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The cover shows the interior of the Mermaid theatre under construction.

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May, 1959
I. Why Worry?

WHY should the Fabian Society worry about the British theatre? Because its health is a matter of national importance, and its survival is a prime claim upon the state. Because no group or party appears to have a full appreciation of its problems, a concrete plan for helping it today, or a sense of responsibility for its future. Because it is in grave danger, from which only political action—by central and local authorities—can save it.

That may sound like a familiar Cassandra-cry. The British theatre has, of course, been in trouble for centuries, and throughout the West the theatre is in trouble today: as an art, as a business, as a social institution. Everywhere it is affected by the competition of TV and the cinema for its artists and audiences, the steadily rising costs of production, the playgoers’ resistance to increase in prices, the decay of buildings, the dearth of capital, the power-politics of public and private enterprise; by the apparent decline of the middle class as patrons of the drama, the ‘straight’ theatre’s isolation from the working class, the gulf between minority and majority cultures; by the exhaustion of aesthetic experiment, the deflationary effects of war and science, the absence of a sense of social community.

Yet the British stage today is confronted by problems peculiar to our nation and our time. In no other European country is the art so immersed in the industry; is the theatre left so completely at the mercy of fashion, luck, and ‘free’ economic forces; is there such a paralysis of new building, combined with so rapid a destruction of existing stages; is state aid and protection on so niggardly a scale; has the theatre, in the past, been so sharply divorced from the other arts; is recognition of its parity with those arts still so persistently denied.

From the past our theatre has inherited a great treasury of tradition. In the present it can parade new glories of its own. For the future there are hopeful signs on the horizon. Yet the very success of its artists not only illustrates our pertinacious richness of native talent but also highlights one of the main flaws of the system within which it is obliged to work: the disastrous and unnecessary wastage of so much fine work and creative potential. Why should we 'settle for half', in Arthur Miller’s phrase, by accepting the current dispensation as the only democratic pattern and supposing that the only alternative is a nationalised, bureaucratised stage?

Author’s Note: — Other men’s flowers throng this pamphlet, and I gratefully acknowledge my particular debt to the Arts Council’s annual reports, which have done such valuable service in explaining and advancing the idea of collective patronage for the arts and in elucidating the techniques through which it may be applied. My special thanks are due to the editor of Lilliput, in which some sections of this pamphlet were originally published; to Mr. Hugh Willatt, for valuable advice and information; and to Mr. Benn Levy, not only for his help in reading the typescript, but for his ventilation and exposition of the theatre’s problems in Parliament, in the Arts Council, in print and in private.

R.F.
That choice does not exist in reality, and the ‘half’ we settle for is already evaporating before our eyes. The theatre as we know it is not immortal. To an alarmingly high proportion of the British people it apparently does not seem necessary.

The essential theatre, of course, will never die, for there is no substitute for the living stage. As a junior partner in the entertainment industry it may be overshadowed by TV and the cinema, commanding a mass range and influence which it cannot hope to match. As an art or anthology of arts it has no rivals. Directly it may serve a small minority, but, as Geoffrey Whithworth said, it is ‘everybody’s business’. Indeed, the advent of films and television—far from making the theatre redundant—has enormously increased its potential social necessity. Consider its local advantages in an era where public taste is exposed to the pressures of standardisation and commercialisation through the machine amusements. The vast capital investments needed for the promotion of films and TV involve centralised, remote control in the hands of small groups of financiers, managers and tastemakers, among whom American influence is still dominant. A city can rarely afford to make its own films and TV programmes, but in a civic playhouse its people—and the people of the surrounding region—might well find a flexible, accessible and cheap instrument of self-realisation, entertainment and education: what Granville-Barker envisaged as the ‘fount of a city’s expression, sounding-board of its emotion and its thought’.

_It’s Everybody’s Business_

But that is still only a mirage. The hard facts are that unless the theatre finds fresh channels and new forms, unless it breaks through to a new audience, unless it ensures a better deal for its artists, unless it reforms its organisation, it will wither away. It will dwindle into a nursery-workshop for films and television; a do-it-yourself hobby for Britain’s growing army of amateurs: a luxury toy in the playgrounds of the rich and the studios of the eggheads. Is it inevitable that it will go on becoming more expensive and more anaemic and more scarce, patronised by an ever-shrinking minority? I say yes—unless the state takes a hand.

Later in this pamphlet I suggest some of the measures which central and municipal authorities must take, for the greater glory of the English stage. But before examining what to do, let us see why it should be done by looking closely at the map of the nation’s theatre. It is essential to see this clearly, in some detail, from the beginning, because contradictory generalities and catchwords usually obscure the facts of life in show business. These facts, indeed, are hard to get, and I have had to make my own rough map without any agreed basis of official data. Nobody knows, for example, the size of the playgoing audience, the source of the industry’s capital, or even the number of theatres destroyed since the war. All discussion of the theatre’s future is befogged by the mystifications of its current masters, who treat stage economics as a secret science. They will not compile the data of attendances, receipts, etc. that are so readily available in France, Germany and the U.S.A., or for our own cinemas, libraries and concert halls. And, apart from such tantalising reticence, the map is confused because the theatre itself is in confusion. Part of it is bathed in a sunset...
glow; over another sector, the dawn seems to be breaking. Boom and slump exist together. What do people mean when they talk about 'the state of the theatre'? Which theatre?

2. The Theatre Industry

There are now about 200 professional theatres in Britain: some 500, it seems, have been destroyed or converted to other purposes since Irving’s death in 1905. They take around £14 million a year at their box offices. Their average nightly audience is, at most, about 200,000; on a good night the cinemas draw ten times and television holds twenty times as many people. Eighty per cent. of them are run for profit, and less than a dozen are publicly owned.

The dominant pattern of the stage is shaped in Central London, where 39 theatres are usually open all the year round. These have about 42,000 seats on sale, of which nearly a third are in seven buildings reserved for musicals, variety, opera and ballet. With a third of London’s population, Paris has nearly twice as many theatres. Twenty-one of these buildings are over 50 years old. The average price of seats ranges from 3s. to 18s. 6d., compared with the price twenty years ago of 1s. 9d. to 11s. 6d. A show playing to capacity (that is to say, with standing room only) may take twice as much money as it would have taken on a pre-war night. Yet if prices have, on average, doubled, the costs have more than trebled. Since the stall was first established in London about 75 years ago I estimate that its average price has risen by 200 per cent., but the average cost of entertaining the playgoer in it has risen by about 700 per cent.

All but four of London’s theatres — the Old Vic, Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (which depend for their survival on state aid) and the Royal Court (where the English Stage Company is in residence) — are let out for hire, from play to play, to one of some 25 producing managements. Half these managements are primarily concerned with what used to be called the ‘legitimate’ drama, that is the non-musical play, and only one (Mr. Peter Saunders) has his own playhouse on a long lease. Others compete for theatre-space, and often are obliged to stage plays in buildings of the wrong size, or even to jettison productions because there is no room for them in the West End. Here, as in everything connected with the theatre, the manager is gambling on the luck of the lottery, but he cannot begin without a sizeable stake. Before he takes a penny at the box office he must pay out production costs, ranging from about £5,000 for a straight play with one set and ten actors to perhaps £25,000 for a musical with an orchestra. He must meet the liabilities of a preliminary provincial tour, and once in London he will have to pay, say, £1,500 a week — for a medium-cost play in a medium-size theatre — while his receipts may vary from £300 to £3,000. If they drop below a certain level, the theatre’s owner will give him notice to quit. For it is the landlord who has the last word.
Rent is the biggest item in a management's weekly budget, and in the inflationary cost of contemporary theatre. The topic is engulfed in mystery, but it is obvious that terms vary according to the theatre, the show and the lessee or sub-lessee (whoever hires out the building for profit), and that rent can be collected in several ways. The lessee may ask a flat sum of £450 a week for the 'bare walls': that is, the manager must meet the costs of heating, lighting, advertising and full staffing, backstage and front-of-house, and this may involve a weekly budget of £1,000 before he pays out salaries and royalties to the author, director and actors. He may be asked to pay six weeks of this 'rent' in advance, from which the lessee meets his rates, insurance and maintenance. The landlord may prefer a twenty per cent. share of the takings (with a guaranteed minimum); or—most frequently today—he may lease his theatre on sharing terms. Here he nets anything from thirty to thirty-eight per cent. of the weekly gross (the box office total), and splits some of the running costs with the manager: he probably pays for half the lighting, heating and advertising, and provides the fireman, stage-door keeper, and front-of-house staff. Whatever his method of rent-collecting, he usually keeps the profits of programmes, cloakrooms and bars. Sharing terms spread the risk and involve the 'bricks and mortar' men in the fate of a production, but it is always agreed that when takings fall below a certain figure the manager and the lessee have the right to give each other a fortnight's notice. At this 'notice-figure' the lessee may still be out of the red, but the manager's budget will still be well below the 'get-out' (the point where he can begin to make a profit, after paying off production costs). It is the man with the theatre who has the power. Although his overheads have increased, his risks are proportionately much smaller than those of the entrepreneur—except in a time of theatrical slump.

