

# IMAGES IN RETROSPECT

Francis Reid visits IMAGES OF SHOW BUSINESS at the V & A and ROYAL OPERA HOUSE RETROSPECTIVE 1732–1982 at the R.A.

'Remind me to remind you, we said we'd never look back.'

sang the Salad Days audio clip as I entered the current Theatre Museum exhibition at the V & A (running until April 17, free). Still as good advice for the young as it was when I was a lad. And Salad Days was indeed running when I left Edinburgh on a one-way bus ticket, fifty pounds in the post office, with screwdriver and pliers, plus sticks of Leichner five and nine and a lake liner, in order to commence reforming the theatre from my power base as a £4 a week rep a.s.m. I did not of course reform the theatre, but I set out in the right spirit – and I believe the only spirit for anyone contemplating a life in the theatre which, with some areas such as the church and, hopefully, politics and social work, is still a calling rather than a job. So, young 'uns, learn your history but cast it aside in a blaze of reforming zeal and you will earn the right to wallow in it during some of your later primes – one of the nicer discoveries of living is that life consists of an unfolding series of new primes.

The Theatre Museum exhibition is titled **IMAGES OF SHOW BUSINESS**. *Images* is a good word for the three dimensional items or two dimensional representations of them that remain after a performance. Performance is an art with many more than three dimensions: my own fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions are all concerned with time. The passing time that gives fluidity to a moving object, the real time that is the once only unrepeatable, unrecordable nature of the performer/audience relationship, and the elapsed time that requires us to consider any performance in its historical

context. Film and video techniques may allow us to record a small measure of fluidity but they cannot capture a really significant impression of audience responses and attitudes. Although one must concede just how helpful it would be to have even one scratchy fragment of video of a routine Garrick evening at Drury Lane!

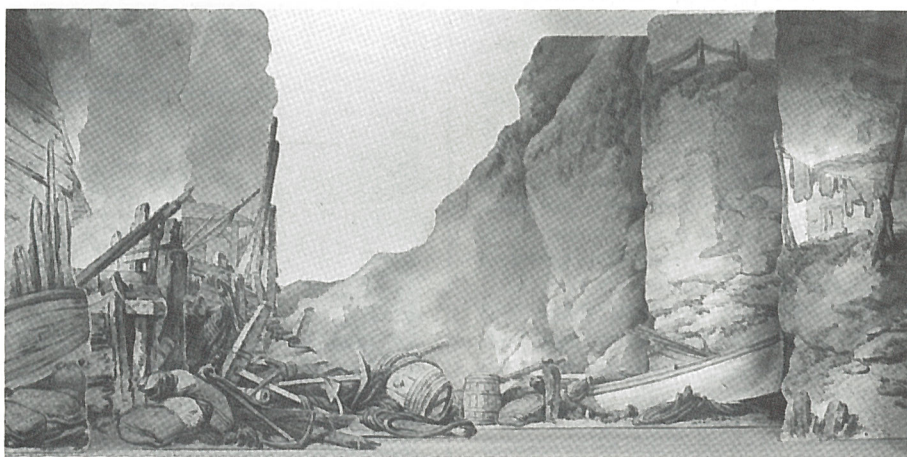
The performances are dead – long live their images. Regular readers of this magazine will be aware that I favour juxtaposition of a mass of related images. They will have guessed that my favourite permanent display is in Copenhagen, and that in Amsterdam I have found the consistently finest series of temporary thematic exhibitions. Both institutions believe in that old adage of the whole being more than the sum of the parts, and so they pile up the images almost to the point of chiaroscuro. And Copenhagen has the advantage (almost the indispensable advantage) of being located in a theatre.

Our own Theatre Museum is undergoing

a somewhat extended period of gestation within the V & A whose acknowledged excellence lies in the display of **SIGNIFICANT IMAGES**. It is rumoured that this style will continue when the Theatre Museum opens a permanent display from its collections in its projected theatreland home in a Covent Garden basement. Certainly there are likely to be space restrictions but it was interesting to see just how much the Ephemera Society were able to achieve by juxtaposition of multiple images of varying significance using the small Barbican space allocated to their Christmas Exhibition.

The autumn number of **SIGHTLINE** carries a leader welcoming the reprieve of the Theatre Museum (anonymous, but with enough internal evidence to authenticate it as pure Bentham). I commend the last paragraph for particularly serious consideration (the italics are mine) . . .

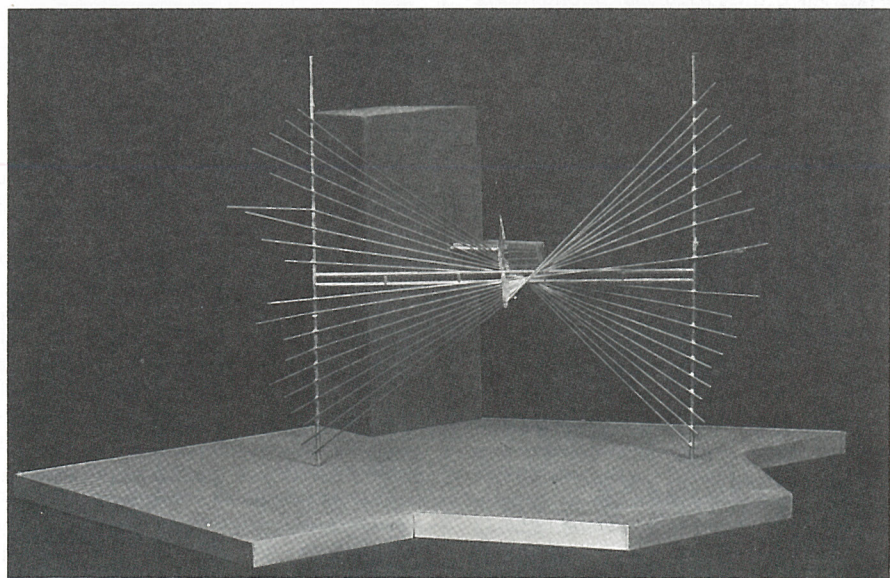
Theatre, like religion or any other en-



Philip James de Loutherbourg. Model of quay and beach setting 1771–1785.



Louis Gunnis. 'The OP Side of the Empire', 1895.



Roger Butlin. Model for set for 'Medea'.