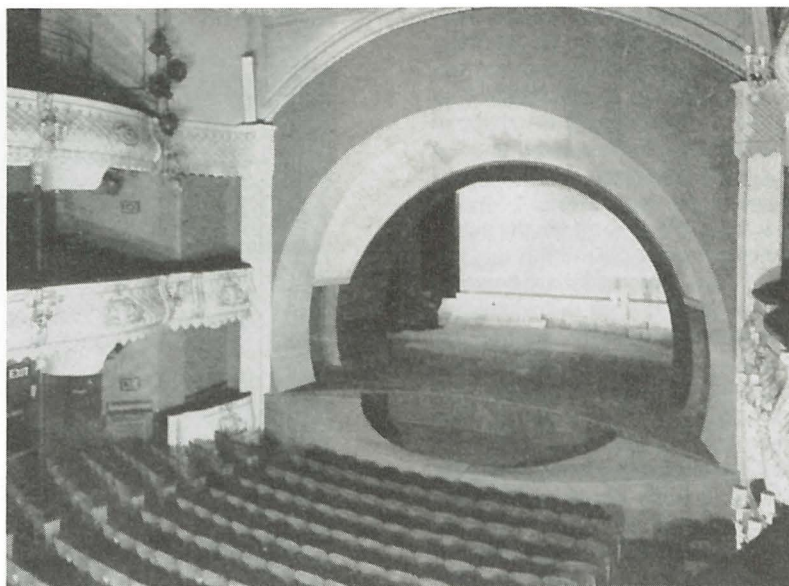


contact of actor with audience; either by thrusting him among them or surrounding him by them.

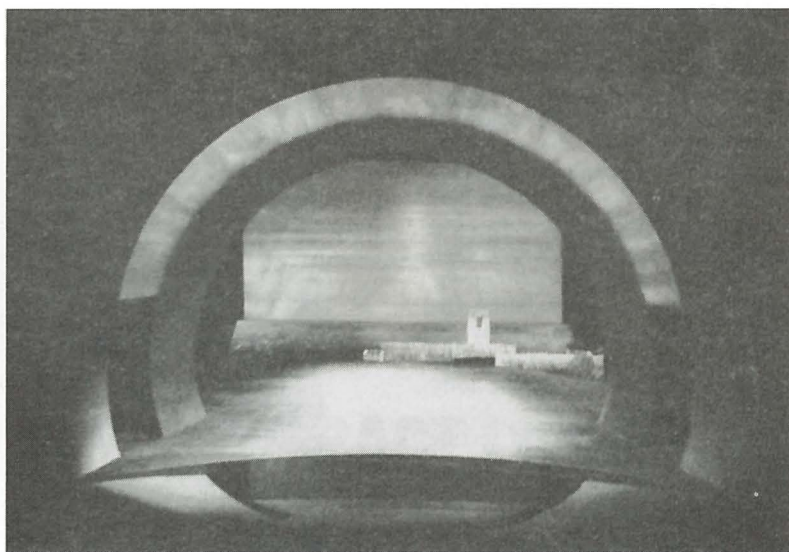
The anti-scenery battle has of course been lost. No matter how unsuitable the venue or whether most of the audience can see the stuff, masses of scenery will be there. If it should so chance that the set is simple in line and size, then it will be made of some strange material like mirror to tease both eye and brain. All this time when there has been so much talk and writing about live acting and theatres designed to exploit to the full this unique advantage over cinema and television we find that what the public wants is a revival of the old mechanical stage and does not care whether it is worked by live men or by computer, so long as there is a lot of whirling up, down, around and loud noise and lights. Can the reader imagine what we would have thought in decades past, if some ass had predicted that Sir Laurence would one day land up as a hologram in a show like *Time* at the Dominion theatre: a 1931 theatre which was then, as for most of its career, only successful as a *cinema*.

Now for the Playhouse or BBC studio down on the Embankment from which the Goon Show and Hancock's Half Hour used to be broadcast. Distinction indeed, another was that of being demolished by a railway station falling on it. There can't be another theatre anywhere which can claim that experience. Detmar Blow is the memorable name of the architect by whom it was restored in 1907. The exterior however dates from the time of the original theatre, 1882. Always excepting the top three floors of luxury flats added to finance the present restoration of the theatre below. Apparently it was touch & go whether they would get their licence in time to open on time for *Girlfriends*, as the building was not considered sufficiently ready. Eventually a provisional licence was issued so long as the top circle was not used. To remark on this would hardly have been relevant in this article were it not for the fact that I used the Underground just across the road to go home afterwards. It was rush hour and like so many of these stations there was extensive building work in progress. As the masses swarmed up the uncompleted stairway I could not help remarking to Roderick Ham on the curious discrepancy between theatre regulations and those if any, of public transport. There are only 210 seats in the Playhouse balcony, I wonder how many use that tube station, Covent Garden? When are they going to complete those lifts? I am sure they had been working on them for some years when I left 29 King Street at the end of 1973!

From the moment one enters the Playhouse from the Embankment, what one sees is impressive. I use this word deliberately because I did not find myself reacting to it as I do to Wyndhams or the new Swan at Stratford for example. The Playhouse auditorium is so dramatic of itself as to take one's breath away. But as far as this one was concerned, it did not do this for long and I soon became critical. In which respect it is necessary to make a distinction between the



The 1962 stage and curved proscenium arch designed by Richard Negri and Michael Elliot



fundamental and the superficial. For example, apart from anything else there is a clash between the new paintings on the pelmet and safety curtain, and the old paintings on wall and ceiling. Although how the latter appear may be the result of age and dirt, the new stuff appears too brash in contrast. What should be there is something midway between the two in tonality. The pair of boxes either side are dramatic indeed; the lower ones with the pregnant gilt caryatids and the crimson curtains of the upper ones swaggering their way right up to the ceiling. The key impression is of height; and this is emphasised by the pair of tall gilt 'street' lamp-posts each side, towering up from 'dress circle' to line up with the balcony balustrade. These balustrades are a fine feature in themselves, even though the lower one was disfigured centre with some stage lighting equipment: ay, there's the rub; for spotlights are not only there but in plentitude elsewhere. Vertically up the sides

of the pros lots of Patt. 264s are to be seen. Even though they were 'my' beloved bifocals of an earlier & wiser age, I thought them an eyesore there.

Nor will this be all; Bob Anderson, the electrical consultant, told the ABTT assemblage, to approving gurgles from a certain F. Reid seated immediately in front of me, how suspension lines can be lowered through purposeful holes in the ceiling to enable bars with massed ranks of spots to hang up there. I wonder what lighting was used during the 1913-14 management era of Marie Tempest, whose name painted up in outsize letters outside remained for passengers on Charing Cross station above to see for all the long years of closure as a real theatre. Did the 1913-ers say it's no good going to a show down there, the lighting is so poor you can't see her. Nor do I think that they lamented the absence of amplifiers & loudspeakers. Yet for the re-opening with *Girlfriends* I understand it was