

Electrifying Lighting at the Lane

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If there is one name in theatre which sets the pulse beating faster it is that of "Drury Lane" or just "The Lane". To play there, to do some work in that theatre or to supply some equipment there is to receive an accolade without equivalent anywhere. It has to be admitted that in recent decades there has not been a lot of logic in this feeling since the place has been dedicated mainly to long runs of one style of show—American Musicals. Even if one allows, as one certainly must, that many of these are the finest examples of that genre; nevertheless the occupation has limited the range of artist who could expect to play a part there.

It is a curious thing that a theatre which proudly declares itself to be the "Theatre Royal Drury Lane" presents only a blank wall to the Lane. The front entrance is in Catherine Street and always seems to have been at that end. The stage door, in the early days connected to Drury Lane by a narrow passage, moved from the East to the North in Russell Street over 200 years ago. In spite of the many reconstructions the theatre is the oldest in London still in use having been built by Killigrew under a charter granted by Charles II in 1662. Nothing of that building survives but it was the theatre in which Nell Gwynn made her first appearance.

The second Theatre Royal Drury Lane was by Sir Christopher Wren and opened in March 1674. It lasted 117 years with some alteration from time to time and was the theatre in which David Garrick and Sarah Siddons played. While under Sheridan it was replaced by a theatre of much greater capacity designed by Henry Holland. It opened in 1794 but burned down fifteen

years later. In 1811 the Benjamin Wyatt building opened and it is from this that the historic theatre we know gets its character in the main. The auditorium is however the reconstruction of 1922. Thanks to the fine drawings of Richard Leacroft it is possible easily to get the feel of the development of this English Playhouse.*

Drury Lane has always been famous for spectacle but particularly from 1886 under Augustus Harris and his successor Arthur Collins so it is intriguing to reflect on what lighting equipment may have been used and precisely how. Above all in the present context who made that equipment?

Recently I came across a reference in *The Illuminating Engineer* of May 1919 in which Mr. G. A. Applebee says that in 1883-6 he was assisting Sir Augustus Harris with his lighting effects by gas and gas limes. He goes on "In those gas days at Drury Lane such a thing as a hard sharp shadow was unknown, partly by the great number of gas burners in the battens and footlights, and partly by the low power of the gas limes and the great distance they were from the object to be illuminated." He then says that;—"Mr. Henry Emden the scenic artist (for many years at Drury Lane) . . . maintained that the heat rising from the gas created an atmosphere which gave the scene a certain amount of life, and from his point of view the electric light gave the painting a hard and cold appearance." This glimpse of the nature of the light from people who knew it well is fascinating. At the time the remarks were made it was only seventeen years since Sir Henry Irving had left the Lyceum and he retained gas because according to Ellen Terry "The thick softness of the gaslight gave illusion to many a scene which is now revealed in all its marked trashiness by electricity."

Though Strand Electric never had anything to do with gas except perhaps to remove some of the installations, there is a connection. The initials G.A. in front of Applebee are not, as one might suspect in these days of slovenly produced newspapers, a misprint. This man—at that time electrician at the Gaiety—was the father of

L.G., the forcible personality who joined Strand in 1922. Our Applebee was in fact the third generation in stage lighting (his grandfather was master gasman at Alexandra Palace) and some affection for all over flooding of light lingered on since he always seemed to judge an installation from the number of battens!

In the present context I am greatly indebted to L.G.A. (as we used to know him) because when he retired at the end of 1957 he gave Brian Legge a manuscript by an engineering student at the S.W. London Technical College. This gives us a discerning eye-witness account of the Drury Lane installation as he had just seen it in 1904. He says "The regulator gear is coloured according to the lamps it controls and is arranged as on the switch-board viz—White, Red Blue. The regulators again are capable of being worked all together, each separately, or one after the other." Such an arrangement is just what one would expect and it also indicates that the regulator and the switch panels formed separate "boards" as was certainly the case when the theatre changed over to AC in 1950. Indeed it is a reasonable assumption that they were the identical boards and probably went in when electric lighting replaced gas in 1898.

They were located in a square recess off stage by the prompt corner. This room was open to the stage on one side but the floor was a few steps *below* that of the stage itself. Even without any masking scenery at all in the wings the view was poor indeed and could be obstructed by members of the cast awaiting their entrance. There was a sense of remoteness from the show quite unlike the feel of the usual perch platform—even when barricaded in by scenery. On the other hand in those amplifierless days the stage manager really did have the lighting just round his corner. The regulator ran along the off-stage wall with tracker wires to the dimmers of "the Lyons liquid type" in the room underneath. According to the same 1904 account "Lamp signalling is used throughout" and there is a detail description of the interlocking of the regulator handles. It goes on;—"The stage is fitted with 5 front battens 45 ft. long and containing 250 lamps and 6 back battens 38 ft. long; in these separate leads are used for each colour

* *The Development of the English Playhouse* by Richard Leacroft (Eyre Methuen).

The D.C. electrical intake room prior to the takeover to A.C. in 1950.