**Rents and Runs**

No London theatre outside the Royal Court, the Whitehall and the three major state-aided institutions shelters a resident management with any continuity in casting or policy (as was once common here and is still the norm across the Channel). Both the economics and aesthetics of the West End stage—that is to say, of the English drama—are governed by the long-run system. A play is rehearsed for a few weeks by a company of actors working together mostly for the first time, and is then allowed to run as long as it draws an audience and pays the lessee and the manager—which may be for several years. Inevitably many managers pick plays for their 'long running' possibilities, and reduce their risks in the theatrical casino by avoiding experiment: their ideal drama is the one that will run for ever. Plays are classified, according to the cult of success, only as hits or flops. Once staged in London they are hardly ever revived there, although their West End haloes keep them alive for a while in the provinces. One result of this system is that the range of the theatre is wastefully and unnecessarily limited, in the performance of classics and contemporary drama alike. As Mr. Benn Levy has pointed out, 'unless 300,000 or 400,000 people want to see a play it cannot be done—50,000 people are not sufficient to support it', and what is more those 400,000 have to want to see the play roughly at the same time: they mustn't straggle in. With costs of production
increasing, and the interests of the lessee at stake, the manager frequently looks abroad for ready-made successes and long-runners, on which somebody has already taken the first plunge. He must mobilise his audience at once, and that is much easier to do if they already know that the play has been a succès fou in Paris or a Broadway smasheroo, or at least appears to follow the pattern of some old London hit. He cannot wait for a public: a very high level of takings is necessary from the first week of the play’s run, if it is to keep its theatre. And he can never work with a long-term plan in the long-run system.

Indirect Subsidy

One of the most encouraging features of the West End theatre in the past few years is that, in the face of many handicaps, managers have taken risks with plays which could not hope to settle down for marathon runs, and have sometimes found that they were still in pocket. But it is a notable and neglected fact that most of the outstanding progress in Shaftesbury Avenue made since 1939 has been indirectly but substantially due to state support. During the last twenty years the dominant manager in the British ‘straight’ theatre has been Mr. Hugh Beaumont, of H. M. Tennent Ltd. and Tennent Productions Ltd., and although that dominance has had its obvious dangers — notably, in the restrictive influence of his taste — there is no doubt that Mr. Beaumont has done a great deal to raise the standards and advance the prestige of the English ‘commercial’ stage. Under his management, which at one time occupied as many as ten West End playhouses simultaneously, distinguished productions of new and classic drama have been staged. Through his association with such star talents as Sir John Gielgud, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Peter Brook and Dame Edith Evans, of whose services he seemed at one time to have a virtual monopoly, a kind of continuity in policy and style was loosely established among the anarchy of the West End. Yet Mr. Beaumont’s achievements were, in effect, subsidised by the state. For from 1942 to 1957, when entertainment tax on the theatre was abolished, he ran a satellite company which by virtue of its non-profit-making constitution was exempt from the payment of that tax, which amounted in its last years to about fifteen per cent. of the takings (around £25,000 at one theatre in a year’s run). Instead of paying that £25,000 (to take a sample figure) to the Exchequer, as his profit-distributing contemporaries were obliged to do, Mr. Beaumont could keep it in the family. An ordinary management paid tax on every ticket, whether it was making a profit or not: Mr. Beaumont’s non-profit-distributing satellite could use the entire proceeds of the box-office to invest in new productions or accumulate reserves, after the books were balanced. The 1957 Budget, by abolishing such concessions with the abolition of tax, ended — in the words of Mr. Ashley Dukes — ‘a long period of differential based on the motive of production’: and it was because of the advantages of that ‘differential’, in subsidising the ‘art’ theatre in London and the provinces, that the abolition of tax was so warmly opposed by such men of the theatre as John Clements and Benn Levy.
Out of London's thirty-nine theatres fifteen—containing nearly half the seats—are linked with one small group of men, headed by Mr. Prince Littler and Mr. Stewart Cruikshank. Through the Stoll Theatres Corporation, Moss Empires, Howard & Wyndhams, Associated Theatre Properties (London) Ltd., and other companies, in an intricate network which has been consolidated through the past seventeen years, they control not only a high proportion of the best seats in the West End but also the principal touring dates in the provinces. The Group—as this Littler-Cruikshank empire has been called—has a big stake in theatrical advertising, insurance and catering: it has interests in song-publishing, entertainment agencies, and the recording industry; its members are Britain's biggest producing mansagements in the realm of music hall and pantomime; it is linked with Mr. Beaumont and H. M. Tennent's; and it has a large share in the fortunes of independent television (Prince Littler is chairman of Associated Television). As the power of TV grows, and the area of independent enterprise in the commercial theatre contracts, the Group's already considerable influence throughout British show business is likely to increase still further. Although it has thought fit to sell a number of theatres and although its theatre profits have dropped during the past decade, its power rests firmly on the control of bricks and mortar, with annual trading profits in a good year of over a million pounds, and capital of some four million. The balance of theatrical power is, as I have pointed out, weighted on the side of the landlord, and that increasingly means on the side of the Group. Its leaders are—unlike the financiers who meddled in the business between the wars—men of the theatre, who have brought solid benefits to show business. Yet, as Mr. Prince Littler has rightly pointed out, 'I don't feel we have to put on artistic things that lose money. I am only in my position so long as the shareholdes are happy'. The Group is in business to make money, and where theatre is an 'industry', as it has been in England for so long, it is not so much artistic merit as an occasional windfall that is the prime object of the exercise.

IN THE PROVINCES

In London, the industry—leaving the art aside—has never had it so good. But now look at the map of the touring theatre—at those disappearing Grands and Royals and Empires which once loomed so large in the life of our provincial towns. In their Edwardian heyday hundreds of special trains chugged between them every Sunday, bearing cargoes of touring 'theatricals' taking Shakespeare, or The Only Way, or Sweet Nell of Old Drury, or the latest West End successes around the provinces. Although the cinema's competition cut down the scope of touring, twenty years ago a London production (with or without the original casts) often circulated outside the capital for half the year after its run had closed. As late as 1950 there were still as many as a hundred and forty companies on the road in a given month, but by the corresponding month in 1958
(a year after the abolition of entertainments tax) there were only fifty-five: half were pseudo-French nude shows and 'revues'. Ten years ago theatres were still graded as Number One, Number Two and Number Three dates, but virtually all that is left today is the Number One circuit of such cities as Edinburgh, Newcastle, Liverpool and Manchester. Outside a dozen leading theatres at most the Oliviers and Gielguds never penetrate, and in these privileged cities they are seen before they arrive in London; for a significant innovation of the last quarter-century has been the try-it-on-the-dog tour of shows destined for Shaftesbury Avenue, in which they are tested, titivated and sometimes scrapped. Stars usually refuse to work for long, if at all, 'on the road'. Without them a play can seldom tour for more than half a dozen weeks.

The touring theatre, then, has withered away — and is still shrinking. Scores of English towns have had no professional stage for a generation; in scores more the playhouses and variety palaces are doomed; and this is not necessarily because they no longer have an audience. They occupy urban sites which can usually be much more profitably occupied by blocks of flats or offices, and as profit is still our ultimate criterion of theatrical value, as playhouses are regarded not as public assets but as expendable units of private property, as the housing of the arts is generally ignored by the powers-that-be, then demolition gangs are allowed to knock down any building which gets in the way of a real estate deal. Unless, of course, it can touch our antiquarian hearts by claiming to be a historical monument — and even then its safety is by no means assured. It is a typical product of our topsy-turvy thinking about the theatre that we may fervently try to preserve an early Victorian playhouse, however inefficient, uneconomic and unserviceable it may be, because it has some mildly interesting architectural features and historical associations; but scarcely a murmur is heard when a landlord sells a relatively modern, popular, money-making theatre to the 'developers' because he can make a big profit by doing so.

