

AUTOLYCUS

Oz invests in 12 West End theatres

So, control of Stoll Moss Theatres has changed for the second time in just two months. Behind the new owners, Charmead, an Australia-based investment group, is one of the world's most aggressive and successful businessmen, Robert Holmes à Court, whose business empire now includes an astonishing proportion of acquisitions, of which Stoll Moss is but a tiny part. Charmead is said to have paid more than £25 million for the 12 London theatres plus a package that includes Bermans and Nathans, the theatrical costumiers.

Stoll Moss have suffered two spectacular West End flops to write off this year, *Winnie* and *Ziegfeld*, yet Charmead was not alone in wanting to buy the organisation. Indeed, had there been the choice, things might have been different. Louis Benjamin, Stoll Moss' chief executive recently said: "If it had been an open thing that these theatres were for sale, I would have gone for a management buy-out". Other interested parties included Lord Grade and his brother, Lord Delfont.

The theatres involved are: the Apollo, Cambridge, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Duchess, Garrick, Globe, Her Majesty's, Lyric, Palladium, Queen's, Royalty, and Victoria Palace. This is still by far the largest grouping of West End theatres: the next largest is Maybox, with the Albery, Criterion, Donmar Warehouse, Piccadilly, Whitehall and Wyndhams.

Despite such a substantial chunk of theatres going to Australian ownership, the West End is still predominantly British, with most owners controlling one or two theatres each. Notable exceptions are the Adelphi and Aldwych (owned by the Nederlander Group, American); and the Old Vic (owned by Ed Mirvish, Canadian).

New designers' award draws attention to London fringe

Let's leave behind the world of Australian investors and West End theatres becoming speculative acquisitions in some foreign property portfolio, and take a look at something new on the London fringe. It is launched this year as an additional category in the Charrington London Fringe Awards, which is administered by PTN, the Pub Theatre Network (168-170 Battersea Park Road, London SW11 4ND. Tel: 01-622 4553).

There are other new categories as well, including one for 'most outstanding poster design'. But it's early days to talk about the poster awards, I am told. On the other hand, there have been no shortage of nominations for the production design awards: some 20 are now on

the shortlist alone. The 30-strong panel of judges, all drawn from the fringe, include designers Christina Stephenson, Penny Fitt and Anne Howarth. PTN, for those not familiar with the London scene, number such well-known haunts as the King's Head, Islington, the Man in the Moon, Chelsea, and the Orange Tree, Richmond, among their membership.

What does the winning theatre designer get, I ventured to ask Jessica Dromgoole of PTN? Apart from public recognition, personal satisfaction and so forth. "There is TV coverage of the awards ceremony itself", she replied, "and a plaque will be put up in the theatre concerned to commemorate the winning production and its designer". There may be more to it than that, she confided, but the details are still being finalised.

Anyone interested in the poster award - or who would like to discuss becoming a sponsor of one of the new categories can contact Mademoiselle Dromgoole at the above number. She'd love to hear from you avid Cue readers.

Her observations about fringe design were interesting. Unlike designs for larger theatres, especially in a proscenium setting, London's fringe designs tap into one's imagination more, drawing us into the imaginary world of the play

with greater urgency. "The fringe designs usually build the audience into the design itself," she told Autolykus recently, "and in small theatres, where acting spaces are more fluid than in a conventional theatre, design can involve the audience itself", she added. "Not only for reasons of cost but also in creative terms, almost all fringe designs are non-representational; and they are human-sized, not larger than life. They are never brighter, never larger than the actors".

All in all, I hope the new award scheme will help win fringe design work the credit and credibility it deserves. I've asked for pictures of the winning production to be sent to us as soon as it has been chosen.

Bohemian love takes to the big screen

Aficionados of Puccini's musical portrait of love and life Bohemian style in nineteenth century Paris, will be glad to hear that this best-known of operas has been filmed. Directed by Luigi Comencini, *La Bohème* is produced by Daniel Toscani du Plantier, whose earlier efforts, *Don Giovanni* and *Carmen* were critically acclaimed. It features the voices of José Carreras Barbara Hendricks, two of my favourite singers, although newcomer Luca Canonici takes Carreras' lead acting role since the great tenor became unwell on the third day of shooting.

The movie takes its bow at the Barbican's Cinema 1 on 26 December - where the newly

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