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THE METROPOLITAN BACKSTAGE

To the rhythmical chant of "slack out, slack out, slack out, one, two, three, TACK!" fifty members of the Institute watched a crew of twelve and their foreman lay about nine groundcloths, one on top of another in reverse order for the various scenes of IL BARBIERE and TANNHAUSER, the two operas to be performed that Saturday. Then the asbestos came down and the house lights were brought up while Richard Thompson introduced us to Mr. Rudolph Kuntner, Chief Electrician of the Metropolitan Opera and leader of the tour of that venerable building. Mr. Kuntner made a few remarks concerning the difficulty in lighting the stage with only eight 2KW instruments in the front chandelier and a few more from either side of the proscenium, while all other light comes from behind. Thus there are many dark spots that the singers make a point of finding in the downstage areas.

Mr. Kuntner next introduced Mr. Francis Robinson, Assistant Manager and the Historian of the Met, who gave us a capsule history in about five minutes. The building opened October 22, 1883, with a production of FAUST, but the house was criticized in the papers as being more suitable to society than to opera production. It was 1903 before any modernization was performed on the stage and the house. The theatre always lost money but was kept alive by the generosity of Otto Kahn. When the depression was at its worst in 1932, the season dropped to 14 weeks, and money was raised by having the singers pass the tin cup among the members of the audience. In 1940 the Metropolitan Association bought the house, and to allow for more seats, tore out the boxes in the grand tier. In 1953 more seating spaces were provided by ripping out the Orchestra Circle. Mr. Robinson commented that the trend is now going back to box seats in the new building.

Mr. Robinson noted that the theatre was built by an architect, Cleaveland Cady, who boasted that he had never been inside a theatre in his life, and for this reason he designed a stage that was absolutely impossible to use efficiently. Thus Mr. Robinson could not understand the persistence of the well-wishers in the city who wanted to "save the Met." In fact, the site of the old Met will better serve the new by being newly built upon, as the leasing fees will bring in over half a million dollars a year.

After Mr. Robinson's talk we were lead by Mr. Kuntner around the various backstage areas. The theatre operates with over 700 personnel performing every possible task imaginable. All scenery, lights, properties, costumes, wigs, etc., are manufactured by the company on the premises, although it was noted that most of the shops have since been transferred to the new building.

The stage is 72 feet deep, but only 50 feet was useable for performances as the back part was necessary for scenery storage since there was only about 15 feet available on either side of the stage. Four large wooden vertical rollers, once used for cycloramas, now provided leaning space for the flats. The grid is hung with two types of rigging. Forty-eight pipes are manually operated counterweight sets hung on six inch centers, while another 48 are hung in between these and are driven by a single large motor connected to the lines by a clutch system. Thus the pipes are hung on 3 inch centers; in a word: tight.

The light bridge, 15 inches wide, is hung at least four feet upstage of the proscenium, which means that much of the stage light is often on the back of the stars who sing front and center. Twenty-two electricians are needed to run a typical production, several of whom are stationed on the bridge and the two side galleries as follow-spot men and color changers. Four are needed to operate the board which is located below the stage in the prompters position. In fact, the chief operator has his own viewing position next to the Prompter, and he gives commands to the operators of the three scene preset board below. Nearly 75% of all light cues are sight cues taken by the lighting control operator himself, making it mandatory to know all the action of the operas by heart.

The board, built by G.E., contains 175 dimmers, and was one of the first thyatron boards installed in any theatre in this country. Mr. Kuntner, as chief electrician, is in charge of all electrical operations in the entire building, being responsible for the maintenance of everything from Mr. Bing's color T.V. set to the hair dryer of a chorus girl. All electrified properties are built in his shop and he commented that the Met uses at least 5000 batteries a year just for candle and lantern effects.

The tour ended in the trap room below where the machinery for many shows past sat corroding. The traps were seldom used anymore for anything but storage of set-pieces, and the dirt testified to their lack of use. In a sub-cellar below this crouched a monstrous dragonlike machine; a huge steam operated plunger with steel sinews which when activated pulled up the great golden curtain. It lay there quietly that morning, an ancient beast languishing in an antique dwelling, perhaps anticipating its long overdue encounter with destiny.

THE MOVIE PALACE - A REMINISCENCE

The old Brooklyn Paramount Theatre, now Metcalf Hall of Long Island University, was the meeting place for this journey down the memory lane of the golden years of the Movies by two distinguished contributors to that era. Mr. Arthur Benline and Mr. E. Carlton Winkler. Mr. Richard D. Thompson introduced the speakers with a reading from Ben Hall's "The Best Remaining Seats" the published remembrance of that period.

