

and fly galleries is of great interest as Grieve had to overcome the severe problem posed by the failure of the architect to provide adequate flying height above the stage. The gridiron proper is small, constrained by the pitch of the roof. However, above the generous wing spaces, each twenty-three feet by forty feet in extent, there are two upper fly galleries which in effect are small gridirons with slatted floors. Each possesses a drum and shaft reduction gear complementing the central drum and shaft which spans the gridiron proper. This machinery was harnessed to a primitive counterweight system installed on the prompt side (stage left) which was contained by crude timber guides fixed down the prompt-side wall to stage level.

Beneath the lower gridirons are two fly galleries. Control of the scenery and backcloths was from the prompt side. Several forks are still attached to the trimming beam at the edge of the galleries and there is clear evidence that grooves were installed when the stage was in use. The one surviving groove was removed to the Museum of London in the mid 1970's and it is clear that these devices were unsophisticated to the point of crudity, consisting as they did of a grooved timber bar suspended from an iron chain and simply hinged from the trimming beam.

The fact that the stage demonstrates a transition between an archaic system of scene handling involving grooves together with drum-and-shaft flying gear and the familiar modern system of counterweighted flying means that it is an article of great archaeological significance and of consuming interest to theatre historians particularly those with a knowledge of the development of scene-handling techniques. It is most important to bear in mind that this mechanism functioned well and was amply capable, when under the control of a competent stage manager, of effecting the breath-taking pantomime transformation scenes for which it was designed.

Some evidence to support this contention can be found in an admittedly obscure publication entitled 'The Pantomimes and All About Them' by Leopold Wagner, which appeared in 1881, on page 34, he states:

'... latterly, also, the Alexandra Palace has given us some capital children's pantomimes' an indication that the pantomimes were of a



sufficient splendour to warrant comment'

The critic of the North Middlesex Chronicle reviewing the pantomime of 1879 'Little Jack Horner', was moved to write:

'... such was the splendour that some of the rougher element in the top gallery could not restrain their emotion at the sight of so much beautiful effect and artistic resplendence, but gave vent to it by whistling and hurraing'

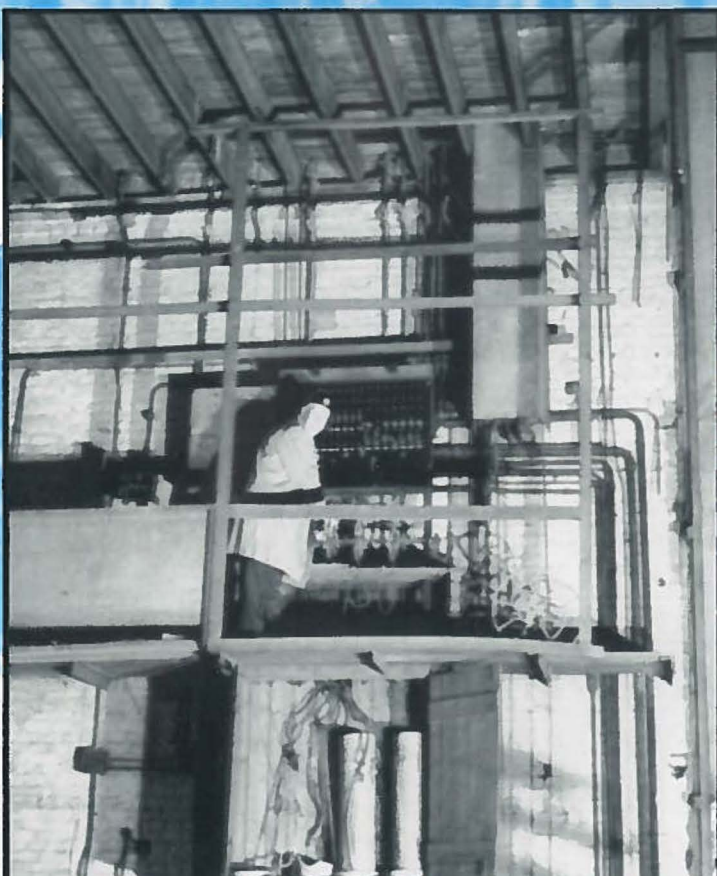
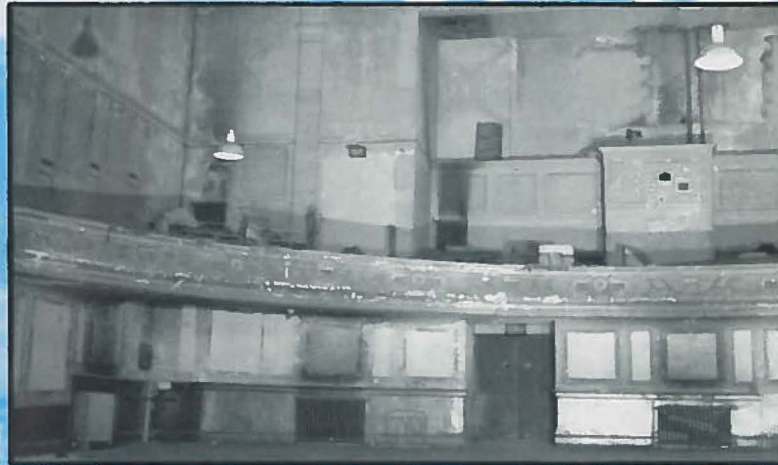
The puffs for the 1876 pantomime 'The Yellow Dwarf', directed by and starring George Conquest give an indication of the magnitude of the spectacle that could be achieved.