**Obsolete Buildings**

Under the current system, as I have indicated, the costs of production are too high, the means of production are concentrated in too few hands, and the ends of production are too narrowly limited to making money. What is more, the system has failed to distribute theatre and to protect its buildings. It has also failed to invest a supply of adequate capital, notably in the maintenance and modernisation of capital equipment — that is to say, the playhouses of Britain.

Too many of the survivors are structurally out of date and operationally inefficient, and this is bad not only for business but for art as well. In comfort and service, they compare unfavourably with the standard cinema. Bad acoustics and sight-lines are too common, there is not enough sound-insulation, and air conditioning is virtually unknown. Late Victorian and Edwardian architecture still perpetuates a class apartheid with segregated entrances and box offices for the lower orders, preserving that era when — in the words of Emile Littler — 'patrons sitting in the cheaper parts
of the house were treated like poor relations and compelled to use the side doors like tradesmen’s entrances’. One sign of the times is that ‘the gods’ are usually the last part of the theatre to fill today. Many outmoded provincial playhouses were originally built merely as shop-windows for replicas of West End successes, without the workshops, paint-rooms, scene-stores, rehearsal rooms and wardrobes that are indispensable to self-respecting Continental playhouses, making their own theatre on the spot. To get the best out of their investment, the promoters usually concentrated on the auditorium at the expense of the stage and its services: the backstage regions (including the dressing-rooms) were skimped and cramped in order to squeeze in more seats. Shallow stages, with scant space in the wings, are sometimes served by corridors so narrow that players in costume cannot squeeze through them. Rudimentary lighting has frequently been supplemented by additional installations, supplied at visiting managements’ own expense.

The heavy cost of maintaining these ageing buildings (as the best lessees strive to do) adds to the economic burden of the theatre in general; and all of them (however serviceable) preserve as the only platform for the drama, of all ages and all styles, the picture-frame stage behind the proscenium arch in its least flexible form. Yet private enterprise cannot afford to build new ones. As Emile Littler has written: ‘The cost of erection is so prohibitive that business men and investors with the lack of adequate return must hesitate to tie up capital in building new theatres’. Here, once again, one may see the failure of the profit incentive working in the open market to sustain unaided a living art.

THE ‘OTHER’ THEATRE

For years the industry has, indeed, been fed and fertilised by that sector of the theatre which is non-profit-distributing (by force of circumstance or constitution) — the little theatres, the provincial ‘repertories’, and the play-producing clubs and societies. This marginal theatre has played an important part in the drama of other European countries, but in England its role has been especially significant because of the dominance of the commercial stage and the absence (until recently) of state or municipal aid. It is in this ‘other theatre’ — as Mr. Norman Marshall has labelled it — that many actors, directors and playwrights have learned their trade and made their reputations, that new talents and new methods have been tested, that the honour of the stage arts has been fitfully kept alive. Much of the best work of the modern theatre has originated not in the gilt and marble of the commercial playhouses but in converted mission halls, cathedral chapter-houses and suburban attics. Yet the life of such enterprises has been usually erratic, uneven and wastefully brief, striving to exist on luck and largesse, and since the war the weight of new economic burdens has killed off many groups and crushed the spirit of many survivors. Here and there in the past ‘the other theatre’ might find some rare Maecenas who thought a
playhouse as worthy of subsidy as a hospital or a park, but most of the rebels working on the fringe of the industry depended upon finding small buildings at low rents, enthusiastic volunteers with private incomes, and the loyal support of good audiences. Steadily rising costs, the lure of TV and film work, and the pressure of urban redevelopment have driven most of the London groups out of business, and among the survivors only the Arts Theatre Club makes any valuable contribution to the stage in general (subsidised by its club and restaurant). It is out of this ‘non-commercial’ tradition that the English Stage Company has drawn its strength; and this group, with public and private subsidies, has in the last three years helped to change the face of the London theatre by its presentation of new talent in acting, directing, designing and playmaking. But today the ‘other theatre’ cannot exist without patronage. Box-office successes it may and will have, but if it exploits them by surrendering to the long-run system then it has lost its raison d’être. What it gains on the swings it must spend on the roundabouts: its prime aim is not to make big money but good theatre.

The Repertory System

To this non-profit-making sector of ‘the other theatre’ belongs the most vital and valuable part of the provincial stage — the leading companies in the so-called repertory movement. This name points the gap between ideal function and practical performance. Throughout Europe the repertory system, in both state and municipal playhouses, means that a season of mixed plays (including many masterpieces of world drama) is presented by a permanent company with frequent changes of bill from night to night. Under this system good productions need not be scrapped after a fortnight, but may be kept in the repertoire for months or years; minority plays, which find an audience slowly, can be nursed; bad productions can be quickly buried without substantial loss. It is easier to take a risk on new plays and methods, and the frequently changing range of parts keeps the actor learning and experiencing, while the theatre provides a living library of drama. But such theatres depend upon a scale of subsidy which is, at the moment, beyond the dreams of our ‘reps’. There are now about ninety of these, unevenly scattered throughout the country. Only four can afford to run a production for longer than a fortnight, and eighty per cent. change their programme every week or close for part of the year. None can afford the expense of the large company and capital outlay which the ‘real repertory’ system involves: none has, in any valid sense of the term, a ‘permanent’ team. All suffer desperately from the chronic disease of the English theatre — lack of capital, and from the widening gap between costs and prices. Most work in cramped and makeshift playhouses. Apart from the difficulties of providing comfort and atmosphere in converted church halls and cinemas, their stages are usually too small to make the best of their human resources and their auditoria are too small to make the best of their box-office successes. Most ‘weekly rep’ productions are hastily improvised imitations of the Samuel French acting texts which reproduce, in
detail, the stage directions of West End successes—usually the more common-
place comedies, farces and thrillers—and as both direction and playing suffer
from persistent overwork and under-rehearsal, 'rep acting' has become
synonymous with the second-rate. The casualty rate is high among these
companies, but many of the defeated will never be missed. Many reps,
indeed, are miserably inadequate as local theatres, and as standard-bearers
of the living stage they scare off the new potential audiences in the provinces.
It is a dangerous fallacy to suppose that any theatre is better than none.

Municipal Aid

The leading reps—such as Bristol and Birmingham—give valuable
service to their communities and to the theatre at large, in spite of their
economic straitjacket. In presenting balanced programmes of the drama
ancient and modern (including West End successes), they help to train
audiences, actors, designers, directors and dramatists; and their value is
increasingly recognised in new forms of collective patronage—notably in
the projects financed by the Coventry and Nottingham corporations, in the
assistance given by the Arts Council and in the subsidies granted by the
independent television magnates. About thirty reps are non-profit-distribut-
ing, and none could survive without help from the Arts Council and/or
the local authority. Yet only a dozen municipalities give direct aid in some
kind to their resident repertories, and that is on a scale that is often
revealingly meagre: even Birmingham spends only £3,000 annually on its
famous repertory theatre, and about £600,000 on its parks. And the Arts
Council had (up to 1958) only some £30,000 a year available for all the
provinces' needs.

By Mr. Bevan's Local Government Act of 1948, local authorities were
given the right to spend on the arts the product of up to a sixpenny rate.
This could yield about £9 million a year today, but in 1958 the total of this
municipal patronage amounted to less than £250,000. In the same year of
1958 the Arts Council was voted just over a million pounds to meet the
demands of opera, ballet, drama, music, and the visual arts, and over a
third of that budget had to be earmarked for the Royal Opera House and
Sadler's Wells alone. This compares with a subsidy to free reading of
£16 million of the 1958 total of municipal aid to public libraries. But books
have been 'on the rates' since 1854; theatres were beyond the pale up to
1948. It is worth noting, moreover, that the amount of the rate permitted
in 1854 was a penny, which remained as an official limitation until 1919;
that within twenty-five years after the 1854 Act, there were only eighty-
three public libraries; and that the rapid spread of libraries in this century
was not primarily due to municipal enterprise but to private philanthropy
—by Andrew Carnegie. Our theatre cannot wait for American millionaires
to come to the rescue, and English industrial patronage—though notably on
the increase in the past few years—is unlikely to approach the necessary
scale of investment.
3. The Artist in the Theatre

I HAVE roughly sketched out the organisation of the English theatre today: how does it work for the artists?