Mr. Winkler, who served as production supervisor and stage manager for many impresarios including Billy Rose mentioned that the Opera House (Paramount) that we were in was intended to be the largest in the circuit and it was the last to be built on that scale before the depression. He was stage manager at the opening and remembered well the confusion of that evening. Not only was the carpet still being laid, but the back wall of the stage was still being bricked up. The elevator that carried actors to the stage always stuck enroute, and the new Major switchboard was so tall that the short electricians could not reach the top bank.

In fact much of his discourse centered around the deficiencies of various theatres around the country. The Joy Theatre in Dallas he described as the "Acme of the Architects Craft." Long rows of columns down the center of the auditorium necessitated the projection booth to be located on the side wall of the hall, but more impressive was the ladies room which was entered through a door in the top of the screen. The Metropolitan Music Hall in Boston left out the projection room, so a temporary one was installed in the mezzanine in 1925. It is still operating there today. The scene door was behind the pin rail which had only a 2'-6" X 7'-0" opening in it to allow for scenery access. The Branford Theatre in Newark had poor sightlines so they built the stage 9 feet above the first row of seats. Since no one could be seen upstage, they later built the front section 6 inches lower, leaving a permanent step in the middle of the stage.

Mr. Benline took the floor at this point and complimented Ben Schlanger for building so many good theatres. Mr. Benline was an engineer and architect associated with the building of many of the Loews Theatres throughout the country, and had many stories to tell of Marcus Loew, who knew the value of the dollar. One tale went as follows: Mr. Benline was called into the office to view the latest acquisition of the Loew empire. "Look at this, Benline, the French Government's medal making me a Chevalier in the Legion of Honor." While Loew was proudly showing off, Mr. Benline commented that "such an honor was obviously something you couldn't buy with money." Loew quickly retorted, "Don't be a fool, Benline."

Most of the Loew theatres were 2500-seat structures and were built for \$300,000 to a \$million top. He described the Valencia Theatre in Baltimore as the first of many atmospheric theatres in the East with its sky and star projections on the ceiling. It was built on top of the Century Theatre as a means of strengthening the roof-top dance floor which had developed the shivers from the dancing of the Black Bottom. Another fortunate afterthought was the kiosk box office which became the standard in all theatres of the day. This developed because the architects forgot to include a box-office in the Metropolitan Theatre in Boston. Somebody set up a temporary kiosk out front under the marquee and a trend was set.

When Roxy built the Music Hall for Rockefeller, he thought that he had the greatest thing going ever. He was going to make so much money with the largest theatre in the country that he just did not bother to budget. Instead, he hired everybody he knew from other theatres and since this one was twice as big he doubled all salaries. He even had four musicians whose only duty was to play a fanfare at 11 AM for the opening of the house and another at 11 PM when it closed. Mr. Benline was called in to straighten the fiscal matters when Roxy started to go broke.

Mr. Winkler returned to the floor with another story about the Music Hall. The second movie to be shown there was the Sign of the Cross. As part of the stage show it was thought a great idea to have a chariot race using the turntable as a sort of circular treadmill. This race was timed to end as the movie started on the screen. However, as the screen came in, the turntable continued to move around with the chariots driving clear through the screen. The film that day was shown on bedsheets borrowed from the first aid room.

Mr. Winkler continued with a mention of a few of the more attractive theatres, the most impressive being perhaps the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. This 3200-seat house was built in the middle of nowhere in the Detroit suburbs as a drawing card for real estate sales, and for years it played to no one. Each dressing room was fitted out with an anteroom, a private bath, and built-in hotplates on which the actors could cook. Such elegance and care for details was often the case in the golden years when showmanship was considered essential to sell the product. The important thing was the creation of the "wonderful moment" for the audience, so that they would have a memorable evening. Mr. Winkler hoped that this approach to theatre might come back again.

The remainder of the evening was spent looking at the disemboweled shell of the old Paramount auditorium and stage. The first 20 rows of seats were torn out and the area covered over to make a basketball court, the upper balcony was bricked up to provide a lecture hall. The once gilded plaster baroque now is chipped away and sprayed with a tapioca brown spatter. And in one corner of the musty stage, now covered with parallel bars and trambolines, could be seen one of the remaining consoles of the Mighty Wurlitzer, soot covered and crumbling. Depressing the keys produced nothing but a small eddy of dust.

THE LATIN QUARTER

Eugene Rudolph reports the following concerning the December joint meeting of the IES and the USITT. As a follow-up on a most enjoyable evening at the Latin Quarter it might be of interest to some members to know just how the production part of the Latin Quarter functions.

