

# BOOKS

## COMMUNITY THEATRES

**Percy Corry, Pitman Publishing, 39 Parker Street, London WC2.**

In the '50s and '60s it was assumed that any architect could build a theatre, so there sprouted a rash of problem buildings and disillusioned committees. Gradually, thank heavens, it is being accepted that designing a theatre requires special knowledge and it is the obvious thing to consult bodies like ABTT, before finalising plans. Here is a book which examines the question from most angles and offers much food for thought for designer and committee member.

Percy Corry is well qualified to write on theatre planning and his latest will undoubtedly become a standard text book. It sets out most of the problems which may arise, and as a guide for Community Theatre Committees it is excellent. Many will recall Mr. Corry's *Planning the Stage* and *Stage Planning*, published in 1961, which he pronounces "Mercifully out of print". In fact, Percy Corry moves forward with the times and his new book reflects the lessons and discoveries of the last decade. There is no need to apologise for what was relevant in the '60s. "What type of theatre?" he asks, and there follows a clear explanation of the different styles in use today and the problems which inevitably arise if a multipurpose design is demanded. There are answers, of course, and he offers them, but "you pay for what you get". A tilting auditorium floor may defeat you but, ah well, there are bleachers or even portable rostrums. The pros and cons are discussed with the experience of a sound practitioner.

The argument that schools should be used more extensively for cultural activities during periods when they would otherwise be closed is gently but firmly dealt with. "It may be helpful in spreading capital and running costs" says Mr. Corry, "but the facilities likely to be available to adult activities are usually too restricted. Such a school scheme could be supplementary to, but not a substitute for, a Community Theatre . . .", and he continues by suggesting that the students of the schools should be encouraged "to use the special facilities of the Community Theatre in addition to the more instructional use of their own drama studios and stages."

The Auditorium receives the same careful analysis and he offers interesting comparisons between the American and British requirements, backed by audience statistics. Seating, sight-lines, ceiling, acoustics and decor are all discussed.

The advice on stages, excellently illustrated, should prove a boon to those who argue about height and depth, wing space, borders and other matters. Here is the accumulated knowledge of many years. Details which are often overlooked, such as the height and width of access doors to acting areas, may help prevent much irritation and frustration when the building comes into use.

Mr. Corry offers a hypothetical project and examines it from the points of view of customer and architect, in this case Robert Adams, who supplies the excellent plans and drawings throughout the book. Alternatives are proffered and assessed, a valuable exercise as they pose the sort of questions which planners are likely to face.

Ancillary accommodation is often much neglected and there is a good chapter devoted to everything from box office to battery room. Did you know that the latter existed? It does, and it's important, and so are the other ancillary rooms, backstage and FOH. Planners spend much time on stages and auditoriums but often neglect these other matters.

There is, as one would expect, a useful chapter on stage equipment and an all-too-brief section on Management. Theatre management is not a job for a keen amateur. It is full of pitfalls and there might have been more stress on the need to appoint a trained and experienced Manager. The section does, however, indicate the need for trained theatre technicians.

Yes, thank you Mr. Corry, a valuable contribution which will intrigue all who are interested in Community Theatres and modern approaches to designing and equipping them.

HUBERT MITCHELL

**HANDBOOK OF TECHNICAL PRACTICE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS**  
**Ned A. Bowman's Inter-Galactic Serial Shop Cookbook. Published by Scenographic Media, Box 8861, Wilksburg, Penna 15221.**

For a non-American, the title is the most daunting thing about Ned Bowman's handbook. When one has translated "cookbook" as a transatlantic name for an instruction manual and descended from the intergalactic plane, theatre technicians will find this publication both useful and interesting, and will immediately want to suggest improvements. This reaction is most important as the author stresses the need for constantly up-dating and this applies equally to the refinement of format as to the adding of new material.

Since the thirties, the USA has published, with the lay reader in mind, many more books and periodicals on practical subjects than the UK, and the cookbook is the logical outcome of this tradition. Comparable publications which spring to mind are training manuals used by the armed forces and, more recently, those produced by some of the industrial training boards.

The first task of this type of book is to present its information in a format suitable for the "reading whilst doing" situation. The standard cookery book is perhaps the most common example of this requirement which Len Deighton attempted to simplify some years ago by a strip drawing approach with minimal text.

The second task is to take account of the reader's level of skill and knowledge and this the car workshop manual can best illustrate, for instance instructions such as "tighten down the cylinder head" will be adequate for a skilled mechanic but would require further amplification for the

"do-it-yourself" reader, or alternatively a paragraph on the use of screw extractors.

The publication sets out to cover by instalments many technical theatre subjects in a form which can be used as a loose leaf book suitable for up-dating. Two sections are contained in the first volume, one on the subject of make-up and a long section covering plastics. Making considerable use of drawings and photographs, it endeavours to provide enough technical information for a theatre use of the material covered. The first section on make-up gives recipes for the making of stick and body make-up, eyeliners, etc., in fact most of the items for general stage use. With such a wide range of make-up available off the shelf, one may question the need for this section but the cost conscious production manager will no doubt have in mind the items such as body make-up which are paid for by the management and often used in large quantities. Recent shortages have led some managements to import these items in quantity for their specific needs. Personal safety in the handling of materials is stressed throughout the book by the effective use of a repeated skull and crossbones motif.

Although the author has stressed the need for constant up-dating, there is a danger with this type of book of giving inadequate attention to a particular subject: such an example is the reference to polyethylene ropes. As the subject heading is plastics, it is reasonable for this section to omit reference to sisal and hemp ropes but at least three other types of plastic are used in the manufacture of man-made fibre ropes. These all have different performance characteristics which are documented by the manufacturers, the test results relating to performance in contact with hot surfaces being of particular interest to potential theatre users.

Safety requirements relating to the use of materials on stage are of prime importance to all potential users of this handbook and the totally inadequate treatment of this subject in the published sections severely limits the usefulness of the publication.

One can well understand the editor's reluctance to grasp this nettle, but it is completely unrealistic to publish a technical theatre handbook with so little reference to this crucial issue. The problem, as in the UK, is probably one of differing standards but it would be better to mention all the relevant standards and standard setting organisations rather than to ignore the subject. The difference of American trade names makes a further limitation for the non-USA reader but this is more easily remedied.

Finally, the indexing of this type of publication is of crucial importance and must have a technical bias. The production photographs of "Prometheus Unbound" and "The Cherry Orchard" are indexed but not the "mask wig" and "Russian stove" that they serve to illustrate.

The editor is to be congratulated on successfully attempting a difficult task, and it is hoped that this work will draw attention to the current need for craft information to be documented as new