Let us begin with the actor. There are about 10,000 nominally professional players in Britain today; about 1,600 of them ‘leave’ the stage every year (because of death, marriage and disillusion) but their places are taken on average by another 1,600 stage-struck boys and girls. Jobs on the stage, or even behind it, can be found for only a small fraction of them. About thirty-five per cent. cannot make a living out of the theatre (they rely on the dole, on a private income, on a job in shop, factory or hospital). About forty-five per cent. can only make ends meet with the help of films and television. And about twenty per cent. earn more than £40 a week, from all sources. Most actors still depend for stage-work upon the reps, where the Equity minimum is £6 10s. weekly and few earn more than £15; but reps find casting increasingly difficult, when actors can earn more from a twenty-four hour week in television or half-a-day in films than from an eighty-hour week in the theatre. In London the Equity minimum is £9 10s. weekly, but supporting players’ pay ranges from £16 to £80 a week — about the same, according to Equity, as in pre-war times. Top people, however, do better than ever before. Such stars as Gielgud and Olivier get perhaps ten per cent. of the gross, with a guaranteed ‘basic’ salary of £100, which may net them £400 in a successful week (at Stratford and the Old Vic they are paid only about £50 to £60 a week). Others get shares varying from one to eight per cent., so that their earnings depend upon the size of the weekly gross. But in the ‘commercial’ theatre an actor never knows if his new job will last four days or four years, or how long he must wait for his next part, or how much he will earn from year to year. Stage-playing is increasingly a part-time occupation; after initial training the players often turn for more regular work and wages to television and films.

Playing the Part

In acting, as elsewhere in the theatre, art is influenced by economics. Many fine artists — including a few great ones — have emerged out of the anarchy of the ‘commercial’ stage, usually after an apprenticeship in the reps, but none are continuously employed in the full exercise of their powers. Even our leading players are condemned, under the long-run system, to be casual labourers in a fluctuating market. The actor has gained professional status without any degree of professional security, and one result of economic pressure has been, until recently at least, that recruitment has been too strictly limited to the middle class. Working class aspirants to stardom have found it harder to survive in the rat-race, with fewer opportunities in the dominant drama of genteel naturalism and the polite poetry-speaking of Shakespearian revival. Accents beyond the pale of Standard English have been generally confined to comic ‘character parts’. Ambitious players have been known to scrape the local colour off their speech at elocution classes, only to put it back again in order to specialise in a selling line of regional caricature.
But for all players, whatever their class, training and development are often dangerously limited. The only way of broadening technique and range is by acting frequently in all kinds of styles and plays, and the commercial theatre cannot ensure such frequency. On the contrary its aim is, in effect, to restrict the range of acting, by its exaltation of the long run: it seeks to keep the actor in one play as long as that is making a profit, and often tends to cast him in similar roles thereafter. In the leading reps much more is demanded from the players than from their counterparts of, say, eighty years ago, but in a highly overcrowded profession few can be sure of finding regular work in such companies, and most get less useful experience in ten years than their predecessors of the 1870s (before the modern system was established) got in ten months. Even in the last twenty years the opportunities have shrunk, with the decay of the play-producing societies and little theatres which gave the 1920s generation a platform in a wide range of drama ancient and modern. Henry Irving played over 400 roles in three years in his provincial apprenticeship; in his first nine years on the stage, John Gielgud played 80 parts (and only 30 more in the next 29 years); in his entire acting career of 21 years (excluding war service), Alec Guinness has played only 54 stage roles.

Ensemble playing has been brought to England in recent years by the Berliner Ensemble, the Moscow Arts and other visiting companies, but at home it is almost unknown when the working actor depends on the short-run or the long-run system—immersed in the hard labour of a weekly change of part, or linked to a company assembled for one play only and roughly unified in three to six weeks rehearsal. A system which exalts the 'personality cult' (though the theatre still doesn't go as far as the cinema) also promotes the wasteful under-employment and absenteeism of its true stars. If you don't see a Guinness or an Olivier in the theatre as often as you would like, it is not only because of the enormous financial rewards offered by the films but because of the tiny aesthetic rewards open in the theatre.

_Hazards for the Writer_

So much for the actor: what about the dramatist? There are about a hundred and twenty active English authors now working in the theatre, although a dozen times that number are attempting to write plays (in one year, 1958, the English Stage Company's readers received 998 plays). Not more than thirty can hope, as a rule, to see their work staged in the West End in any one year, and until it is staged in the West End, on the whole, they cannot hope to find a public. Of these thirty I estimate that roughly half will earn more that £500 from the preliminary tour and London run. For the lucky few, the rewards are enormous—immensely higher than before the long-run system was established. When in mid-Victorian times a star actor might earn his £150 a week, a top playwright earned only £300 down at most as his first and last payment (£50 an act was the usual fee, with no royalties). Today he may earn about £350 a week during a play's West End run, on a sliding scale of royalties, and after the run is over he may expect a small harvest from amateur and repertory rights, radio and
TV: if he is lucky, the film rights may be sold for anything up to £60,000. In a good year the successful, productive playwright may earn £20,000, before the taxman takes his cut. Terence Rattigan has grossed as much as £100,000 in a year. As in acting, the contrasts between the rich and the poor are far sharper and wider than ever before, without regard to any rational differential. The glittering prizes go haphazardly and erratically to a tiny handful of writers, while the dramatist who doesn’t write ‘hits’ finds it very difficult to earn his keep from the theatre at all.

Limited Opportunities

Many writers have given up: many more have never tried. For getting a play on the stage, any stage, is a desperate gamble. The novelist of medium skill or minority appeal has a reasonable chance of seeing his book in print within eight months of its completion, but the aspiring playwright — whether he makes farces, thrillers or mood dramas — may wait for years to see his play on the boards. Often he waits in vain. Take a dramatist such as John Whiting, for an example of the crushing hazards that await a new writer in the modern theatre. His first three plays — Saints Day, A Penny for a Song, and Marching Song — disappeared from the London stage after only a few weeks (although one of these, at least, is a firm favourite among amateur and repertory groups): his fourth play did not even reach the West End, but capsized on its provincial tour after prolonged preliminary difficulties in casting and direction (although it has been frequently and successfully staged across the Channel). Is it surprising that Mr. Whiting — hailed by many critics as an outstanding playwright of the younger generation—has given up in disgust for the moment, and prefers to write for the cinema instead? Even a dramatist of world fame such as J. B. Priestley cannot be sure that his work will get a showing, and is obliged to stockpile plays in which he has invested months of hard labour. Because of the unpredictability of the lottery under which our drama works, the plays of men such as T. S. Eliot and Graham Greene have had to be staged in New York first, as no London theatres were available.

For English dramatists, as for English actors and directors, opportunities for training, development, collaboration and continuity in communication are dangerously limited. While long runs have drastically reduced the turnover of new plays in London, they have also encouraged the standardisation of dramatic formula. Yet the technical efficiency of English playmaking compares unfavourably with the American level, maintained by a forty-year-old tradition of university instruction (Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller are among the most eminent products of that tradition). Until recently no universities or theatres in England have offered the aspiring dramatist a chance to learn and practise his craft. Happily the theatre has not had to depend entirely upon the luck of the market, waiting for tomorrow’s drama to arrive by post. Many of the century’s box-office successes were first staged by the ‘try-out’ societies and little theatres, often after they had been rejected by the commercial managements, and many of the century’s outstanding dramatists — Shaw, Galsworthy, Eliot, Fry — have begun to write plays through being commissioned to do so. If in
the past two years a fine crop of promising new talents has emerged, in spite of all the obstacles, it is largely for two reasons: the enterprise of Britain's reps and art theatres, and the state subsidy without which they could not exist—channelled through the Arts Council, which also gives specific encouragement to new drama by granting financial aid to both companies and authors.

4. Programme for Reform

THAT, then, is a rough map of the English theatre today. If I appear to have overstressed the darker side, it is because our stage is too often viewed through rose-coloured glasses. Too often do its leaders sound off in self-praise. Too often is it asserted with confidence that, in Lee Shubert's words, 'the box office never lies', that there's nothing wrong with the theatre that a good play won't cure, that the alternative to the current pattern is the paralysis of political control and the slow death of committee-rule. I believe that reform of the theatre is vitally and urgently important, that we have already demonstrated—in a traditionally cautious, empirical English way—that there is a middle path between cut-throat commercialism and bureaucratic Bumbledom, that although there are risks in this reform they are risks that must be taken—if the English theatre is not only to survive, but also to seize the new opportunities of the future.

