

hope that designers will increasingly use this technique to demonstrate to directors, actors and (especially) lighting designers, just how they hope their sets will be used at key moments during the progress of the production. I would like to see British acting style escape more frequently from the confines of barely heightened naturalism, and so I welcome evidence that costume design drawings are showing more tendency to escape from the confines of dressmaker's reality. But, above all, this exhibition constantly reassures me that young designers are firmly in the business of offering actors a supportive environment. (In the process of developing decor into scenography there have been moments during the last couple of decades when extreme minimalism has left actors rather cruelly exposed.)

Touring has always been at the heart of British theatre. Would it not therefore be rather appropriate for our national Theatre Museum to offer a short London run to interesting regional exhibitions of local theatre? Exhibitions such as that mounted by Oldham Leisure Services to mark the centenary of Oldham Coliseum and running in the Library's Local Interest Centre until February 7th.

**Theatre, Eagle Street**

Opened circa 1810  
Closed circa 1840

**Working Men's Hall/Theatre Royal, Horsedgate Street**

Opened 1844  
Closed circa 1958

**Adelphi/Gaiety, Union Street**

Opened 1868  
Closed 1920

**People's Music Hall, Rock Street**

Opened circa 1870  
Closed circa 1896

**Colosseum/Coliseum, Fairbottom Street**

Opened 1887

**Empire, Waterloo Street**

Opened 1897  
Closed circa 1960

**Palace, Union Street**

Opened 1908  
Closed 1935

**Grand, Union Street**

Opened 1908  
Closed 1936

**Grange Arts Centre, Rochdale Road**

Opened 1975

Called simply **OLDHAM THEATRES** it traces the history of Oldham's nine theatres, of which only two, the 1887 *Coliseum* and the 1975 *Grange Arts Centre* remain open. So, although specifically about Oldham, the story could be that of many a British town.

The names are universal: Adelphi, Coliseum, Empire, Gaiety, Grand, Palace and of course Royal. Every town had at least one of these, many towns had several, Oldham had them all. A 1922 ordnance survey map showed their locations and the potted biographies of each one included reminiscences by regular members of their audiences.

Ephemera on show included the usual posters, prints, photographs, newspaper cuttings, etc. The inevitable, and rightly so, box office. And a series of tableaux including a box set with a backstage glimpse, a dressing room and a design studio. The exhibition was housed not in an elegant room but in a hall with something of the threadbare flavour that was for so long characteristic of so many backstage areas.

The slight distancing of the sound tapes of musical comedy numbers helped enormously. The display includes considerable material on Oldham's regional playhouse, the Coliseum, whose centenary motivates the exhibition, and James Carter has written a well illustrated history of this famous theatre, available at £2.95 from the Local Studies Library. This book, like the whole exhibition, encapsulates the general story of the joys and frustrations of the development of any rep (to use a good old honest but now somewhat devalued word).

*Oldham Theatres* probably fails to match the exhibition criteria of the V & A who are the Theatre Museum's masters. But it is strong in those elusive traces of naivety and tacky cheerfulness which are at the heart of popular theatre but seem to be missing from the tasteful elegance that has been imposed upon our theatre history by the art historians.

But then theatre does rather stand at the crossroads of art and hokum.



Dressing Room, Oldham Theatres Exhibition.



Designer's Room, Oldham Theatres Exhibition.