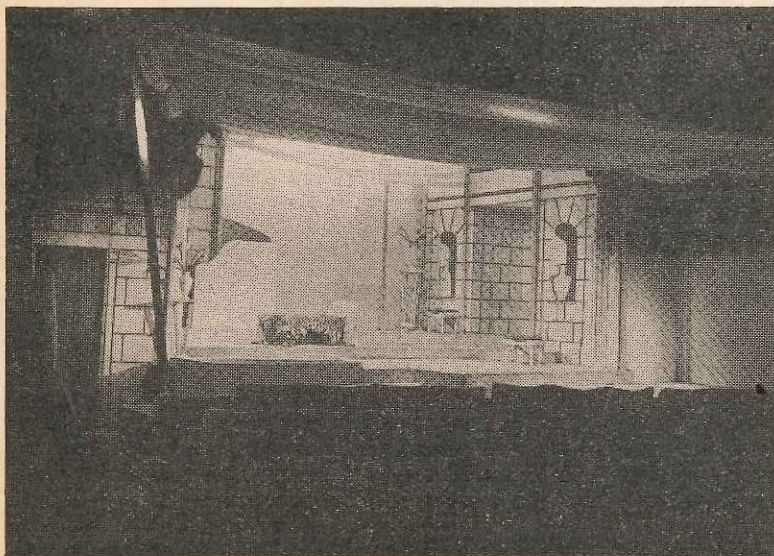


Britain's 'Little Theatres'

By ALFRED EMMET

IT is the fashion for writers about the amateur theatre to use the description, 'amateur theatre movement', for what is in point of fact a vast, sprawling and mostly amorphous mass of activity. The word 'movement' I always feel to be not only faintly pretentious, but also a misnomer. 'Movement' implies a body of people with a common object, whereas it is essential to an understanding of the amateur theatre to realise that there are in the so-called 'movement', different and sometimes conflicting objects. There are groups whose



At The Questors Theatre, Ealing: setting by Ernest Ives for Maurice Valency's 'The Thracian Horses'—an attempt to burst out of the picture-frame and spill into the auditorium

Ronald Stilling

objects are wholly or mainly educational; others whose purpose is social, in any of the different meanings of that rather over-worked word. Often there is no particular object at all, but simply a desire to participate in a pleasant pastime. It is true, I think, to say that all these groups impinge only in a limited way upon the mainstream of theatre.

There is, however, a section of the amateur theatre of which it may genuinely be said that its object is to serve the theatre. This section includes the majority of the established amateur 'little theatres' in this country, and other groups which have similar policy and aims. In discussing the contemporary theatre and the contribution to it that the amateur theatre can make, it is this section, which for ease of reference I will call the 'little theatres', that I have in mind. These little theatres are complete and independent theatre organisms owning or controlling their own theatres, which theatres they have achieved because there came a point in the natural growth of the organism when control of its own theatre building became essential to its development. Incidentally, these as it were spontaneously born, independent little theatres are to be found almost only in this country.

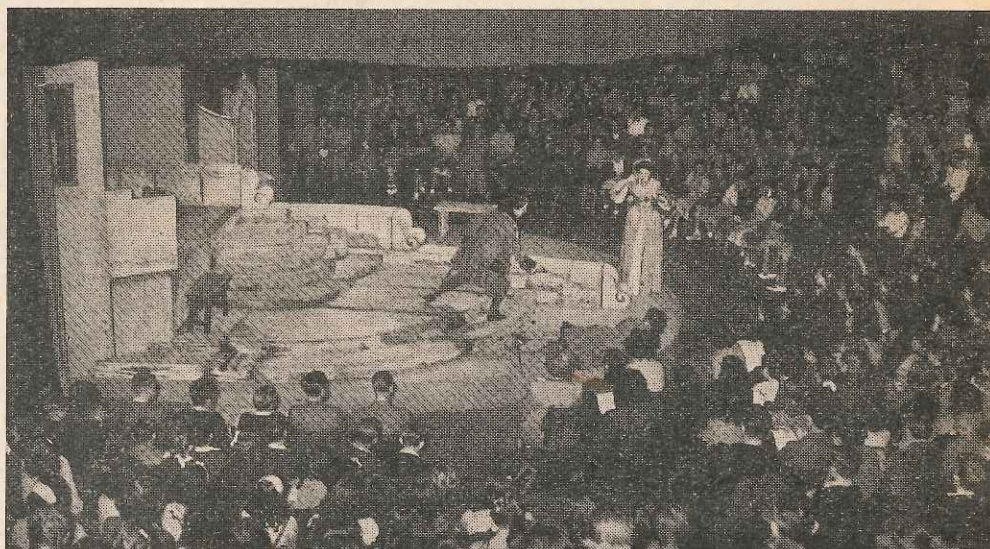
For hundreds of years the theatre has 'progressed', has been in a state of flux and change, never standing still—the form of the playhouse has been continually changing, from the medieval pageant car to the Elizabethan playhouse (on which, incidentally, one of the most famous of the little theatres, the Maddermarket at Norwich, is modelled); from the Restoration theatre, combining in its form several independent influences,