'Produced on an unprecedentedly magnificent scale and pronounced by the entire press the greatest pantomime of the season, MR. GEORGE CONQUEST will appear daily making the highest leaps ever attempted. Three hundred performers. Magnificent scenery and costumes. Grand transformation. Great Eastern Ballet by M. Espinosa. Comic scenes by the Lauri family...'. How Conquest nearly killed himself in front of the author of the pantomime, Blanchard, performing one of these 'highest leaps', is

Actors view into the auditorium

recounted in F. Fleetwood's biography of the Conquest family in a passage which starkly depicts the horrendous risks taken by the acrobats and tumblers who relied on the proper functioning of the sprung platforms and heavily counterweighted traps to enact their 'phantom flights' and other illusions.

Having had no past for fifty years, does this extraordinary building have any future? Happily, it is now lodged in the North East corner of a building which in less than three years will have been transformed from a fire-gutted ruin into one of the largest



The Editor on stage, giving an idea of the large scale.

exhibition and leisure centres in the country. Even more fortuitous is the survival of the theatre, virtually intact, from the deprivations of the 1980 fire, which leaves it as one of the few parts of the building remaining in anything resembling its original 1875 form.

However, the crucial question must inevitably concern the usefulness and current relevance of an over-sized, wrongly shaped barn with its only previously successful theatrical function being the staging of Victorian pantomimes. There is no doubt that the auditorium, however bizarre it may have been as a theatre is potentially a superb small concert hall. If this potential is realised, then the stage may be rendered useless and even obstructive, as it would seriously interfere with the provision of proper orchestra changing space, green-room facilities and instrument storage.

Discussions are taking place at the moment with the Association of British Theatre Technicians which could secure a unique role for the building as a museum of technical

theatre, with the stage and fly-tower as the centre-piece exhibits. Such a venture, if it is implemented, would have to permit the periodic adaptation of that part of the auditorium closet, to the stage to accommodate an audience of six or seven hundred for occasional orchestral concerts. Who knows, perhaps the future development might even be sufficiently ingenious to allow the staging of a Christmas pantomime - complete with transformation scene, of course!

**Acknowledgement**

The above article contains the result of much painstaking research and diligent detective work by David Wilmore into the original layout and functioning of the stage machinery for which I must record my grateful thanks.

\* For readers who are as ignorant as the Editor, our author tells me that a sloat is a piece of timber which supports a masking piece to conceal a stage bridge.

The Editor tries the remains of the liquid dimmer installation.

