



# Variety is the Word at The Alhambra

Another gem of the North, Bradford's Alhambra Theatre, has also been given a new lease of life, thanks in no small part to Strand Lighting.

The Alhambra was for years known as 'Yorkshire's Premier Theatre of Varieties'. It was here that Ken Dodd made his name in pantomime, and where a young lad named Ernest Wiseman — later shortened to Ernie Wise — stole the show in a children's revue in 1936.

Opened in 1914, it has featured the top stars of the day such as: Sarah Bernhardt; Florrie Forde; Gracie Fields; George Formby; Paul Robeson, Ivor Novello, Laurel and Hardy; Tommy Cooper; Danny La Rue; Little and Large; and many more.

As part of the total refurbishment, modern facilities were built-in to bring the 1500-seat theatre up to date.

However, the general decor reflects the spirit of the original 1914 design, in red, white, blue and gilt.

New stage lighting equipment installed by Strand includes 38 FOH lighting circuits, 152 stage lighting circuits and a Strand Gemini 180-way lighting board.

Loose equipment includes 14 Harmony 15/28 profiles, 20 Harmony 22/40's and 48 1kW Harmony fresnels, plus two Cadenzas, 26 Iris floods, three four-circuit Groundrows, three follow-spots and 20 Parcans 64's.



The refurbished auditorium.

# Back To Life at The Marina, Lowestoft

Why, as I drove into Lowestoft, did I begin thinking of Los Angeles? Both are near the Ocean, one Pacific and one, according to my 1902 Atlas, German. Smog? Not a chance in those East Coast breezes.

Suddenly I had the answer. In LA gantries over the highways direct a dozen lanes of gleaming cars to such delights as Marina Del Rey or Sepulveda Boulevard. Similar but far narrower gantries as one enters Lowestoft send bicycles and fish lorries to 'Town' or 'Docks'.

But I still prefer Lowestoft, and now my liking for this honest and non-touristy town is confirmed by the opening of the recently refurbished Marina Theatre.

Originally built as a skating rink a hundred years ago, it became a live theatre in 1897. When the all-conquering talkies arrived in 1930 celluloid ruled until a few years ago, when ABC lowered their inverted triangle flag.

All this I learned from the handsome souvenir programme, green with gold tassled cord, which marked the Marina's re-birth last year. One interesting point from this document: during the first period as a live theatre seven different Pantomimes were presented during one

Christmas season! A custom that economics have long since sent right up the beanstalk.

The former Lowestoft show venue, the Sparrows Nest, needed a great deal spending on it, so the decision was made by Waveney District Council to buy the empty cinema and turn it into a local live show and film showcase. I consider they have not only succeeded, but succeeded very economically.

The Marina has been re-seated and recarpeted and a bar-restaurant has been added. A new grid and lines were provided and a complete and very handsome redecoration — green and gold like the souvenir programme — was carried out. All has been done, including purchase, for £850,000. Not a bad bargain at all.

There are nine dressing rooms with showers, a pit for 20 musicians and a playing space of 10.5m x 15.5m.

The lighting? Here my admiration of economy must be tempered by commercial sadness. The M24 and the Strand lanterns were all transferred from the Sparrows Nest! But at least this shows that, once again, Strand equipment lasts and lasts — even in salty sea breezes!



Refurbished Lowestoft Marina Theatre.



Susan Hayes, who is in charge of the theatre, at the re-sited M24.

# The Festival Players

A millionaire businessman with passions for cricket and magic had his own theatre built during the 1930's in the grounds of his Leicestershire mansion. The Stanford Hall Theatre is now an important venue for local repertory companies.

Andrew McGowan, Technical Director of Loughborough's Festival Players, tells the story behind the theatre and its lighting system.

Stanford Hall is a large country house set in several hundred acres of park land and situated approximately two miles north-east of Loughborough, Leicestershire. The Hall dates from 1771 but in 1928 it was purchased by Sir Julien Cahn, the then owner of Nottingham Furnishing Company, now, believed to be part of Cavenish Woodhouse.

