

# Theatres Must Be Theatrical

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Nearly thirty years ago TABS carried the first of fifteen didactic dissertations on the arts and crafts of the theatre, e.g. Actors Must Act, Stage Managers Must Manage and so on. Those rather flippant contributions extended from 1946 to 1951 and became known in the corridors of Strand Electric as the "Must Series". This belated epilogue was recklessly provoked by the present editor who must accept whatever censure may result.

The series was devised mainly but not exclusively for the amateurs: TABS originally proclaimed that it was "Issued in the interests of the Amateur Theatre". In more recent times the main emphasis may have shifted somewhat but, in truth, there is little basic difference in the activities of amateur and professional, a truth that would be disputed scornfully by both with equal lack of justification. Both are trying, with differing degrees of expertise, to present some form of entertainment and to prod the local populace into visiting the box office. Both are in the business for their own satisfaction. They would probably prefer to call it "fulfilment", following prevalent practice of claiming high-falutin motives for all kinds of communal activities which are invariably egotistically "motivated". (Horrible word! discreetly omitted from my Shorter O.E.D.). Too many of those dear souls to whom life is real, life is earnest, love to pontificate about the cultural and social value of their work in some particular type or form of theatre. At times, judged by results, they appear not to realise that intention, be it never so virtuous, is lame excuse for in-expert craftsmanship. When they fail to persuade a sufficient number of customers to pay for the privilege of participating in their earnest evangelism, the fault, dear Brutus, is not in the self-styled stars but in the populace, that they are myopic underlings.

Our theatre appears to be suffering from an excess of subsidised conventionality and of academic theorising. Francis Reid could be right in suggesting that the rot set in when Henry Irving was knighted. Admittedly, there is an anti-new-establishment fringe of roguery and vagabondage invading the urban highways and byways, offering earthy social comment in song and dance, without making much impact and doing no good or harm to theatre. These strolling players could be suspect of dubious and patronising attempt to take theatre to a reluctant people. The mountain to Mahomet? Communal life has always had its wandering minstrels and other itinerant performers. Although they could be part of theatre in the generic sense they are not very relevant to our immediate concern with theatres.

Notwithstanding all the pretentious protestations about social uplift it has to be recognised that theatres are high street shops offering merchandise for sale. Expert shopkeepers know that they must dramatise both window display and interior. Whether they do so with the brashness of the supermarket or with the subtle delicacy of the exclusive salon depends on the kind of clientele they are trying to attract. Whatever may be their particular line of merchandise, theatres, like all enterprising shops, must be theatrical.

There are now a lot of new theatres, being either recently completed, work in progress, or on the drawing boards of architects and consultants, each of whom is assumed to know what should be provided. Provision must usually be at the expense of the community whose purse-strings are firmly held by an amorphous assortment of elected or appointed representatives. The results are not always aesthetically appropriate or commendable. Reinforced concrete is not the most lovable of materials but just occasionally one is relieved to find that it has been fashioned in grateful form, defying the bleakness of a wilderness of the standardised "construction" that has superseded building.

In these days of inflated costs and deflated craftsmanship we must not expect the colonnaded opulence of the old Theatres Royal but it should not be impossible to create a main entrance that has magnetic attraction, that uplifts the spirit, that holds promise of stimulating experience, that compels the interest and induces a readiness to buy the goods on offer. To present theatre with the dismal anonymity of a municipal wash-house is an unprofitable exercise in public relations. A theatre may well have a touch of vulgarity, in the best sense of that much abused word. It is a place for Everyman, a place in which he should expect to be emotionally excited. It must offer colourful and dramatic welcome. To the potential customer it must unmistakably demonstrate that the true intent is all for his delight. The best of our older theatres did present impressive fronts and although it was good business to abolish those segregated entrances, with their Early Doors and stone staircases for the *hoi polloi*, the common entrance must not be too depressingly common in its egalitarianism.

Even though the theatregoer is now deterred from wearing white tie and tails by the knowledge that he would be regarded as an ostentatious freak, some attempt should be made to create an environment in which patched jeans and scruffy sweater would be incongruous. The customer should, at least, be suggestively induced to wash and shave and to wear whatever

multi-coloured costume is the with-it substitute for the old fashioned Sunday suit. It should be generally accepted that visiting the theatre is an event, however regular or infrequent it may be. Theatre going should be an animated experience which should begin long before "beginners please": if the beginners do not please as much as they should it's just too bad.

Despite any preoccupation there may be on stage with the more sleazy aspects of our current decadence, the theatre is still a place of illusion, no matter how blatant may be the illusion of social or sexual realism, whether in the gutter or in the brothel. Excessive concern with the seamy side is but a passing phase due in part to abolition of censorship and, maybe, to proletarian revolt against romanticised and melodramatised middle-class immoralities. The phase-passing will be speeded when more of our dramatists lift up their eyes to the hills whence cometh their theatrical strength. They could then bring new life to the theatre and a viability both emotionally and economically more profitable, provided it be truly theatrical.

Those of us whose adolescence is a distant memory are often prompted to regret the passing of the red plush and gilt era of theatre when lush house tabs concealed the world of illusion that awaited us, our interest excited as footlights announced the imminence of our entry. It is true that the maximum number of us were likely to be compressed into minimum space and to suffer from sight lines less than perfect. The contemporary theatre will almost certainly have masses of technical gadgetry to complicate the processes of production and will have been more efficiently planned; but efficiency is not all. The playgoer must not be condemned to enter an auditorium whose décor of lugubrious drabness causes deep depression, a depression quite likely to be deepened by preview of a partly lit vacant scene of action.

Theatre, literally speaking, is a place for seeing. It is a basic requirement that vision must not be impeded but the quality of what is seen is vastly important. Any sensation of vision provokes emotional reaction: such reaction may or may not foster that willing suspension of disbelief said to be required by the performance. Senses and emotions must be energised: the customer must be sensitised by his environment. He, too, has a vital part to play in the performance. Theatre is unique. It is created for and depends upon the presence of a live audience, whose spirit must be exalted by lively artists and technicians. It has a purpose that is completely served only when it becomes an organic whole. It must be positively and comprehensively theatrical.