A New Policy—Now

I agree that no new machinery will work without technicians to man it; that arts-administrators seem, at the moment, to be in short supply; that there are never enough geniuses to go round; that the theatre's future depends in the last resort upon getting the talent and the audiences, and no political plan can guarantee either. Yet talent needs room to grow, develop and communicate: the hit-and-miss anarchy of the long-run system is decreasingly able to supply that room. Talent needs a stage to work on: only public enterprise can now keep enough stages open. Talent needs time to make mistakes: Shaftesbury Avenue cannot afford it. Plan for the opportunity, and the talent will be there. You cannot trust to luck for a theatre fit for twentieth century adults.

Any programme for ensuring the future of such a theatre must clearly be linked with a central plan for resolving the 'chronic crisis' in the arts. It must be a long-term policy, with carefully phased objectives (and the knowledge that, in the theatre, all plans may be built on sand); it must be carried out in close co-operation with local authorities; but the important thing is that there should be such a policy now, and that the party in power should get on with it at once, without waiting for any Royal Commission's report. Much information is needed which only such a Commission (with the power to call for papers) can supply, and its appointment should be an indispensable part of any plan for the theatre, with a brief to investigate the best method of abolishing the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of the drama;
the pros and cons of Sunday opening and restricted entry into the acting ‘profession’; the rent-system of the West End; the effects of ‘the Group’ upon both art and industry; and other questions concerning the theatre at large. But no further inquiries are needed now to establish the priorities.

The main aims must be to protect our existing theatrical assets; to expand and maintain a theatre outside the market, a theatre of limited runs, limited audiences, and unlimited range and ambition; to do this as part of the ultimate establishment, for the first time, of a truly national theatre.

Any programme designed to achieve these objectives must aim to preserve a healthy balance of private and public enterprise in a ‘mixed economy’; to minimise the threat of economic blackmail without introducing the threat of political blackmail; to guarantee a supply for which there is not necessarily a current majority demand, or at least to guarantee a minimum supply of buildings in which theatre can be made; and to promote local self-government, both in aesthetics and administration, free from any cultural oligarchy in the capital. How can it all be done?

MORE CASH FOR THE ARTS COUNCIL

The first item on any serious programme for the theatre should be simply to allot the Arts Council’s Drama Department enough money to do all the various jobs which it now has to leave half-done, spreading its tiny dole among scores of deserving causes with desperate ingenuity.

These jobs include the subsidising of existing art theatres and experimental groups such as Theatre Workshop, the English Stage Company and the Studio Theatre (in-the-round); the promotion of new drama, partly by encouraging repertoires to stage it (with guarantees against loss at the box office) and partly by grants to individual writers to allow them to concentrate for a time on working for the stage; helping new directors (one of the theatre’s biggest needs) to get training and experience, by giving them direct employment in the production of Council tours, and by helping them to find work in repertory; bringing audiences to the theatre (by means of bus subsidies), and taking theatre to the audiences, either by its own very limited tours in special areas or by assisting mobile enterprises; helping repertoires to maintain the fabric of their buildings, and to refurbish the interiors so that these often makeshift playhouses may glow with something of the atmosphere without which the theatre is only half-alive; raising the standards of repertory work, by paying the cost of increasing the period of rehearsal from one week to two weeks at least, where companies have not yet found an audience big enough to warrant more than one week’s run; investigating new methods, new talents, new sources of patronage, and giving advice to and liaison with local authorities, industrialists, politicians, and artists in other fields; promoting and encouraging the formation of local arts trusts and associations; helping to establish closer links between the amateur movement and the professional stage which it so largely ignores; helping to export the best of our own theatre and to import the best from other countries, in the furtherance of international co-operation and mutual aid.

Much of this work is a make-do-and-mend service, bargaining, prompting, patching, compromising. More radical measures are obviously needed. But
such a service — based on twelve years’ practical experience — must remain an essential part of any realistic new deal for the theatre, which will also inevitably charge the Drama Department with new tasks and responsibilities.

Meeting New Demands

Since 1946 the Arts Council has fully shown its value as a democratic channel of public patronage, surprisingly free from ministerial dictation, bureaucratic tyranny or private empire-building — in spite of the paltry total of its annual budget, and the impossibility of long-term planning when its grant is voted from year to year. Fully aware of the dangers of ‘Londonisation’, this body of sixteen independents and its advisory panels has served well as both paymaster and trustee, without being jailer or dominic. To replace it by a Ministry of Fine Arts would be disastrous folly. The importance of the Arts Council is that it is not a Government department, that it is free from political tastemakers and party umpires of aesthetic merit, and that although it may inevitably tend as an official body to side with the cultural Establishment it has shown flexibility and alertness in encouraging new work through its very narrow channels. It must take the immediate main weight of any new general policy for the arts, and with an adequate budget it should do so infinitely better than any Whitehall department.

Some aspects of its current organisation should, however, be revised to meet the new demands. The advisory panels, in meeting more frequently, should be more intimately linked with the moulding of policy. As a necessary corrective to over-centralised power, and as allies in reshaping the structure and recharging the energies of the provincial theatre, the Council’s regional offices should be opened again. The needs of national institutions such as the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre of the future should be considered separately from the rest of the Council’s claims. And its budget should be voted for a five-year period.

PROTECTION OF PLAYHOUSES

The second item in a policy for the theatre’s future should be the protection of existing playhouses, under certain circumstances, as national assets, which cannot be converted or destroyed at the whim of a private individual. This involves the registration of all playhouses, the prohibition of any ‘change of user’ without public investigation and sanction, and the possible public ownership of essential buildings through compulsory purchase by local or central authorities. These new responsibilities should be vested not in the Arts Council but in a National Theatre Trust, separately financed and administered. The state patronage of tomorrow should not be concentrated in one official body. Spreading the load is necessary to keep the arts healthy. Unlike the National Trust, this body would be associated not only with the preservation of old buildings but also with the promotion of new ones; but initially its main task would be to stop the random destruction of the nation’s theatrical housing, which is its working capital.
Today a local authority may block the destruction of a playhouse, under the Town and Country Planning Acts, if the ‘development’ involves a ‘change of use’—for any other purpose than public entertainment. But there is nothing to prevent the conversion of the playhouse into a cinema, dance-hall, ice-rink or any other place of ‘public entertainment’. What’s more, councils are often naturally reluctant to reject plans for improving the value of local land and increasing their own income, especially when the playhouse concerned may have had a black record in recent years; and if they do reject these plans, they risk a potentially large financial loss, for the ‘developer’ may appeal against their decision to the Minister of Housing, and if successful he may claim substantial compensation from the council. In London alone all decisions of development are ‘frozen’, the L.C.C. cannot give approval for ‘change of use’ without first securing the Minister’s approval. Outside the capital a playhouse may be temporarily protected if an advisory committee to the Minister of Housing decides that it has special architectural or historic interest and puts it on a statutory list. Owners and local authorities are then warned that they must give two months’ notice before seriously altering or demolishing it. But it can easily be removed from the list at a council’s request (this led to the destruction of Leicester’s last playhouse); no allowance is made for what should be the prime consideration—the building’s social and theatrical value; and in any event this ‘listing’ gives no real protection, only the possibility of publicity and postponement. While new building is restricted, because of the high costs and the lack of capital, speculators and developers cannot be allowed to wipe out the rest of Britain’s playhouses, scores of which have been unnecessarily sacrificed on the altar of private profit. But which are to be saved, and how is it to be done?

*Death and Destruction*

To suppose that all should be kept for the nation is sentimental nonsense. That would involve a bill of millions in compensation and maintenance, to endow the nation with ugly, unserviceable showplaces without an audience. In planning the theatre of the future we must allow for the audience of the future, which cannot be sized by today’s box-office. To permit a town’s last playhouse to be killed because, for some years, it has lost many of its customers is murderously short-sighted. Yet the hard fact is that some surviving buildings will have to go, because they no longer serve any useful purpose. The point is this: that destruction of a theatre should be regarded not as a bit of good business, but as a social calamity, and that its approval should be the exception not the rule. This approval cannot be left to local option, or to Whitehall.

