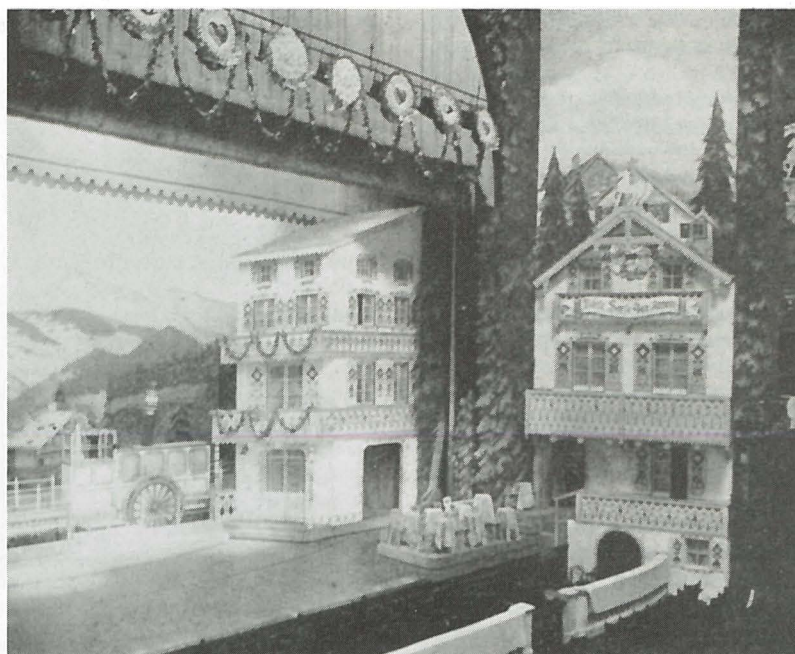


impossible to see the pelmet area for the loudspeaker array hanging there. Needless to say the centre group of seats in the last two rows of stalls had to be removed to house a domineering visitor in the shape of a mighty sound console. For a real band of twelve, the short very front row of seats is removed and the pit uncovered.

It is sad that in seeking to attract the public to a theatre whose principle merit is that it is of its period, it has to be vandalised however temporarily by today's taste in technology. Could it be, I pondered, that one fine day thanks to laser and fibroptic technology it will become easy to diffuse & direct all the FOH stage lighting necessary via those four lamp-posts with all hidden within from view? Back to today with a bang! A similar thought, but in the reverse direction, occurred to me under the stage where so much of the old machinery remains. It seems accepted that, unlike the Tyne Newcastle, this is unlikely to be used even if it were in proper working condition. What we have here is something which *some* may wish to visit as a museum exhibit. But lit as it is by bare fluorescent lamps it is no longer an authentic understage of its period. A fuss over nothing? Above stage the practical has rightly taken over and instead of 28 hemp lines there are now 34 single-purchase counterweight sets. The dressing rooms are nicely housed en-suite under the stalls area — another legacy from Detmar Blow. This level goes on to house the stalls crush bar. What I found good is the way the doors to the Ladies and Gentlemen are near to each other. None of that finding relief for *the* person and now where the hell is mine! The front of the house area can hardly be described as spacious but does have style and gets one into the mood for the lofty impact of the auditorium.

All this is very well but what of seating and sightlines? As is usual in these theatres too much must not be expected of the sightlines downstairs. The Playhouse seats 790 now whereas in the 1946 Stage Guide it claimed only 653. I am told that the difference is accounted for by the substitution of normal seating rather than luxury arm-chairs in the stalls. And now for the upper circle. Even in 1946 this was not called the gallery; perhaps no one was prepared to queue on the draughty Embankment. Whatever it is called access is not via the main entrance and there are many stairs to climb. Once up there the upper circle drops steeply away from under one's feet. I found myself clutching a special rail for the descent to the front row up there. Steep top balconies are far from unknown but perhaps the height decor, so effective in the rest of the auditorium, *stresses* the stress. The seating in the balconies is rather odd. The seat backs are angled to encourage you to learn back and look upwards. They are quite wrong; it is as if they were intended for the stalls of some cinema. The 'dress circle' front row runs into trouble as the de-luxe padded top to the balustrade tends to intrude itself in the view downwards.

On the title page of the programme for C. B. Cochran's *The Cat and the Fiddle* at



*In 1931 at the London Coliseum, Erik Charell spread the show Whitehorse Inn over the stage boxes right up to the circle*



*The 1908 Playhouse interior design by Detmar Blow and Fernand Billerey*