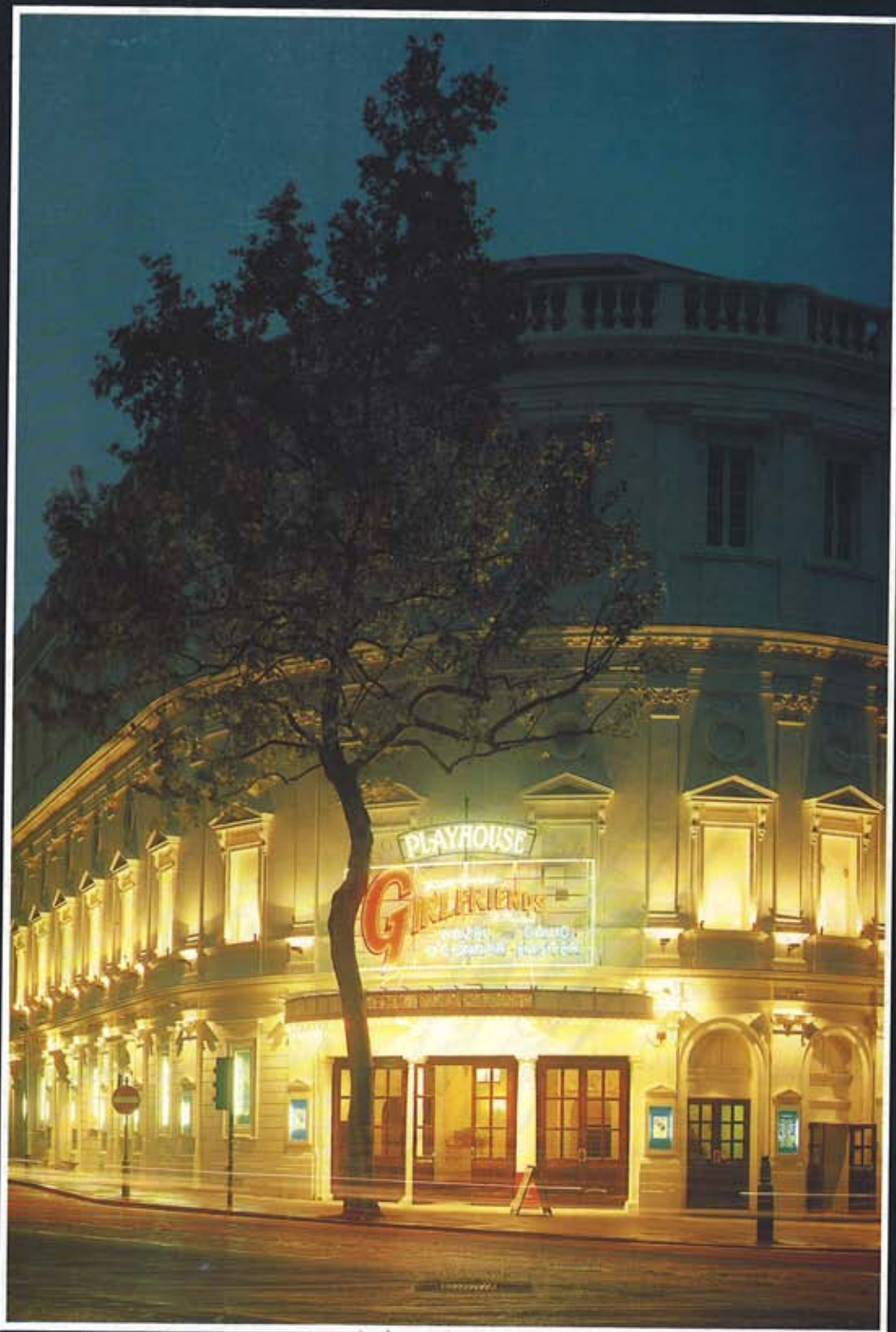


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The Playhouse lives again in London's West End - see feature this issue.

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Playhouse Plush

Derek Gilbert charts the course to the October re-opening of London's Playhouse Theatre.

The return to public use of any derelict theatre is an exciting event, and should be the cause of a celebration. In the case of the London West End's Playhouse Theatre this is particularly so. The Playhouse's auditorium decor has been meticulously and tastefully restored to its original condition, and the front-of-house spaces altered and improved. Just as important, the stage and backstage areas have been completely modernised.

