

Liverpool Flashback

The first Director was Basil Dean and the first Chairman was Charles Reilly whom Basil Dean describes as "the energetic principal of the recently founded and already famous Liverpool School of Architecture . . . without whose ebullient enthusiasm and persistent refusal to look economic facts in the face the scheme might never have got off the ground."

The following extracts are from Professor Reilly's own description of the events of 1911 in his autobiography, "Scaffolding in the Sky", published by Routledge in 1938.

As evidence of the ferment of ideas and enthusiasms in Liverpool in the years immediately preceding the war, when she was expanding almost daily her young University and starting to build her first Cathedral, the founding of her repertory theatre now called "The Playhouse" is a good example. . . . Founding things and starting new ventures was in the air those days. Nothing seemed impossible. . . .

When, therefore, I heard from Granville-Barker that he and Nigel Playfair would be visiting Liverpool and would be willing to address a small audience likely to be interested in what a repertory theatre might do for the town, I jumped at the opportunity. I got the University Club to lend me the large dining-room for an afternoon meeting. . . . The élite and wealthy departed murmuring something ought to be done, but did nothing. A little group at the back, however, consisting of a chemist's assistant, the owner of a small hardware shop, a young man in the coal trade and an insurance clerk, all of whom I had somehow got to know and had invited, stayed behind. They suggested the formation of a Playgoers' Club, not of the usual provincial kind, organised to entertain visiting celebrities, but one designed to educate the public and to back good plays of every kind when and where they could be found. . . . I felt from the start, Liverpool must own its own theatre, impossible as that seemed, and not merely rent one as Wareing did. When he had a success at Glasgow up went his rent. However, he fixed up a six weeks' season at Kelly's Theatre in Liverpool for February, 1911. Then he fell ill and the date was vacant. A young man, named Basil Dean, in Miss Horniman's company at Manchester got to hear about it, and came over to Liverpool. . . . We talked over plays and a possible company, and being all young and enthusiastic we agreed to back him in a trial scheme.

The six weeks' trial season at Kelly's, with

Basil Dean producing the plays and acting now and then, was a tremendous success, with packed houses and sixteen hundred pounds profit. We held tea-parties on the stage, nominally to meet the leading lady, Miss Darragh, which almost filled the auditorium. On the seats were placed printed forms of promises to take shares in a permanent theatre. I had to make lots of speeches and used to tell the audience that the theatre doors were locked and only those would be let out who filled in their forms. It was all great fun and very exciting too for a young professor. Nearly a thousand people promised.

It was more exciting still when Clifford Muspratt and I actually bought a theatre one day at lunch at the Adelphi Hotel. We had all decided that the Star Theatre in Williamson Square, once a music-hall and then a melodrama house, was the one we wanted. . . . The price was £28,000, of which £20,000 could remain on mortgage.

There were two things to settle first: who should be director of the theatre and who should be architect for the alterations. For the first there were two obvious candidates, Basil Dean and Miss Darragh. The latter came to Liverpool the day before the meeting at which the decision was to be made, took a room at the Adelphi Hotel and rang me up and asked me to go round and see her. . . . I give myself considerable credit for making no promises and leaving after ten minutes talk. Next day at the Board meeting she was a very haughty lady in heavy white furs. Basil Dean, hardly more than a boy, was elected.

For the other post I had no difficulty in getting Adshad appointed. The theatre was to open in September and he had about four months in which to buy some property at the back, get a small passage between it and the theatre closed, build a block of new dressing-rooms, a property room and a paint room, and, most exciting of all, to re-design the auditorium and turn the beer-cellar under it into a foyer. The old auditorium was a sort of seraglio with half a dozen Moorish boxes on either side. Now it is in a large scale dignified Roman manner with two big boxes only and a ceiling with the loves of Jupiter painted in large roundels by our Sandon Studios friends at, I remember, thirty shillings a Jovian amour. I am not going to retell the story of the theatre. That it has lived all these years and finally prospered financially must not be mistaken to mean that it has fulfilled all the hopes of that band of young men who set the Playgoers' Club going after the Granville-Barker meeting. It has not, it must be confessed, since Basil Dean, possessed a producer with any consuming ambition to break new ground. It has had in turn several very good producers from Nigel Playfair to its present one, the best of all, William Armstrong, but their ambitions have lain in other directions. Armstrong has, for instance, succeeded in