Any application for demolishing a playhouse should be investigated at once by the National Theatre Trust. It will consider the building’s operational efficiency and state of repair; its current and potential audience, in relation not only to the town but the region; the possibilities of supplying that audience with alternative theatre, now or in the immediate future; the social value of its successor on the site; the money needed to buy the lease and run the building as landlord; the theatre’s roots in local life, and
its possible role in the town’s future—and it will consider all these factors against the background of the nation’s theatrical housing as a whole. Historical and architectural interest alone cannot weigh heavily in the balance. The Trust may decide, after investigation, that the building is expendable, and the application for redevelopment should be granted. But if it decides that the building is indispensable, it must find a buyer—at a market price which may be anything from £10,000 to £100,000. Sometimes the theatre may be a flourishing commercial concern, and there will be no lack of bidders. Private ownership should not be prohibited, but the local authority should have first claim, with the right of compulsory purchase, and the National Theatre Trust should encourage—as part of a long-term programme—the formation of local trusts ready to buy and let playhouses as non-profit-distributing enterprises. If no suitable private or public ownership is available, then the Trust should buy the theatre itself.

After consultation with the Arts Council, the Council of Repertory Theatres and other bodies, the Trust should vest control in a local trust, which will lease it out, in the care of an experienced manager, to visiting managements and amateur groups until a resident repertory theatre can be established. The building alone is the Trust’s responsibility, but as the landlord it must be prepared to stand possible financial loss. Touring business cannot quickly, if at all, be boosted back to pre-war levels, and audiences in areas which have long been theatrically starved must be wooed and trained. Yet although this financial commitment must be accepted, in relation to a total budget of needs and means, it must be pointed out that the possible ‘losses’ should not be assessed by the current ledgers of provincial theatres. The whole climate of provincial opinion towards the theatre—as an entertainment and as an institution—is likely to be transformed by the effects of such policies as this pamphlet suggests; and I believe that the challenge of these policies will release in the theatrical profession new energies to raise it to new summits of achievement.

NEW BUILDING

Preserving playhouses is only a temporary, negative measure. What the British theatre urgently needs is new buildings, and the National Theatre Trust should be given the task of promoting and supervising their construction, in relation to local and national needs. Local self-government should be, as I have emphasised, one of the main planks in a policy for the arts, but our theatrical annals are so crowded with architectural fiascos that it is imperative to ensure that the rare opportunities for rebuilding should not be bungled. It would be disastrous if public or private enterprise were allowed to waste money on replicas of the old ‘Royals’ and ‘Palaces’ of the touring system, now socially, technically, and aesthetically outmoded, and there must be no recurrence of such blunders as the Stratford-on-Avon Memorial Theatres (the second of which has required long and costly revision); the Cardiff theatre built without dressing-rooms; the brand-new theatre in a London school, with corridors through which it is impossible
to squeeze a 'skip' and the ornate barracks erected in the West End in the
1930s by cinema architects (such as the Savoy and the Cambridge).

We need theatres which, without sacrificing a shred of atmosphere, put
function before pomp. Every new building must have its own workshops,
paint-frame, wardrobe, green-room, restaurant, with adequate air-condition-
ing, lighting control and acoustic efficiency, and there should be no
economising on these essential services to squeeze a few more seats into
the auditorium or to dress the facade in pseudo-classic grandeur. Every
member of the audience must be able to see and hear the play, feeling
not only welcome but warmed by that special aura which distinguishes
all theatres worthy of the name, and after the play is over he should be
able to discuss it on the spot over a drink or a snack without being sum-
mariy evicted. The stage should be flexible enough to present any play
of the past in its appropriate style, while encouraging the writer of today,
and ensuring in all productions the intimate contact of actor and audience.
This means the end of the fixed playroom behind the picture-frame:
tomorrow's theatres must have variable proscenium and adjustable stages,
so that actor, writer and audience may enjoy new freedoms and variety.

All plans for tomorrow's theatres should be referred to the National
Theatre Trust (not the Royal Fine Art Commission), which should ensure
that every project meets certain minimal standards in the light of social
and theatrical needs. In Britain there is no living tradition of stage archi-
tecture, but across the Channel there is a rich choice of patterns to be
followed and avoided, and no new playhouses should be erected here without
close study and careful assimilation of Continental experience — linked, of
course, to the lessons of our own theatre-builders in the past and the
admirable pioneering work of such bodies as the Questors today. By acting
not only as an umpire but also as a consultant, with a clearing-house of
architectural information, the National Theatre Trust would serve both
private and public enterprise. Such trusteeship would provide the safeguards
which are indispensable to the future of the theatre as a whole, without
imposing a dictatorship of taste upon the nation's showplaces.

The Little Theatres

But who is going to build the new theatres? If they are beyond the
means of private enterprise, can public enterprise afford them? Clearly
there can be no immediate boom in building, and not every city can or
will follow the bold lead of the Coventry corporation, which has constructed
at a cost of about £274,000 the first brand-new professional public playhouse
opened in Britain for twenty years, or of the far-sighted Nottingham city
councillors who are to spend some £200,000 on a new home for their
resident repertory company. Yet many towns could and should afford to
provide new theatres on a smaller scale and a different plan. Take the
example of the Middlesbrough Little Theatre, an enterprising group of
amateurs which has built its own brand-new playhouse—a relatively flex-
ible, comfortable, efficient 512-seater—for only £50,000, which the group
has accumulated over the years.
Consider the single-minded, adventurous ambition of another amateur group, the Questors of Ealing, which out of thirty years' experience—after consulting leading theatrical authorities at home and abroad—has evolved an adaptable playhouse which will permit productions behind the conventional picture-frame, on an adjustable fore-stage, in 'arena' style (when the audience surrounds the action), 'open' style (with the audience on three sides) or 'space' style (with the action in a semi-circle open to the audience along its axis). This building will seat 350 and cost about £50,000, and the Questors' members—who have already constructed part of it by their own hard labour—have collected about £18,000 towards the bill. And in the professional theatre the crusading drive of Bernard Miles has created the Mermaid, an intimate 500-seater on a very restricted site in the City of London: a single, raked auditorium faces a bare platform stage only a foot above the first row of the stalls, without any proscenium arch or orchestra pit. This has cost about £65,000, raised over five years from firms and individuals, and the City of London has given the site at a peppercorn rent.

None of these three theatres is exemplary in architecture or organisation. Yet in spite of their restricted scale, they show that local authorities need not be scared of theatrical building because of inflated estimates of the cost (influenced by the £2 million budget bruited abroad as the initial cost of the National Theatre on the South Bank). The Mermaid, the New Questors, and the Middlesbrough Little Theatre also show how much unsubsidised enthusiasm can achieve on its own, however wastefully slow and exhaustingly arduous may be the job of money-raising, however inadequate private mendicancy may be as a substitute for public patronage. And there are other growing-points such as these, here and there in England, from which new theatres will spring, if ripened by grants from local authorities. Methods of public ownership and civic control have been tried and tested in several cities since the war, and the pattern of the public trust—as in Nottingham, or Ipswich, or Coventry, or Canterbury—is likely to be widely followed in the future. Protecting the theatre from direct committee-rule by the local council, and minimising the dangers of outside interference, it puts the burden of day-to-day control on an individual director-administrator.

Changes in Design

Among the civic theatres of tomorrow a new balance of power in the provincial stage will be created. Exchanges of productions will lead to a new kind of touring network, intimately linked with the National Theatre in London. Town Hall champions of the stage should also be encouraged by a notable change in architectural design, already visible in Milan, Brussels and Copenhagen, and even perceptible in England. Tomorrow's theatres are likely to be built increasingly, if at all, as parts of an architectural 'complex' of development, incorporated perhaps with shops, garage, offices, hotel and exhibition hall in a pattern which makes a more profitable, valuable use of restricted urban land than unit-building in the traditional way. If the destruction of a playhouse is permitted by the National Theatre
Trust, the local authority may grant the ‘development’ project on condition that a playhouse is built into the new block— as the London County Council insisted in the case of the Stoll Theatre.

The era of the isolated playhouse is over, not only architecturally but socially. Tomorrow is the age of the theatre-plus, which will be open not only at nights but during the daytime for exhibitions, lectures, recitals, film-shows, debates. With its own coffee-bar, bookshop and assembly room the theatre will put down roots more firmly into the life of the city, especially among the young— whose absence is, in general, so noticeable today. Apart from working in liaison with educational authorities, in arranging special matinees and keeping an eye on current curricula, the company will promote ‘children’s theatre’ (so neglected in Britain today). In spending money from the rates on a theatre, a council will be buying a lot of other things as well. Yet some cities which need and want a full-scale theatre will not be able to meet the entire cost of construction on their own, and here the National Theatre Trust may well— after reference to its total budget and its map of theatrical housing— assist not only by helping to mobilise other patrons but by granting financial aid.