The Playhouse, sited in Northumberland Avenue adjacent to British Rail's Charing Cross Station, was designed by architects Fowler and Hill and first opened its doors to the public in 1882 as the Royal Avenue Theatre. In 1906/7 substantial rebuilding became necessary after part of the elevated station had collapsed during building works, causing fatalities and seriously damaging the theatre. The new interior was modelled in Franco-Venetian style, incorporating a number of unique features including open balustrades.

For many years the Playhouse was run by Gladys Cooper, at first in partnership and later as actor-manager, and a number of Somerset Maugham's plays were first performed in the venue. Among the celebrated actors who appeared there were Noel Coward, Laurence Olivier, Ivor Novello and Alec Guinness.

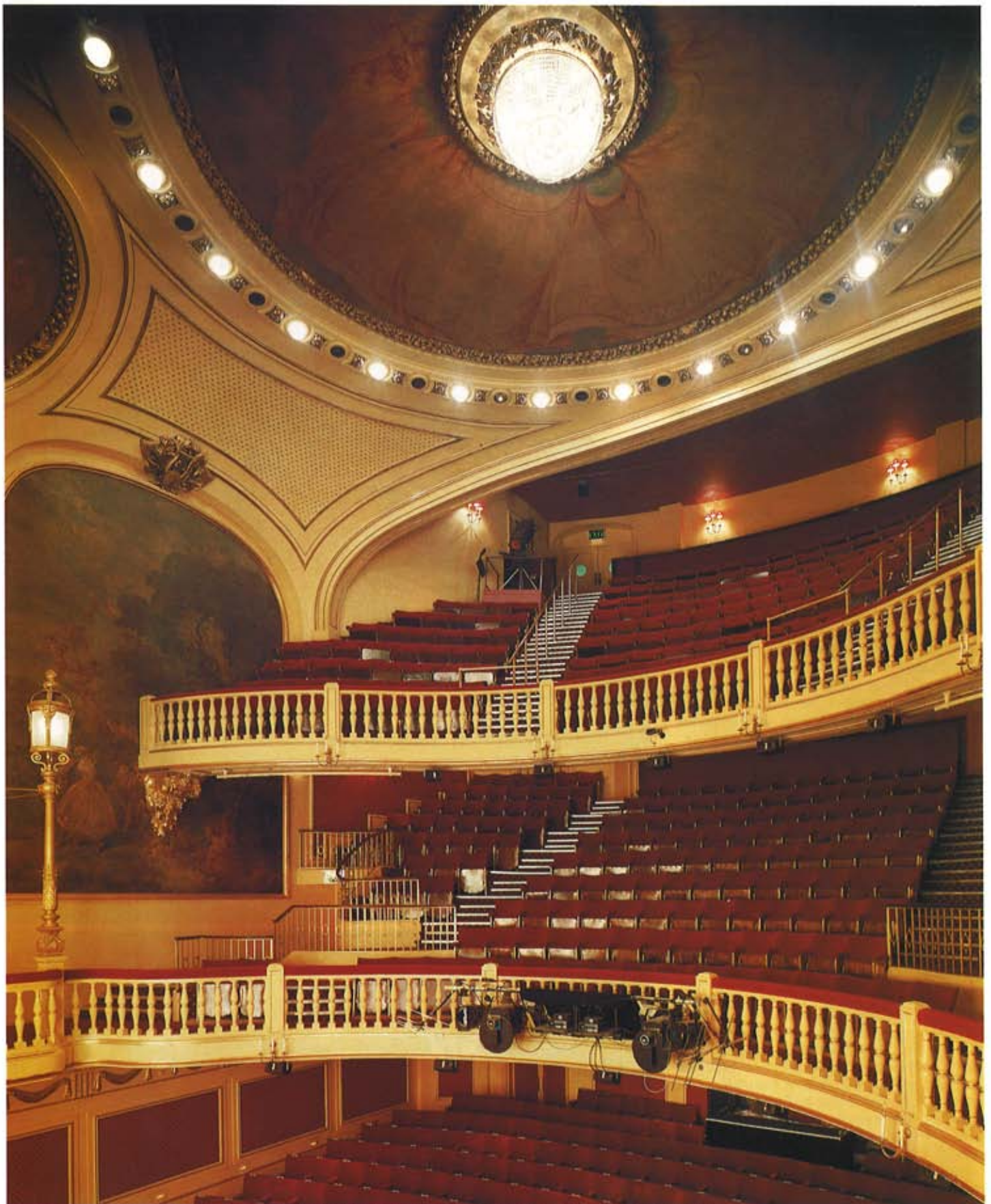
In 1951 it was taken over by BBC Radio, and for the next twenty-five years served as a venue for radio productions that required live audiences such as Hancock's Half Hour. By 1976, the theatre had become somewhat neglected during the radio phase and afterwards fell into a serious state of disrepair. Various proposals were put forward for restoration, conversion or demolition, and all fell by the wayside until 1981 when the site was purchased by property developer Robin Gonshaw. While possessing the natural astuteness of a developer, Gonshaw nevertheless had a long-standing love of theatre, and determined that any development that would take place should include a full restoration of the Playhouse.