evolving through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the picture-frame theatre which is the fashion today. The kind of play has been continually changing, from the robust poetry of the Elizabethans to the Comedy of Manners of the Restoration, degenerating to the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century and the false romanticism of the nineteenth, to swing back to the truth and realism of Chekhov, Ibsen, Galsworthy and the intellectual ideas of Shaw. Not only the playhouse and the play, but also the kind of acting has been continually changing, down to the naturalistic behaviour so common today. All these changes are, of course, complementary. It is not possible to dissociate the kind of play that was written in any era from the kind of playhouse in which it was to be performed; the style of acting was complementary to the kind of play. And so on.

But somehow in the last few decades we seem to have got stuck. Though the tyranny of the proscenium frame is loudly and oft lamented, the form of the playhouse has been substantially unchanged for upwards of seventy years. Though occasionally a dramatist such as T. S. Eliot or Sean O'Casey tries to reach out into a new form, there is little significant difference in kind between the majority of the plays produced today and those of, say, forty or fifty years ago.

There are two main reasons for this near-stagnation and the first of these, quaintly enough, is the theatre licensing regulations. Before a building can be used as a public theatre, a licence must be obtained from the appropriate authority. In the greater part of London, for instance, the authority is the London County Council. Chiefly to guide the local licensing authorities in other parts of the country, the Home Office published in 1934 a *Manual of Safety Requirements in Theatres*, which is widely followed. Among these regulations are the following: first that any theatre seating more than 400 must have a fire-curtain in the proscenium opening; secondly, that it must have a proscenium wall of fire-proof construction not less than so many inches thick. In other words, any public theatre built today must have a picture-frame stage. The licensing regulations in effect have fixed the form of the public playhouse as it was when these regulations were drawn up, at any rate in regard to the most important factor—the physical relationship between the actor and his audience.

It is interesting and instructive to glance briefly at the history of these regulations. In their main outline, they were conceived when the stage was lit by flaring gas jets, and decorated with inflammable materials of all kinds. In those days the stage was indeed a place where a fire was likely to break out in full view of the audience at any moment. The provision of a fire-curtain which could descend in



Intimate Theatre Group 'arena' production of 'The Servant of Two Masters' by Carl Goldoni, with the audience on three sides of the players

the already existing proscenium frame, and so effectively seal off the danger area, was, of course, a godsend to those whose job it was to lay down regulations for reducing the fire risk. So it came to stay. The regulations, as is the way with regulations, have through the years been continuously added to, made more onerous and difficult, and very, very seldom relaxed—and this despite the fact that in the meantime the fire risk on the stage has been reduced to relatively negligible proportions by the discovery and development of electricity, and all but eliminated by the invention of automatic sprinklers. The quaintest thing of all is, that if gas or even oil is used to light the stage, it is not considered that any additional precautions are necessary, so complete are they already. Not only, then, have these out-of-date regulations blocked any major development in theatre architecture, but also so complicated and difficult are they that they have increased the cost of building to a point that must be quite uneconomic.

Playing Safe

And that brings me to the second reason why the theatre has got stuck, which is that its economic structure is not designed for experiment. The costs of putting on a new production today have so much increased that a commercial management can hardly be blamed for 'playing safe', for leaving the experimental play, the experimental production, to someone else. It is nobody's business to try out new plays, new dramatic forms, new developments and ideas in production; it is nobody's business, economically speaking, to take a long view. The theatre has no organised research department or laboratory. Perhaps an organised research or experimental theatre may seem a fantastic idea for such an unorganised body as the theatre, but somebody has to do it, somebody has to organise it, and if economic conditions prevent this work being done by independent managements, where is the answer if the theatre is to go forward and not die back upon itself? The cry is: 'Where are the new plays? Where are the new playwrights?' To that one may add: 'Where are they going to get their chance, their inspiration?'

That pre-eminent theatre historian, Professor Allardyce Nicoll, has tentatively advanced a fascinating theory that every 'great' period of dramatic writing in the history of the theatre has followed shortly after some important advance or change in the form of the playhouse; that any such important change acts as a challenge or inspiration to the writer or potential dramatist, and draws him into the theatre; that when the form of the playhouse has remained for a time more or less static, inspiration seems to dry up, the writers feel a sense of frustration so far as the theatre is concerned, a feeling that there is nothing new they can contribute, nothing they can do in the theatre that has not already been done, and so they tend to turn away from the theatre to other media.