The review we saw was called "French Dressing." The major portion of this review (les girls) is produced without major change for a period of one year. The variety acts (the gypsies) and the headliner (Roberta Sherwood) change every 3 or 4 weeks. This basic format produces a solid framework of production with the variables slotted into it.

The lighting control system is well suited to this mode of operation. The main control consists of a 2 scene preset remote control console, operating 30 thyatron dimmers of 2KW and 4 KW capacity. An auxiliary package board consisting of six 2.5KW autotransformer dimmers is located to the right of the main console and at right angles to it. The main console is located directly under the opening of the stage, so that the operating electrician has an unobstructed view of the show area.

All the lighting units are plugged into pigtails distributed throughout the ceiling and coves. These pigtails are permanently assigned to their respective dimmers. Some dimmer appearances repeat 3 or 4 times. There is no patch system associated with the system, and some circuits such as the foots are tied in directly and do not appear as pigtails.

From an operational standpoint the system works well, for the main lighting groups always appear at the same respective controls on the console. The operator can safely memorize the positions, knowing they won't be changed in three or four weeks. Most changes in dimmer allocations take place on the package board which handles all special cue lights. In addition to the lighting, the electrician also controls the sound system, wireless microphone equipment, motorized curtains and special effects. All these controls are situated on either side of the lighting console.

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THE THEATRE AT THE CROSSROADS: WHICH TURN SHOULD I TAKE?

Richard Thompson reports the following on the National Council of Christians and Jews meeting of January 27: The Moderator was Al Capp, and there were the following panelists: Peggy Wood, Frederick O'Neal, Henry W. Denker, Cheryl Crawford.

It seemed that the most surprising thing about this meeting of the N.C.C.J. Forum Series was that few of the regular attendees of such functions of the theatre were present. There appeared only one familiar face, except those on the panel, in the entire gathering.

Much of what was said we have all heard before; Mr. Denker complained that the playwright was not being recognized in the Theatre, and that the critics were too harsh. Broadway was the only place for the theatre to live. Mr. Capp, as moderator, interspersed his introductions of the various speakers with his usual wry satire and provided for some humorous moments. Miss Wood commented on her recent to-do she has had in regard to the Tulane Drama Review's Conference and their "vulgarity." She stated, however, that the Theatre cannot go to the left or the right of the crossroad, but must go straight ahead. Mr. O'Neal commented that Broadway was not the only place the Theatre was being done and referred, of course, to Equity's plan for regional theatre groups. On the other hand, Miss Crawford defended the Broadway position and also Actor's Studio, which had come into some criticism by Mr. Capp and Mr. Denker.

While it was an interesting discussion and the luncheon was good, it did, however, repeat what has happened in so many instances where the "specialists" try to find out what's the matter with the "invalid." Unfortunately, as in all these cases, the forest could not be seen because of the trees.

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THEATRES IN THE NEWS:

BOCA RATON, FLORIDA

A Laboratory for the Arts is an apt description of Florida Atlantic University's Humanities Building. Due for completion in July 1966, it will bring under one roof all the Fine Arts programs of the University. It will contain two stories of art classrooms, music rehearsal rooms, music rehearsal auditorium, ballet rehearsal room, classrooms for the dance, an experimental theatre, a scenery painting studio, an electrical equipment shop, and the most versatile theatre in the East. The steel grid is already in place at the top of the 68 foot high loft. Harold Burris-Meyer, director of the college theatre, who planned the layout, has provided for three alternate methods of handling scenery: the conventional counter-weight system, a rope system, and power hoists. The center curtains are to be of two-foot wide aluminum panels, any or all of which may be drawn at any time.

The building will cost nearly \$2,000,000 by the time it is equipped. Continental seating is a feature of the 504 seat house, whose stage is 38' deep. It can be used for proscenium, extended, thrust, or open staging. The projection room can handle 16, 35, 70 MM film, as well as large screen television. Mr. Burris-Meyer feels the acoustics will accommodate anything from a solo violinist to Aida complete with camels. He plans to use the theatre for research studies on the ultimate effect of sound on audience appreciation of the popular arts. The sound effects expert is experimenting with what he calls a "new sound" to cause emotional reaction on audiences which he believes will eventually affect both the motion pictures and television.

FORT WORTH

A \$1,250,000 theatre, the latest addition to Fort Worth's projected "square mile of culture" recently opened. It was built with money furnished by the William E. Scott Foundation. The Scott Theatre was designed by Donald Oenslager, a New York set designer. The performance area is dominated by a huge asbestos curtain which covers the walls as well as the stage. The orchestra pit can be raised to extend the stage. In addition to the main auditorium, there is a 122-seat experimental theatre, which will be used for productions of plays by Fort Worth playwrights. The Amon Carter Square also includes the Fort Worth Art Center, the Amon Carter Art Center, The Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium and Coliseum, and a Summer Theatre, Casa Manana.

