

How Safe is Your Theatre?

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Most managers, after recoiling sharply at such a question, would probably retort that since their theatres were licensed it followed that they complied with the requirements laid down by the "authorities" and were, therefore, as safe as could be, thank you very much. They might even add, if they felt like warming to the subject, that they were probably a lot safer than some of those big stores down the road, particularly at times like Christmas when they bulged from top to bottom with highly flammable goods and were festooned with plastic decorations, which followed one along the ritual journey to Father Christmas's polystyrene Grotto! And what about all those people jammed into the gangways, bristling with umbrellas and parcels — all trying to move in different directions at the same time!

Indeed, have they not got a point when they compare that kind of *mêlée* with the far more orderly conduct of their own patrons, who buy their tickets and quietly file into long rows of fixed seating to watch the show? And as quietly file out — well, usually.

That said, it is probably true that, not since the days of Richard Burbage, whose Globe Theatre was burnt down in 1613, has there been a manager who has not infringed one or two, or even on occasion quite a number, of the regulations laid down for the safety of people in his theatre.

Of course, in Burbage's day, the puritanical City Fathers regarded theatres as evil places and joyously declared the destruction of the Globe to be "an Act of God." Today we would be more likely to ascribe it to a neglect of elementary precautions while, at the same time, being thankful that current building regulations do not permit theatres to have roofs of straw which can be ignited by the firing of cannon during Shakespearean productions.

Rather the opposite may be said to be the case these days, for such is the proliferation of regulations of all kinds — building, Health & Safety at Work Act, Fire Precautions Act and so on — that it can seem a wonder to some that a theatre can get built at all or, when it is, that a show can actually be mounted in it!

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the begetters of these requirements do so in the name of safety, both for those who work in the theatre and those who visit it, and while some may appear to bring with them the proverbial sledge-hammer to crack a nut, it should not be forgotten that quite a few of the regulations have been brought about as a result of previous fires, accidents or near misses.

Irksome Rules

That some officials charged with implement-

ing the rules occasionally display little or no understanding of how theatres work is just one of those irksome realities that managements (and others) have to live with while muttering invectives behind the door through which the representative of "authority" has just passed!

There is an oft-repeated story of a senior GLC official (now retired) who came across a rule stating that an unguarded edge more than two feet above floor level in a "place of assembly" should be protected by a fixed guard-rail or barrier. After visiting the Lyttleton Theatre during the construction of the NT complex he returned to the office with the news that there was nothing to prevent actors from falling off the stage on to the front row of seats, which certainly is very close. In accordance with the rule, he argued, a guard-rail should be provided across the width of the proscenium.

Fortunately, wiser counsels prevailed, or we might have seen the creation of a new breed of National Theatre Players who only needed to act from the waist upwards.

It is well that this official was sufficiently unversed in theatrical lore as to be unaware that, in the not too distant past at the Old Vic, a sword had been knocked out of an actor's hand during a stage fight and had ended up on an empty seat in the stalls. That would surely have convinced him that nothing short of a partition between stage and auditorium would suffice!

Of course, when one comes to consider the matter, a theatre can be quite a risky place to be in: more perhaps for the actor than the audience. What with stage traps, moving trucks, heavy scenery zooming up and down over one's head, masses of electrics, stage effects of all kinds including firearms, which have damaged people before now, and set changes in almost total darkness, it is astonishing that more accidents don't occur, particularly at rehearsals before these manoeuvres have been thoroughly worked out and plotted.

Surprise is often expressed at the variations between licensing requirements in different parts of the country. Now that national building regulations exist (except for London) some standardisation may be expected in this quarter, but licensing conditions remain in the hands of the local District or County Councils. Depending on the administration arrangements, their control and implementation may be in the hands of the local police or fire brigade or a department of the Council. The only unifying factor is the Theatres Act, 1968 which, under Section 12 gives the local authority power to licence theatres and public performances of plays.

Some authorities, particularly the GLC, have very detailed requirements in respect of theatres and other places of public entertainment. Technical Regulations — which deal with standards of fire separation, construction, means of escape and electrical,

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