Consider here the parallel procedure for the preservation of historic houses. Under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act of 1953 the Minister of Works may take ancient monuments into ‘guardianship’, may acquire historic houses and their contents, or help local authorities and National Trusts to acquire them, besides making grants for their maintenance. He acts on the advice of three Historic Buildings Councils for England, Scotland and Wales, and recovers his expenditure from the National Land Fund. In the first five years the budget for acquiring or helping to acquire historic houses and collections was nearly £200,000, and the expenditure on maintenance was over £1,500,000. Under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 the Minister of Works or the Ministry of Housing can authorise a local authority to acquire compulsorily a building in respect of which a ‘preservation order’ has been made, where reasonable steps are not being taken for its proper preservation.

5. A National Theatre

No policy for the theatre will be complete without immediately implementing the National Theatre Act of 1949, by which the Treasury was empowered to contribute up to a million pounds towards the cost of erecting and equipping a National Theatre on the south bank of the Thames (on a site given by the London County Council). Two years afterwards the Queen Mother laid the foundation stone of the Comedie Anglaise, acclaiming in her speech the ‘new partnership of the nation and the stage ... signified by the agreement of Parliament to build, largely at common cost, a theatre national in name and purpose’. Today that great dream seems just as remote as if the Act had never been passed, and the dormant opposition to the project grows perceptible in press and Parliament. An
eminent dramatic critic soberly declares that the building of the National Theatre would be a national disaster, and advocates the distribution of the million pounds among commercial managements. In the House of Commons a movement attempts to reverse that ‘agreement of Parliament’ so jubilantly hailed in 1949. It is significant that, some years ago, The Times should report that at a meeting of the Labour Party’s arts and amenities group there was substantial agreement that London already possessed an adequate number of theatres and that any funds available for building should be devoted either to providing a national theatre in the north or to encouraging interest in the theatre throughout the country. According to the Manchester Guardian, earlier this year, the Party executive is likely to support a recent recommendation from this arts and amenities group that instead of building a theatre on the South Bank—or, indeed, anywhere at all—the State should put under public ownership a group of existing provincial playhouses, served by a company from the Old Vic. The view that the million pounds should be doled out in accordance with the slogan of ‘fair shares’ is firmly held in influential circles, without respect of party, and it gathers support as the National Theatre Act recedes into the mists of parliamentary cant, as the problems of the theatre outside London grow more complex and urgent, and as public pressure for implementing the Act continues to be so dismally undiscernible.

The Critics

Why, people ask, should public money be squandered on ‘mere bricks and mortar’, in a city with forty theatres already? There is every reason to believe that the figure of a million pounds was based on an unrealistic estimate, and when the fifty per cent. rise in the building costs during the past decade is taken into account, it seems evident that the National Theatre could not be built and equipped for less than two million pounds, at least. That is not all: for once the building is opened, it would require a large annual subsidy in the region of £100,000. Shakespeare may usually be good business today, but as the experience of Stratford and the Old Vic has shown in the past, the public is slow to show a comparable enthusiasm for other ‘classic’ dramatists. Even with full houses at every performance, the Old Vic ‘loses’ over £250 a week. Think, then, of how much it would cost to keep open a larger theatre, with a much bigger company and staff, presenting Jonson, Strindberg or Ibsen to half-empty houses.

And who is to run this theatre? Without a Guthrie or a Brook, why count on new machinery, electricity and reinforced concrete? Like its Continental models it will be exposed to bureaucratic interference and committee rule. It will become a museum of talent—and second-best talent at that. For it will not be invulnerable to the economic pressures of our time. In many German theatres the annual repertoire has, in the past few years, been cut down from twenty to ten plays a year, and the ‘permanency’ of their ensembles has been impaired by the competition of films and TV. How could our own National Theatre hope to lure the stars from their screen salaries, their overseas tours, their marathon runs? Its supporters nurture a naive faith in the idealism of our leading mummers and their
directors if they believe that theatrefolk will suddenly begin to put art before money.

What We're Missing

So the critics say. But much of the hostility and apathy towards this project springs out of insular inexperience and understandable cynicism about the long delays and the repetitious controversies. We have no live tradition of theatre-building, so the relationship between architecture and drama isn't widely understood. People who dismiss the National Theatre as 'mere bricks and mortar' visualise it as just another auditorium with a picture-frame stage, presenting the same kind of production, in the same styles, under the same system that can now be seen at Stratford and the Old Vic. We've never had a national theatre, so we don't know what we're missing.

What's more, the whole issue has been confused by the status of the Old Vic, widely regarded as the de facto Comедie Anglaise—a false identification which has had unhappy results on both the Old Vic and the National Theatre-to-be. In 1946 the Trustees of the Shakespeare Memorial Trust (who own the site) agreed with the Governors of the Royal Victoria Hall (as the Old Vic is officially called) that their Joint Council should attempt to procure a Royal Charter providing for the amalgamation of the Old Vic with the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre. The Committee would provide the building, and the Vic would provide the company. But why—ask the sceptics—does the Old Vic need a highly expensive playhouse only a few hundred yards from its own home? Why can't the nation's money be saved by doing up the old building in the Waterloo Road and increasing its subsidy? (Currently, £20,000 a year from the Arts Council.)

The Old Vic

Now, the National Theatre will of course draw heavily on the experience which the Vic has accumulated (not least in its frequent front-office imbroglios) and on the talent it has trained. Until the second satellite playhouse is built on the South Bank, it seems advisable that the Vic should serve as its stand-in. But there can be no make-shifts and compromises. Both a new playhouse and a new system are indispensable. First of all, the Old Vic building has many disadvantages. Its amenities behind and before the curtain are inadequate; it has a solid concrete stage, insufficient wingspace, imperfect sight-lines and acoustics; it is only suitable as a platform for a small part of the world drama which a national theatre must stage; its ageing, heavily-repaired structure has a limited working life; and it is too small to make the best of its successes. To rebuild it entirely on that site would cost about half a million, and would only add another two hundred seats. Patching it up would mean spending a great deal of money for a very small return, without providing the desirable conditions for a national theatre. Moreover, the project would be dangerously handicapped from the start by appearing as a mere extension of the Old Vic: the famous playhouse in the Waterloo Road is now an inadequate basis for a radically
new venture in theatrical organisation. Many of its traditions are great and glorious, as a Shakespearian gymnasium for beginners. But there are also persistent traditions of high-minded philanthropy (bringing drama to the poor at cut prices and rockbottom costs), shoestring budgeting for minimum standards, and—in recent years—administrative vendettas. To pass off the Old Vic, with a new label and more cash, as the National Theatre would not only be a disgraceful exhibition of national Scroogery; it would also seriously endanger that Theatre's chances of success. We have to make it new, in order to make it work. And we have to pay for it.

The hard facts are that the conditional million voted in 1949 is tied to one site, and one site only: it cannot be shared among the provincial repertories. That site is not going to be 'frozen' indefinitely by the L.C.C., when there are other deserving claimants to a place in their admirable scheme for the South Bank. With every year that passes, the costs grow higher—and the need grows greater. This is the only chance, the last chance, to build the British National Theatre. If the site goes, the hope of the theatre goes for ever.

The Why and Wherefore

That would be a disaster. For the following reasons. Six of them were formulated as long ago as 1909, when the objects of the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre were listed in a handbook:

1. to keep the plays of Shakespeare in its repertory;
2. to revive whatever else is vital in English classical drama;
3. to prevent recent plays of great merit from falling into oblivion;
4. to produce new plays and to further the development of the modern drama;
5. to produce translations of representative works of foreign drama, ancient and modern;
6. to stimulate the art of acting through the varied opportunities which it will offer to the members of the company.

To these should be added:

7. to set an example in imaginative, ambitious and efficient building, not only for the theatre but for the nation;
8. to serve as the training-ground and battlefield of designers, technicians, directors, managers, actors and authors (in association with theatres outside London);
9. to raise the standards of the theatrical arts, united in a new, continuous collaboration of purpose and policy, within a new organisation and architecture;
10. to spread the appreciation of that new unity, and to promote its extension among the nation's theatres;
11. to establish by its very existence, the prestige of the theatre on a new level of national consciousness.