After considerable dialogue with the planning authorities, a scheme was eventually approved whereby the Playhouse would be rebuilt with residential accommodation constructed above the theatre, to be supported by an independent steel structure built up through the theatre from new foundations. A narrow block would also be built immediately behind the stage to provide separate lift and staircase access to the flats, as well as providing a number of one-room studios together with ancillary theatre space at basement level. At the same time, the Playhouse's impressive Portland stone facade would be extended upwards to achieve an aesthetic integration between theatre and residential units.

Construction work started in mid-1986, and it has been closely supervised throughout by Robin Gonshaw and an extensive team of professional advisors. Incorporation of a substantial tonnage of steelwork into the theatre's structure created a number of major problems as well as causing delays to the rebuilding programme. Many imaginative and innovative solutions were found, necessitating considerable



Construction work on the Playhouse began in mid-1986, and the theatre was re-opened in October 1987.



Alive again! The Playhouse's auditorium decor has been meticulously and tastefully restored to its original condition.

changes to the front-of-house areas but leaving the auditorium unaffected. Concealment of the steelwork has been carried out in an effective manner so that there is no intrusion and the general public are unaware of its existence.

The stage area, on the other hand, has been subject to extensive rebuilding. Although proscenium, side and rear walls have been retained, the timber grid and hemp flying sets have been completely replaced by a modern steel grid at a higher

level, together with side and crossover galleries and 34 single purchase counterweight sets. Intricate and complicated design work was necessary to incorporate a smoke vent permitting smoke extraction through an opening in the flats being built above the fly tower. All stage engineering works including safety curtain renovation were carried out by P.E.Kemp (Engineers) Ltd. Understage the historically important timber stage machinery installation has been refurbished and one day parts of it may be

used in future productions.

Turning to systems and electrical installations, the original designs had been prepared by Theatre Projects Consultants against a brief that envisaged the Playhouse being occupied by a permanent resident theatre company. Plans changed however, and the provisions demanded by the brief had to be cut back to achieve compatibility with the budget available. During the implementation phase, ongoing consultancy and supervision services were provided by

Charles Wass (theatre and stage equipment), Bob Anderson (electrical and stage lighting), Autograph (sound and communications) and Alan Todd (safety and licencing). A number of additional late requirements were injected by the user so that, throughout the project programme, the design process has been fraught with 'fluidity'.

In October 1986, a significant decision was taken to award to Glantre Engineering Limited a single contract covering supply, installation and commissioning of the complete electrical package for the Playhouse. This encompassed stage lighting, sound and communications, electrical power distribution, general lighting (interior, emergency and exterior) and all other electrical services for the building. The appointment of Glantre certainly produced considerable savings in co-ordination although it did not pass unnoticed that instead of the norm of one consultant and several contractors, the Playhouse electrical works involved several consultants but only one contractor!

The stage lighting installation is based on an 180 channel Strand Gemini control desk located in a miniscule control room at the rear of the dress circle but able to be brought out into the circle during rehearsal. The permanent stage dimmer installation consists of Strand Permus dimmers, 12 x 25 amp and 108 x 10 amp in 6 racks. The Playhouse's opening production, Howard Goodall's musical 'Girlfriends' demanded a heavy lighting rig requiring the basic dimmer installation to be supplemented by a further 48 x 10 amp dimmer in portable packs with demux units to permit control from the spare channels on the Gemini board. The production lighting wiring and socket installation is extensive with more than 60 of the dimmers being provided with two parallel connected pairs of 15A outlets to permit maximum flexibility. In addition, the modular socket boxes also incorporate outlets for 13 independent and 4 rehearsal light circuits.

No stage lighting luminaires are included in the initial scope of supply; it is intended that in accordance with normal West End theatre practice, these will be obtained on hire by the production company, thus providing the lighting designer with a complete freedom of choice. Mark Henderson's lighting rig for 'Girlfriends' comprises over 200 units on hire from White Light, and it was interesting to note that these included a considerable number of Pattern 264's - still performing well after many year's service - as well as Lekos of various beam angles. (The recent introduction of the latter to Strand Lighting's European catalogue is certainly much welcomed, as well as being long overdue.)

