

THE SOUND OF GALAXY



The exterior of the former New Victoria, now re-named Apollo. While it was being built cockney cab drivers used to call out Sing Sing! to the builders. No one in 1930 was used to such a plain and dignified façade.

Inset: The Galaxy in its control room, the former projection suite. The very top of the stage can be seen in our photo. Note the V.D.U., Pin Patch and Alpha-numeric keyboard.

ORSON WELLS directed and starred in 'Citizen Kane' at the age of 26. R. C. Sheriff wrote 'Journey's End' at the age of 35. Two brilliant achievements and two brilliant men.

This thought brings me to a third brilliant man, young at the time of his greatest work, who operated in our own field, Mr Ernest Walmsley Lewis, the architect of the New Victoria Cinema. In his excellent recent book 'Cathedrals of the Movies'* David Atwell describes the New Victoria as "the most important cinema building to have been erected in Britain". After this one major work of true brilliance in concept, design and execution Lewis never designed another cinema or theatre. To quote David Atwell again, "It was to be the cinema's loss that after completion of the New Victoria, E. Walmsley Lewis decided to leave London and settle on the south coast where he set up his own quietly successful private practice".

The New Victoria was opened in 1930, and the interior, now somewhat altered, originally represented a

mermaids cave, with cool blue green house lighting shining indirectly from the dome and from enormous oyster shells formed in the plaster, and directly from glass stalactite fittings clustering thickly all round the auditorium walls.

The proscenium is an absolute delight, the motif being organ pipes — not actually the real organ pipes, which are in a chamber above the proscenium, but gilded replicas. The proscenium sides again follow the organ theme, all gilded darkly and richly. And the detailing! The various ballustrades and rails in the foyer, for example, have a finely moulded brass capping, while the intermediate horizontal rails of humbler metal are pierced by the uprights, with no wretchedly clumsy welding, as displayed in other much more recent and infinitely more costly theatrical buildings. Which brings me to yet another sign of Walmsley Lewis's professionalism — his budget was £250,000 and he completed the project for £82,000! The point is not the actual sum — this was after all, fifty

years ago, but the relationship between the budget and the final cost.

I first visited this marvellous building in 1946 or 47 to see Jeanne Crain and Victor Moore in "Centennial Summer" — 20th Century Fox, Technicolor, with score by Jerome Kern. I entered while this melange was showing, so in the post war restricted austerity era imagine the overwhelming effect of this building upon a provincial young man of taste and sensibility when the house lights came on — and, dear readers, they did not just rise together, they started in the dome and then the light not only increased but also geographically spread around the auditorium from the central dome outwards and downwards. (The sort of effect we can nowadays achieve with Strand's ENVIRON — see separate article.)

From that forties moment I date my enthusiasm for the designs of the early and mid thirties.

Incidentally only one memory of the actual programme remains. The main film was accompanied by a short subject featuring the trumpeting of a Mr

Harry James. One middle aged lady sitting a row or two behind me, having listened to the "Carnival of Venice" by this immoderate virtuoso said, very loudly, "Send him to bed early with a hot potato!" An unlikely criticism, but it has remained in my mind.

The occasion of all this enthusiasm? Because the New Victoria has been saved for us all, by conversion into a theatre. I believe I am right in suggesting that some news of a new 'live' version of the Von Trapp saga has leaked into the press — in fact "The Sound of Brilliant Public Relations" would perhaps have been as appropriate a title as "The Sound of Music". But let me not carp — after all there is a new career for this wonderful building and a new name "The Apollo". Oh, and by the way, a new lighting control — London's very first Galaxy!

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