HOUSTON, TEXAS

The Houston Music Theatre, which will cost about \$3 million, will open its doors on May 17. The 2,861-seat house is situated on the Southwest Freeway leading out of Houston. The Houston theatre, one of the biggest in the state, has been leased for 10 years with options to Randolph Hale and Nick Mayo. It was designed by Jerry Hawkins and Tom Lindsey. The concrete building is completely airconditioned. The structure employs Theatre-in-the-round staging, turntables, thrust stages, and the projection of "scenographic" effects around the circular walls, a technique developed by M. B. Paul.

UNION, NEW JERSEY

A new \$1-million theatre for the performing arts was dedicated recently at Newark State College. The new theatre is designed in a semicircular Greek Revival style and has a seating capacity of 975. It has a stage 52 feet wide by 40 feet deep and is similar to the one designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Dallas Auditorium. The one-and-a-half story building has 25,000 square feet of floor space. There are two large dressing rooms, a greenroom, offices, and a high-ceilinged lobby suitable for art exhibits.

ASBURY PARK, NEW JERSEY

Live theatre has returned to Asbury Park with established hits being offered by an Equity company that hopes to establish a repertory troupe. The Asbury Playhouse is performing in the long, dark 60-year old Savoy Theatre in the heart of the business district. The house was the first legitimate theatre built here. During the nineteen-twenties it housed summer tryouts of shows staged by the Shuberts, Klaw and Erlanger, and others. The current co-producers, Barbara Ley and Phillip Dorian, are bucking an economic theory, long subscribed here, that such projects are more profitable during the summer season.

LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

The Dutchland Music Theatre, a tent utilizing a proscenium stage rather than the customary arena stage, is under construction in the heart of the Amish country in Lancaster, Pa. The first presentation will be "By Hex," a musical comedy about a young Amish farmer who rebels against the customs of his people.

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NOTICES:

STAFF CHANGES AT ANTA

Miss Ella A. Malin has been promoted to the position of Editor, Publications Programs. She will be responsible for ANTA's quarterly news-letter, as well as informational publications distributed by ANTA to professional, educational, and community theatres throughout the country.

Miss Martha Wadsworth has joined ANTA as Assistant Director, United States Center of the International Theatre Institute, an affiliate of ANTA. The Institute's International Theatre Congress, to be held in New York for the first time in June 1967, will be her major responsibility.

I. E. S. SYMPOSIUM

The Illuminating Engineering Society's Theatre, Television and Film Lighting Committees Symposium is being held this year on Monday and Tuesday, May 9 and 10th, at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, Chicago, Illinois. This is similar to the Symposium which was held last June in New York, and will cover areas of similar interest. Persons interested should write Mr. Charles J. Neenan, Chairman of this Committee, c/o CBS Television Network, 51 West 52nd Street, New York, N. Y. 10019.

SIMON'S DIRECTORY

A new, third edition of Simon's Directory of Theatrical Materials, Services and Information is now being published by Package Publicity Service, 1564 Broadway, New York. This reference book, covering the theatre arts of the United States and Canada, lists North American suppliers of every kind of material, equipment and service used by theatre craftsmen. In addition, the directory includes stage records and statistics, associations and unions, periodicals, a bibliography of theatre books, a discography of theatre record albums, new theatres built since 1964 or projected for completion by 1968, museums, theatre collections, and other sources of research.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

It is^a depressing time for architecture generally. There has never been more of it; the plans and proposals burst into print vying with each other for size, novelty and status There is a reportory theatre in Minneapolis that adds schizoid insult to its glass curtain wall with superficially artful, aggregate surfaced wooden cutout screens.

Ada Louise Huxtable, The New York Times, Feb. 27, 1966.

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NEW PRODUCTS

A synthetic fiber with the highest resistance to heat and corrosion of any man-made fiber was announced at the winter meeting of the American Chemical Society. The fiber is a compound of boron and nitrogen that exists as boron-nitride, a heat resistant ceramic material. It can be spun finer than either nylon or rayon. It has a silk-like feel, and has been woven into cloth that withstands the attacks of boiling acids and temperatures of 5,000 degrees F.

Developed by the Niagra Falls Research Laboratories of the Carborundum Company, the fiber could doubtless be used for electrical equipment, especially for wire and cable that comes in close contact with motors and engines and other heat producing equipment. The fiber's silky feel also makes it a candidate for fireproof drapes. It is naturally white, extremely light-weight and will not pick up dirt. If it does, just shake and the dirt will fall off.

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