due to the heat haze rising from the floats, and the large amount of water vapour suspended in the air. In this environment, the beams from the limelight must indeed have stabbed through the haze with a power unequalled, for all our pageants and beamlights, until the advent of the 28 volt par 64 'aero' or lightcurtain. In this the joints in the flattage and the ancient stains on the floor must totally have disappeared: and in this even the dry makeup of the reputedly beautiful Ellen Terry, (composed we now learn of a 'maquillage' of Fullers Earth, rice flour, white lead, red lead, powdered antimony, rouge and burnt cork) must have looked good enough for her complexion to be described by contemporary writers as "radiantly natural, needing only a quick stroke from a rabbit's foot to restore a healthful glow". One can imagine her horror when she beheld 'the effect of the faces in the electric footlights'. She used dry makeup to the end.

To the Irvings, Terrys, Trees and Harkers of the era, the coming of the electric light was no boon and blessing. In total unity of purpose, one with another, they built themselves a world of theatre in which all the components balanced out. Within the conventions of this world they were free to move and experiment in any direction, and indeed they would deny that they had any restriction at all: there is no doubt but that they were the magic-makers of the day. But the coming of the electric light demanded that they change many of their basic premises. The illusion of the lighting, the illusion of the makeup, the illusions of the scenery and costume, all had to be relearned. Their first reaction was to reject it altogether. This in no way meant that they were diehards, with their heads firmly stuck in the sands of their past successes. Far from it. Much of the best of their lighting was yet to come. Besides, Irving had already been responsible for material advance in the use of light since the days of De Louthebourg, Garrick's designer. But he had looked at the electric light: and he had not liked what he had seen.

Others, though seized upon the new medium with ferocious delight. Already, by the time the Savoy had settled, the Alhambra Theatre had installed auditorium lighting to a limited extent. On the continent theatres were being equipped at a furious rate, while in Britain all the new theatres that were nearing completion or in planning were converted to the electric power as a matter of course. For a while the invention of the incandescent gas-mantle threatened to slow down the introduction of electricity, but by the mid-eighties, the improvement to the accumulator allowed the electric light to be completely steady, flicker-free and more or less secure against loss of power, and this eventually cleared the way for theatres to take the step of abolishing gas and oil as a primary source of light from their building altogether.

Autolycus

Vox inhumana

Ergastrimythos, as every classically-educated mastermind knows, is the Greek word for the art of belly-speaking, or, to throw the voice more plainly, ventriloquism. It has, surprisingly, a very ancient history, getting several mentions in the Bible (the Witch of Endor seems to have had a go), and turning up regularly in the works of Hippocrates, Aristophanes and Plutarch. Our authority for all this—and probably, indeed, the *only* authority on the subject in the world—is the appropriately named Valentine Vox, who we see on the telly with his demented dog George (sic), and who was once described by the great doyen of the art, Edgar Bergen, as a "dishonest ventriloquist"; "because," Bergen explained, "he doesn't move his lips."

What he does move, however, is about the world, continually adding to his extensive collection of early references, records, playbills, posters, photos, toys and objects generally that all bear on his art. He has, for example, over 200 of the moppets and mannikins that have sat the knees of generations of famous ventriloquists. To call them 'dummies' would be incorrect and possibly dangerous; one exasperated wife of a ventriloquist cited his 'little friend' as the correspondent in her divorce suit.

The fruits of Valentine Vox's 15 year odyssey to find out all there is to know about the rare talent he discovered he possessed when he started 'talking to himself' at the age of 10 will now, with some help from the V & A, go on exhibition at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood (Free! Take your father!) from October the 21st. His handsomely illustrated book* "I can see your lips moving—the history and art of ventriloquism" (which grew out of a request from a record-producer for him to say a few words on the history of the art, and his finding there really weren't any) will be published concurrently (Not free—but fascinating).

Today, of course, we look on ventriloquists simply as gifted entertainers, and for each generation of audiences apparently, one or two seem to turn up whose acts become family favourites, nationally known, like Charlie McCarthy and Archie Andrews—the dolls, perhaps, rather better known than their mouthpieces. But, originally, the 'distant voice' technique seems to have been used almost as a black art, for oracular utterances, divinations and spells, and its practitioners were thought close to sorcerers and dealers with the devil. It was not until the end of the 18th century, when we find a certain Joseph Atkins ("One leg, two

voices Atkins") being billed as "the celebrated ventriloquist now performing with universal applause at Sadlers Wells" that the idea caught on that this was entertainment, and people began to laugh rather than go down on their knees. The early performers played halls like the London Rooms and the Regent Gallery, and, around 1820, the French ventriloquist, M. Alexandre, added a vital element of dramatisation to his turn by using just his own voice to create an illusion of 13 different people all on stage at once. The first use of a doll as a partner is credited to a Mr. E. D. Davis who appeared as 'Tommy and Joey' in the 1880's, but the first bill-topping, show-stopping double act was that of the famous Fred Russell around the turn of the century (another Russell first was as the father of Val Parnell, and as the grandfather, therefore, of Jack). Sometime in the Twenties, by one of those curious inversions of reality and illusion that show-business throws up, the dolls seem to take over from their operators as the real stars of the acts and ventriloquists have been modestly accepting the change ever since. Why this should have appeared is a bit of a mystery. The 'familiar' in Valentine Vox's collection certainly don't look very *human*. They were, and continue to be, the sort of grotesque who, collectively, would be a nice little cast for a Hammer film to be directed by Bergman rather than Bergen. And *this* may be because so many of them were originally made, to a 'primitive' pattern, by just two famous craftsmen, Len Insull and his son; the traditional English material is papier-mache, 'though in America the faces are of wood.

Today, the traditional dolls are giving place to more cuddly, or abstract, characterisations. Valentine Vox's George is, as we have said, a dotty red dog. Lennie is some sort of lion. Floom is possibly a feather boa. But, behind each doll and behind each 'conversation', what remains is a unique capacity in a very few human beings, and, as Valentine Vox has found out, a history and an art that goes back over 3,000 years.

Nothing succeeds like excess?

From time to time, in a pious bid to provide more international coverage, CUE examines aspects of theatre abroad, and then rather wishes it hadn't. Some issues back a correspondent was complaining that of the 25 theatres listed in Barcelona something like 20 of them had been converted to the Spanish equivalent of discotheques or stripamas or clip-joints in general. From rumbustious Rome now comes the finding that of the 46 "legitimate" theatres listed in the 'Chronaca di Roma' 40 are (this month) in a state of being "Chiuso" or "riposo" (which is to say, as of actors, "resting").

Italy, in fact, with a national theatre tradition that runs all the way back, and further, to the gloomy Seneca and jolly Plautus, sweeps in the whole commedia del arte idea, and comes up ringing lovely bells like Pirandello et alii, seems to be in the process of giving the whole art-form the

"I can see your lips moving" published by Kay & Ward price £12.50