The Playhouse is provided with a full specification working light installation - a rare feature in a West End commercial theatre. The system possesses three operational modes - 'Day', 'Night' and 'Show'. Certain circuits are restricted to use in one mode only while others can be made available under two or all three. Under the Show mode, for example, backstage fluorescent fittings are inhibited. This eliminates the possibility of discovering that grid lights have been left on once the first fade to blackout is carried out! Main working light control panels are provided for stage manager and lighting operator with additional local push-button out-station controlling individual circuits at gallery and grid levels. The control rack, located in the dimmer room, incorporates electronic logic circuitry as well as all power contactors and fuses for working lighting, cleaners, independent and rehearsal



Safety in style - another view of the refurbished auditorium.

circuits. The working light control system was designed and built in-house by Glantre.

The sound installation is essentially a wiring, socket and patch panel infrastructure to accommodate a production hire sound rig. Fashions change fast in theatre sound, and the designer of any West End show will always require the freedom to select the most suitable equipment for their production - and this is particularly applicable in the case of mixers and loudspeakers. The advantages of providing an extensive sound wiring and connection network, as at the Playhouse, are to permit fast and easy fit-up as well as elimination of untidy temporary trailing cables, particularly to auditorium loudspeakers and the rear stalls mixer position.

In addition, the venue has been provided with a very basic set of sound equipment that should prove sufficient for straightforward non-musical productions which do not require elaborate sound effects and reinforcement. A Soundcraft Series 200 mixer and Revox B77 tape recorder can be plugged-in to sockets in either the sound

control room at the rear of the dress circle or adjacent to the stage manager's desk. Musicals at the Playhouse will generally, however, utilise a hired high specification mixer at the expense of some seats at the rear of the stalls. The theatre's sound and communications rack includes a basic complement of Yamaha power amplifiers and Electro-Voice signal processing equipment. A couple of Shure SM58 microphones and six Bose 402 loudspeakers have also been supplied.

Communications systems at the Playhouse have also been custom designed and built by Glantre and are considerably more flexible and extensive than those in the majority of the West End's commercial theatres. In addition to a stage manager's desk, pluggable stage left or right, there is a Q-Comm double ring intercom system, cuelights, backstage paging with show relay, front-of-house paging, emergency telephone system and barbells. Communications amplifiers, power supplies and mounting equipment are fitted to the combined sound and communications rack located understage in a dedicated



Behind the scenes during the long re-construction of the Playhouse.

sound equipment room where space is available for hired racks and for storage.

Quite apart from the specialised stage systems as described, the Playhouse's electrical installations include more than 850 general and emergency lighting fittings of more than 50 different types ranging from carefully restored chandeliers and decorative fittings in public areas to modern energy-efficient luminaires in the working areas. Power supply distribution provides for temporary production stage machinery and lighting requirements as well as handling the large loads required by a fully air-conditioned theatre. Although the Playhouse has opened with temporary LEB supplies, a new 750KVA transformer substation will shortly be installed in the switchroom at basement level.

London is fortunate to regain one of its 'lost' theatres - particularly one of such architectural merit and character. Certainly no trouble and expense have been spared in restoring the auditorium to its splendid 1907 design as well as providing up-to-date and functional theatre systems and building services installations. Robin Gonslow and his team are to be congratulated on their vision, patience and determination in carrying such a demanding project through to a successful conclusion.

Derek Gilbert is a Chartered Electrical Engineer, a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical Engineers and managing director of Glantre Engineering Limited, of which he was a co-founder in 1974. Prior to that he spent five years each with Strand Electric and with the Thorn Theatre Lighting Division. The Playhouse is one of Glantre's first significant UK projects after 12 years carrying out major overseas theatre and industrial contracts.

GLANTRE AT THE PLAYHOUSE THE COMPLETE ELECTRICAL PACKAGE



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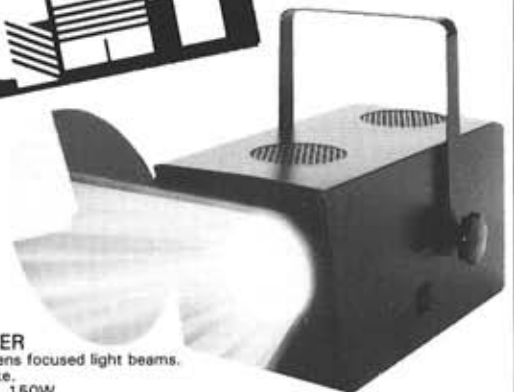
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