Cahn had two passions although legend has it that he lacked any talent in either. Firstly, he owned his own cricket XI with the players being employed by his business empire in one capacity or another during the winter months. Secondly, he was a member of the Magic Circle and after years of providing entertainment to his guests in the library of the Hall he decided to construct a theatre.

In 1936 and at a cost of £73,000 the theatre was duly built at the end of the main hall and connected via a foyer exclusively for the use of Cahn and his guests. The 'hoi polloi' entered from another foyer which is now the main public entrance.

Cahn died in 1944 and after the war the estate was purchased by the Co-operative Union who now use the Hall as a residential training centre. They rarely use the theatre themselves but generously allow the theatre to be hired by local theatrical companies although in the 1950's and 1960's the theatre was regularly used by the Midland Theatre Company and the Lincoln Repertory Company. Sadly, all professional use has now ceased but the theatre is used by six or seven local amateur companies throughout the winter months.

The theatre was constructed and furnished to an extremely high specification and seats 352 people in a raked and fully carpeted auditorium. A projection room houses two 35mm arc projectors and a unique double Brenagraph Arc Follow Spot/special effects projector.

The proscenium has a width of 24 feet and a height of 18 feet with 12 foot wings. The stage depth is 27 feet and there is a full height fly tower with 23 counter-weight and seven hand lines.

Lighting was originally designed for colour mixing and there are still 3 x 4 colour battens, one double three colour cyc batten and 2 x 3 colour cyc towers. Over the last ten years, however, the lighting system has been modernised and we now have in addition:-

FOH 6 x 1 kW Profiles  
4 x Patten 264  
No.1 Bar 8 x Pattern 223 Fresnels

Perches 4 x Pattern 23, 4 x 500W spots  
No.2 Bar 4 x 500W spots  
Cyclorama 4 x Linear Floods  
4 x Pattern 49 1kW Floods  
Floats 4 colour  
Groundrow 3 colour

Three or four years ago a sixty way AMC was installed. This was the first (and probably only) replacement of the 1930's board which was a one-off manufactured by Blackburn and Starling of Nottingham.

Although not now operating, the original board is still in position on the lighting perch and one of the original dimmer drums has been retained in the Dimmer Room. The board was fairly unique for its age in that it controlled 54 circuits via a 50 volt DC supply to electro-magnets on a continuous revolving drum.

From the photographs I have seen of the Strand system of the time the principle was slightly different in that there were four drums approximately eight feet long and the two magnets rested on the drum and were connected via levers to a sweep arm over a radius of studs connected to various resistance coils.

On the board there was an on/off switch for each circuit plus a three position switch for up/stop/dim. There were no meters or any other way of monitoring levels and the view from the perch was somewhat limited. So as the maximum speed on the dimmers was about eight seconds, if one wanted a half level the dimmer was set to fade, one counted to four, and put the switch to centre. Not very subtle, and a nightmare if more than one or two intermediary positions were required!

A rotary fader was connected to each drum motor to slow the fade to about ten minutes but it was always difficult to tell whether the lights were in fact moving (or the drum had jammed!) and there was always the temptation to 'tweak' up the speed control to make sure things were working — and then find that dawn or sunset was instant.

The Festival Players is an amateur drama company formed in 1953 who pioneered the amateur movement at Stanford Hall by being the first amateur company to appear there in 1954. Since



then they have without break produced a show there every eight weeks or so during the winter season and have just started rehearsals for their one hundred and thirty third production, 'Pack of Lies', which will be performed in February. I should add that the theatre also included on the floor above the auditorium some fifteen bedrooms for the use of the visiting cricket team and, below a six feet thick concrete slab under the raked auditorium, was a beehive style air-raid shelter with air-tight submarine doors and its own ventilating and generating system. There was also a seal pond — now drained but most attractive — and a magnificent heated swimming pool with surrounding stone grottos, fountains and waterfalls.