How, then, should we set about building this exemplary theatre? First of all, the existing plans should be revised in order to design a building which would cost not more than the million pounds agreed in the Theatre
Act of 1949. That would mean postponing the small, experimental playhouse whose construction under the same roof as the main auditorium has always been regarded as indispensable to such a theatre's success; but it would not necessarily involve any cheeseparing of essential services or any restriction on the daring and imagination of its fundamental design. Construction should begin as soon as the revised plans have been approved. By the terms of the Act, as it stands, the Shakespeare Memorial Trust is responsible for proposing to the Treasury a 'satisfactory' scheme for building, equipping and managing the National Theatre. The three trustees, who are also the owners of the site, may be augmented by not more than seven persons. I suggest that these ten persons should constitute the National Theatre Trust (as it should be called), which will exercise not only a specific responsibility for the South Bank playhouse but also a general responsibility for the rest of the nation's theatrical housing, as outlined in the preceding pages. These seven members should be appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in consultation with the Minister of Education, perhaps, as is the practice in nominating Arts Councillors, and through him a degree of responsibility to Parliament will be assured. Through an executive (which will appoint the National Theatre's director) the Trust will administer an annual budget out of which it will meet the needs of both London and the provinces: a method which will have the incidental advantage of linking the capital and the satellite playhouses of the future.

6. Who Will Pay?

And where is the money to come from to pay for all this? I have outlined what is, by current standards of investment in the theatre, a grandiose and extravagant plan. Who is going to meet the bill? First of all, I suggest, industrial and commercial leaders can be encouraged to make a much bigger contribution to local and national companies. The trickle of aid from far-sighted and imaginative businessmen, visible during the past three years, should flow more swiftly if all gifts to non-profit-distributing enterprises are exempt from income tax — as is the practice in Canada and the U.S.A.

Next, it is clear that television magnates have a big role to play in keeping the theatre alive; not only in the long run by fostering the taste for flesh and blood drama and in the short run by feeding flesh and blood artists, but by extending the policy of financial subsidy initiated in 1958. At present the ITA Committee of Arts and Sciences is allotted an annual sum of about £100,000, which other TV networks are expected to augment. If such a subsidy is not voluntarily maintained as an annual grant, then the TV companies should be legally obliged to devote a percentage of their year's profits to the living stage, to which they owe so much.

Thirdly, there should be an immediate investigation into the application of a levy on all works of art which have gone out of copyright. By imposing a small royalty of, say, one or two per cent, on the performance or production on the stage, radio, television, gramophone, and cinema of all the plays in which copyright has lapsed, and by diverting the proceeds into
a central fund for the use of the theatre as a whole, a large capital reserve would soon be accumulated (which might be vested in the National Theatre Trust). As Mr. Ivor Brown, who proposed this scheme many years ago, recently said in *Drama*, 'It is typical of the contempt in which artists are held that the post-mortem rights on their work are simply wiped out' after fifty years, whereas 'the heirs and assigns of financial or landed property, if the property can survive death duties, may go on drawing rent and interest in perpetuity'. Mr. Brown points out that 'patient research' would be needed into the considerable difficulties of arranging a workable method of collection and administration, but—as he eloquently says—'To make the art of the dead help to sustain and refresh the art of the living is surely good public policy'. That refreshment, however, cannot be left to voluntary labour.

Fourthly, the provincial public must—in the long run—pay more at the box-office. In most repertory theatres prices are pegged at a grossly uneconomic level, because of the obstinate resistance of the playgoing minority to any increase in price. Although they are conditioned by the prices and comforts of the cinema, and although the abstaining majority may explain their absenteeism by saying that the theatre is 'too dear', the hard facts are that the cost of provincial playgoing has scarcely changed in fifty years—and this is one substantial reason for their permanent condition of financial crisis and artistic malnutrition, which helps to alienate their potential audience and confirm their actual audience in its refusal to pay a fair price. But the theatre cannot escape from this vicious economic circle without an injection of capital, and so it cannot count immediately upon a change of heart among its customers.

Fifthly, the share of local authorities in collective patronage must be greatly increased, not only in financial but in organisational aid, and it will be increased if a bold national programme is decisively launched with influential backing. The establishment of the National Theatre and the National Theatre Trust would have an immediate impact upon the attitudes of Town Hall patrons of the play.

Unpopular Culture

But although the theatre will be served by these sources, with increasing vigour, its main immediate claim will be made upon the state. Only the most approximate figures may obviously be given here, but I estimate that over a five year period the Arts Council's theatrical budget (excluding opera and ballet) should be raised initially to an average £140,000, and the National Theatre Trust should be financed at the rate of some £250,000, in addition to the million pounds voted in the National Theatre Act. Perhaps we might follow the example of the Canada Council, which is financed by an investment fund of fifty million dollars over a seven-year-period, bringing in an estimated revenue of some two million dollars annually. Or perhaps we might incorporate the amount required in a new bill, setting out the powers of the National Theatre Trust.
There are, of course, few votes in such a policy. There is no public demand for it. Enthusiasm for a national theatre, to take one cardinal point, has never extended outside a tiny minority, and heavy expenditure on the arts (especially if concentrated in London) would bring down a barrage from some sections of the press. Yet it was not in response to public demand that the state budget for the arts in general (including the preservation of historic houses, the British Film Institute, the royal colleges of music and many other bodies) has risen by 1,000 per cent. in twenty years: in 1938-9 only £900,000 was spent by the Exchequer, and £800,000 of that went to the national art museums and galleries. Today the total is £6 million. And the establishment of schools, libraries, art galleries, hospitals, museums and universities has not been the result of popular pressure. If governments had waited in the past for such pressure before investing money, many people would be waiting still for amenities and services which they take for granted as part of the fabric of their lives.

What Can We Afford?

Politics is the art of the possible, and there is nothing Utopian about an arts budget of the size I have suggested. The Utopians are those who dream that the theatre can take its rightful place in England without state intervention and finance. Look at the money that foreign MPs and mayors spend on the stage. And blush. In Western Germany, every seat sold costs the public budget 7s. 6d.: about £8,500,000 a year is devoted to the theatre in nearly a hundred towns. Hamburg’s arts budget (in 1953) was over £870,000 (with about £70,000 for its ‘straight’ theatre); Frankfurt-am-Main spends over £400,000 a year on its theatres out of the rates, and is building two new ones for about £1,300,000. In France the Government spends about £116,000 a year on five provincial dramatic centres (with another £14,000 from the municipalities); it invests another £50,000 a year approximately on the Théâtre Nationale Populaire; and (in 1953) it spent over £1,340,000 on the four national theatres in Paris (whose fabric it maintains and for which it charges no rent). In Denmark the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen receives about £250,000 a year. In Sweden over half-a-million is spent on the theatre by the state, and another £70,000 by local authorities (1953 figures).

In comparison with these figures, a plan for the English theatre would involve less than half a million pounds from the state. Will the public stand for it? Of course it will, if Parliament votes it. And this central issue at stake should not be a matter of party politics, though it seems clear that only the Labour Party is likely to initiate a new deal for the arts. Our society spends millions on the development of bacteriological weapons; squanders £40 million on a warplane which was never put into production; invests £10 million a year in a rocket range; pays out, without a murmur, a million pounds every time an H-bomb is tested. Who in his right mind dares to say that our Government cannot afford £400,000 a year on the theatre?
Although other countries spend more upon their stages, they don't necessarily buy better actors and greater dramatists with their subsidies. Of course not. But they do ensure the continuity of the theatre and its honourable survival. It is unlikely that the English people will be immediately converted to the German estimate of what the theatre is worth—in monetary, moral or intellectual terms. But whether we realise it or not, we need it. We must pay for it. And the longer we avoid meeting the bill, the heavier it will be in the end. It may be true that we get the theatre we deserve, but do our children deserve to have no theatre at all?
Ancient and Modern

Bernard Shaw attended his first FABIAN meeting in May 1884. From then until his death he was a regular FABIAN lecturer and pamphleteer (managing a few plays as well).

The FABIAN SOCIETY, now over 75 years old, has won and retained the support of many distinguished people in and around the theatre—writers, actors, producers and critics. Ancient by the modest standards of socialist societies, it is youthful and contemporary in its appeal.

If you enjoyed this pamphlet, the Secretary, at 11 Dartmouth Street, London, S.W.1, would be glad to tell you more.