

# REIDing SHELF

Theatre buildings have souls. But they do not communicate with words. So, alas, they cannot write the autobiographies which would surely fascinate and excite us with revelations of secrets and opinions. However there seems to be quite an upsurge in the publication of theatre biographies, often linked to the anniversaries now being reached by the survivors of the late nineteenth century theatre building boom. Biographers may not know what a theatre was thinking or feeling, but they can recreate something of the actuality of lost performances from diligent research plus their own response to the intangible atmosphere that departed audiences and actors leave within the theatre's walls. As a biographer Donald Campbell perhaps veers towards the analytical rather than the emotive, but his **A BRIGHTER SUNSHINE** does a useful job in celebrating Edinburgh Royal Lyceum's elevation to centennial dignity.

His title is derived from the extensive prologue spoken, or rather 'delivered', on the opening night in 1883 by J. B. Howard and F. W. Wyndham –

To picture out fresh glories, and to cast,  
A brighter sunshine o'er our Scottish stage.

For many years the Scottishness of the stage referred to its geographical location rather than the scripts that were produced or even the actors who performed. But a substantial part of Donald Campbell's story is the emergence of a Scottish national (but not yet with capital N) Theatre – and the part played by the Lyceum in the drama segment of the Scottish performing arts renaissance that has been a feature of the thirty years since I left Edinburgh to seek my theatrical fortune in the south.

Although I have lit only a couple of shows at the Lyceum, its seats are well acquainted with the contours of my bottom. Especially in the gallery where I had a permanent booking on the Saturday nights of my last years at school and first years at university. So it is a theatre for which I have a special affection – but not for its current (1977) decorative scheme. Some day it shall be restored to the cool elegance of C. J. Phipps. An elegance which survived the only other major refurbishment, carried out in the 1930s.

For a theatre history to offer any remote prospects of viability as a publishing venture it must, in the words of the blurb on this book's jacket, be 'written from the viewpoint of an ordinary theatregoer'. Does this however really exclude a few architectural photographs and plans, ancient and modern? But I must not quibble: I enjoyed the book enormously.

Although it is ludicrous that Edinburgh has failed to build a festival opera house, the Lyceum, whose demolition featured in most

of the discarded proposals, has at least been spared. And so, when Edinburgh eventually builds a large theatre as Edinburgh eventually must, the Lyceum will remain. It has survived into an era when we cherish, preserve and write books about the theatres of our architectural heritage.

All biographies of British theatres share a common theme: survival. Merely to be still standing after a century is quite an achievement. The theatre we know as *Stratford East* stands uniquely, battered and alone, amidst the concrete jungle of developer's architecture at its bleakest and blandest that is the centre of London's E.15. But the **THEATRE ROYAL** whose history Michael Coren records has not just survived the standard traumas of apathy and poverty. It has survived the aftermath of nearly two decades as one of the twin powerhouses that set the style of today's theatre. Whereas George Devine's Royal Court developed the textual aspects of the new drama, Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at E.15 liberated performance from the confines of text.

The account of the seventy years prior to Littlewood is rather skeletal – but then there is nothing particularly unique to report. Stratford's story of that period is largely interchangeable with that of dozens of other theatres. The key years are well conveyed and form a most useful record, in conjunction with Howard Goorney's 'The Theatre Workshop Story' (see Cue 13). The account of the subsequent decade provides a useful piece of the jigsaw recording the traumas of playhouses in today's age of the committee.

Readers of Cue will be pleased that proper credit is given throughout to the contribution of John Bury. The interaction between John Bury and Joan Littlewood has had an immense influence on today's theatre design and technology. And so the naivety of the author's 'footlights were considered outmoded' can be overlooked, particularly as it shares a sentence with a more fundamental and timely observation for 1953 – 'from the very first productions hardly any stage make-up was used'.

It is interesting, in the context of Stratford as a popular theatre, to note the style of the opening night. Unlike Messers Howard & Wyndham at Edinburgh Royal Lyceum, no special prologue is remembered. But there is a press account of the first actor manager, Charles Dillon's, first night direct appeal to his audience –

Mr Dillon won much applause. He worked under difficulties and in one important scene had to interrupt the action of the play in order to reprove some inattentive gods who were appeasing their appetites. At the end of the act Mr Dillon

very properly delivered the dwellers on high a lecture on the sin of cracking nuts, and it is to be hoped they will profit by his very earnest reproof. 'You treat me fairly', said Mr Dillon, 'and I will treat you fairly, and give you good entertainment; but I will certainly not have the beautiful lines of this play spoiled and my artists insulted by your rude behaviour'.

The national theatre of my formative years was known as *Tennents* and directed by *Binkie* Beaumont who had earned access to all the best actors and best theatres. This gave him first refusal of most of the best scripts. His control was earned by pursuing quality: Tennent productions were staged with consistently high standards of direction, setting, costume and lighting. Through Joe Davis they pioneered lighting design in Britain and it will doubtless surprise Cue readers of *Kitty Black's UPPER CIRCLE* that her sole mention of lighting is a passing reference to Strand's Stanley Earnshaw. No Joe – and no Iain Dow either! Clearly someone must eventually record the full Tennent contribution to our theatrical heritage and I hope that their archives have been preserved for future researchers.

Meanwhile *Kitty Black* places on record a picture of Hugh (*Binkie*) Beaumont which ties in with my own received hearsay and is given the *Gielgud* seal ('The description of *Binkie* is accurate, amusing and admirable'). I never met *Binkie*, although I did journey in that famous *Globe Theatre* lift to be rejected as a potential *asm* – alas I am not he who shared the tiny cage with *Marie Tempest* when she said 'After that experience, young man, there is nothing for us but marriage'.

Although focussing on *Tennents* where she spent some fifteen years in key executive roles, *Upper Circle* is a chronicle of *Kitty Black's* professional life which included a successful career as a play translator and a spell in charge of the drama department at top literary agents *Curtis Brown*. *West End Theatre* at its final peak of commercial viability is therefore seen through the eyes of one who was involved at the centre of its action. This view from within will give the book a future importance. Meanwhile I, for one, enjoyed the stimulus to my personal memory of so many evenings of exquisite theatre – and not just in London, because *Binkie's* Theatre was truly National.

The *Group Theatre's* influence went far beyond its tangible performance achievements. As a *Poet's Theatre* exploring the integration of dance, mime and music with heightened styles of individual and choral speech, it was one of the key laboratories for today's stage. Its experiments were limited by the financial conditions of an age when funding was primarily dependent upon box office with only some slender private patronage to augment the basic subsidy offered by the grossly underpaid energies of the *Group's* members.