From this theory it may be deduced that we cannot expect another great period of dramatic writing in the theatre until there is again some important change in the playhouse form to serve as impetus for a fresh inspiration. If we accept the theory, it lends further emphasis to my plea, which in any case stands, that the theatre must move forward to find a new form in the playhouse and must give opportunities for new writers, particularly those experimenting with new techniques in writing. Sooner or later, the difficulties that bar the way, the outmoded and unimaginative restrictions on theatre buildings, the conservatism of the managers dictated by economic conditions in the theatre, will be removed. They will be removed because they must be removed, to enable the theatre to progress. And the strong amateur theatre, largely independent of economic conditions, is a certain guarantee, if one were needed, that the theatre will not die, that is to say that it will progress. But it may take a long time, for I think that never in the history of the theatre have circumstances made progress so difficult. This is where the amateur little theatres have an important part to play. This is the section of the theatre that by inclination, by opportunity, by the artistic conditions and by the economic conditions of its work, is best fitted to act as the experimental *avant garde* of the theatre as a whole.

Taking first the question of the playhouse, there is quite a big field for experiment, even within existing buildings. For instance, The Questors Theatre at Ealing, with which I am associated, has for some years been experimenting with bringing plays of all kinds outside the proscenium frame into more direct contact with the audience. Out of the Highbury Little Theatre at Sutton Coldfield has grown a professional group, the Intimate Theatre, which has been carrying out some most interesting and important experiments in an arena theatre, in which the players are surrounded on rather more than three sides by the audience. Much too, can be learned from the Maddermarket's Eliza-

bethan playhouse. Actors have for so long been stuck behind the proscenium frame, that we have much to learn about what happens when they come out again into closer contact with their audiences. Out of such experiments as I have mentioned, oft multiplied and repeated, will emerge an increasing knowledge on this and other allied points affecting the vital relationship between the actor and audience, and from that knowledge will evolve plans of tomorrow's playhouse.

Many of the little theatres are beginning to think in terms of plans for their new theatres—either entirely new buildings or enlargements of existing buildings. Here there is a wonderful and unique opportunity for experiment. Inasmuch as the regulations are far less severe for buildings seating less than 400, the little theatre will be much less hampered by restrictions. I think it would probably be quite possible to build and get a licence for a theatre of revolutionary design, without a proscenium frame, without a fire curtain, provided it were a small theatre. Once the way has been shown, once the revolution has been started, once it can be established that the right shape and arrangement of a theatre building in this year of grace is not this, but that—then surely the regulations must of necessity be changed to make 'that' possible. But 'that' has yet to be discovered—or more correctly evolved, for probability is that once the way is found, the change from one form to another will be gradual, in accordance with the needs, as it has always been. I think the first step, however, must be a bold one, and any little theatre able to build in the near future has a golden opportunity to take it. Economically, it can better afford to do so than the commercial theatre, which will be apt to play safe in theatre design, as in play choice. Not that I think myself there is any risk. I am personally confident that audiences will take very naturally and easily to the prosceniumless theatre. One of the things that struck me most about the Intimate Theatre Group's arena productions that I saw was the way the audiences accepted this method of presentation quite simply and without reservation; that is in accord with my own experience in our more modest experiments at The Questors Theatre and is the experience, I gather from eye-witness accounts, in the arena theatres which have been developed in the United States. I would say that a little theatre that builds now (and 'now' naturally means in the next few years) and does not dispense in some way with the Victorian picture-frame, would not only throw away a magnificent opportunity for exciting new achievement, but would also throw away a lot of money.

New Works and Experiments

Then as to plays. Here again the little theatres can afford to experiment. Most of them have substantially assured audiences, whatever play they do, and it makes comparatively little difference financially, whether they do a new and experimental play, or another Shakespeare, Chekhov or Ibsen. Moreover, I think on the whole the little theatres attract a better informed and more critical audience than does the professional theatre in the provinces. There has been a noticeable increase in the last few years in the proportion of new plays produced by the little theatres. Genuine efforts are being made to promote the production of new plays. Thus last year, the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain especially commissioned a new play from a poet-dramatist, Norman Nicholson. This year it is organising a competition for new plays. There is a genuine desire among the little theatres to produce new works—and new works cast in a new mould.

Perhaps the most exciting possibility offered by the little theatres is the opportunity to the potential dramatist to link up with the theatre as a member of the group, and in this way to gain practical theatre experience. I would like to see in each little theatre not one, but several apprentice dramatists learning their job, not by attending classes or taking courses but by being in and of the theatre: acting occasionally, if they have any talents that way, but if not, painting the sets, operating the switchboard, scrubbing the floors, anything through which they can get the smell of the theatre into their lungs and the feel of the theatre into their bones. This opportunity the little theatres—and probably only the little theatres—can give.

I mentioned the names of two dramatists who I said were trying to reach out into a new form (and I would be hard put to it to add to that list)—T. S. Eliot and Sean O'Casey. It seems to me not insignificant that Mr. Eliot's latest play, 'The Cocktail Party', can find no theatre in London and after a short run in Brighton is therefore going to New York, and Mr. O'Casey's latest play, 'Cock-a-doodle-Andy', is this month being given its premiere by an amateur little theatre, the People's Theatre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. If the professional theatre cannot experiment, the little theatres can and do. And while there is experiment there is life, and while there is life, there is hope.—*Third Programme*