

# D'Oyly Carte Then and Now

PETER RILEY

When Richard D'Oyly Carte opened the Savoy Theatre in 1881, I am sure that he did not fully realise that he had started something quite new in the world of the theatre. Something that over the years was probably going to prove to be the greatest single contributory factor, stage lighting by electricity.

In a publicity hand-out at the time, D'Oyly Carte proudly boasted about the Savoy Theatre, "The first time it has been attempted to light any public building entirely by electricity". This was not just a break-through as far as stage lighting was concerned, but also from the point of view of lighting the public areas of the theatre, cloakrooms, foyers, hallways, corridors, and of course the auditorium itself.

Naturally, there had to be a back-up system; and the old gas burners which the public, artists and staff had all become used to, had to be installed as well as the new system, just in case there were any failures. In fact things did go wrong; a 120-horsepower steam engine had been placed on a plot of land close to the theatre, to drive a generator. It was discovered that this system did not provide sufficient electricity to allow all the lights in the theatre to be lit at once. On the opening night, as the public entered the theatre, it was lit by gas, and the immediate reaction of many of them was that Carte had pulled a fast one, and that he had said the building was lit by electricity just to get people in there. But Carte was a man of his word, and a showman. The curtain went up, the full company were on stage, singing God Save the Queen, at the end of which Carte stepped forward. He explained to the audience what had happened, and of his disappointment at the failure of the generator. His public came first though, and they were not to be cheated of the light he had promised them. Carte ordered the gas-burners to be lowered, and the auditorium electric lights to be lit. Immediately the theatre was filled with light—light of a very different quality from the old gas lights, and much more powerful.

The difficulties of the stage lighting system, and the problems of the generator, were soon rectified, and within eleven weeks the entire theatre was running on electricity generated by a larger steam engine. Stage lighting had begun.

Of course the stage lighting was essentially of a rather crude nature. After all, no one had any experience of this sort of thing. Basically, it was formed of battens and footlights. The battens were crudely made of metal, and contained a strip of wood running from one end to the other, at which lamps were fitted at about 6-in. intervals. There were no proper lamp-holders, or plugs, and at that rather early stage, all the lamps were the same colour, as no method had yet been found to colour

them. All this was a beginning; no longer would the public and the players be subjected to the discomfort of the old gas burners, the tremendous heat and fumes of which at some times became unbearable, and many people were unable to sit through the entire performance, or indeed even through the first part. Consequently, acts had to be split-up into several parts, intervals had to be lengthened so that the public could get out of the theatre into the air outside. The stage area became intensely hot, and it was very difficult for the players to concentrate under such extreme conditions. Now, thanks to D'Oyly Carte, all this was going to end, a new era had begun.

When D'Oyly Carte set about organising his tours for the opera company in the 1890's, he was not able to tour any of the lighting equipment. There were so few theatres in the provinces with an electricity supply, and also, the equipment was by no means of a portable nature; it was built-in to the Savoy, and could not easily be taken down and moved elsewhere. In time, equipment was improved, and it was



possible for the company to tour a small amount of specially constructed units. There were no colours still, as such, but the batten lamps were dipped (in something resembling F.E.V.) to give the required hue. In time, coloured glass frames were invented, and it wasn't long before stage lighting was rapidly becoming an artistic form, rather than just a means of lighting the stage so that the people could be seen. With careful use of the lights, and by dimming or increasing their intensity, and colouring them, the lighting was now becoming important. It needed people who understood exactly what was required with

THE SAVOY  
THEATRE

Mr. R. D'OYLY CARTE,  
SOLE PROPRIETOR AND MANAGER.

THURSDAY EVENING, DEC. 29TH, 1881.

The 250th Performance of

PATIENCE

+OR+BUNTHORNE'S+BRIDE+

WRITTEN BY  
+W+S+GILBERT+

COMPOSED BY  
+ARTHUR+SULLIVAN+

REGINALD BUNTHORNE, A Fleshly Poet, Mr. GEORGE GROSSMITH  
ARCHIBALD GROSVENOR, An Idyllic Poet, Mr. R. BARRINGTON  
Mr. BUNTHORNE'S SOLICITOR, Mr. G. BOWLEY

COLONEL CALVERLY, Officers Mr. WALTER BROWNE  
MAJOR MURGATROYD, of Mr. FRANK THORNTON  
LIEUT. THE DUKE OF DUNSTABLE, Dragoon Guards. Mr. DURWARD LELY

Chorus of Officers of Dragoon Guards.

THE LADY ANGELA, Miss JESSIE BOND  
THE LADY SAPHIR, Rapturous Miss JULIA GWYNNE  
THE LADY ELLA, Maidens. Miss FORTESCUE  
THE LADY JANE, Mrs ALICE BARNETT

AND

PATIENCE, a Dairy Maid. Miss LEONORA BRAHAM  
Chorus of Rapturous Maidens.

Mr. GEORGE EDWARDES, ACTING MANAGER  
Mr. FRANK CELLIER, CONDUCTOR  
Mr. W. H. SEYMOUR, STAGE MANAGER

ACT I.—The Exterior of Castle Bunthorne. ACT II.—A Glade.

The Scenery by EMDEN.

The æsthetic dresses designed by the Author and executed by Miss Fisher, other dresses by Messrs. E. Moses & Son, Messrs. G. Hobson & Co., and Mme. Auguste.

+NO+FEES+OF+ANY+KIND+