

**FEW** people have any idea of the enormous amount of highly specialised work involved in the production of a musical play. In this article the reader is taken behind the scenes to learn what must be done before the curtain rises on a new show.

IT is within a few minutes of 8 p.m. Humming like swarming bees, the "first-nighters" buzz into their places in stalls or dress circle. They have been present at dozens of first nights, and know all about them. One quarter of them recognises another quarter as "first night" addicts.

Most of the seats are occupied. Those vacant have been reserved by those human blisters who imagine they gain some form of social distinction by arriving late and spoiling the first scenes in every show for the remainder of the audience.

Then the lights dim. An outburst of clapping announces that the conductor of the orchestra has taken his place. The rap of his baton rises above and silences (sometimes) the buzz of talk as the orchestra swings into the overture.

It is unlikely that one among the 1,500 or 2,000 pleasure seekers present pauses to consider the preparation that has preceded the rap of the baton. Nor is it likely that anyone unconnected with the theatre recognises the long and hectic hours of work and organisation that have gone to prepare the scene of brilliant form and colour on which the curtain rises.

Being curious, I caught Mr. Phil Finkelstein, of J. C. Williamson Ltd., and bombarded him with questions. Some of the story of how a great musical show is produced I obtained from him. Other intimate details I obtained from various experts whom I interviewed in strange places. For the whole of one afternoon I wandered at large, like Goosey Goosey Gander, up stairs and down stairs and in my lady's chamber at His Majesty's Theatre. There I saw and heard strange things. Also I heard one or two joyous stories, which, alas! are not entirely fitted for publication—but that is your bad luck.

**Plots—of a Kind**

HERE follows something of what I heard and saw about producing a musical show. The first thing that happens to the staff of the theatre is the arrival of the script, accompanied by the various "plots." The script is the typescript of the show itself, and the plots are the guides to production. There will be an electrical plot, with every possible detail of lighting and lighting effects. The scenic plot lists all the "practicabilities" of scenes such as doors, stairs, and how they are to be made. The wardrobe list will have sketches and details of every costume for principals, chorus, and ballet. The property plot lists every article of furniture



and detail of equipment used in every scene.

These property plots are frequently strange documents that make curious demands on the time and ingenuity of the property master, who must be able to produce on demand anything from a 12in. naval gun to a beehive or a mechanical mouse. I'll tell you more about that magician later, though it is risking a reputation for veracity to narrate half the things he can and does do.

Another article that usually arrives with the script is an exact scale model of the stage set with each scene necessary for the show in every detail. This little model is a guide to all the executive officers connected with the production. High up in the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, they have a model theatre into which the model scene can be set, and here the electricians can work out every lighting plan on the model that will be used in the show.

Sometimes the models are not sent, and then the scene painters make their own. Later I saw a number of beautiful little models which were made in Melbourne and used for recent productions.

The plots are passed on, each to the head of the department it concerns, who immediately begins the task of making or procuring everything it demands. Meanwhile the various artists have been supplied with copies of the lines for their roles.

**High Speed Production**

WHEN the whole machine is moving the producer, who holds the script, calls the artists together for a round-table conference. After the parts are read there is a general discussion with the producer about their interrelation. Rehearsal then begins in earnest. Chorus and ballet are taken in hand by the ballet mistress, who drills them in the movements of every scene. The producer assumes personal charge of the rehearsal of the artists. When the work of ballet mistress is well advanced, the musical director takes over his part of the team for choral work. Up to the closing days of the rehearsal the work is carried on apart and in sections. The final process arrives when the producer brings the entire company together on the stage and coordinates and gums the show together. One ceremony at this stage is a dress parade in which every member of the company in costume is carefully inspected by the producer.

This co-ordinated work—and it is work—is carried out under high pressure until a day or two before the performance when a full dress rehearsal is staged. There is a saying that preparation is never completed until the curtain rises. Literally it happens that the paint on the scenery is sometimes still wet on the opening night.

It appears that production customs on the Australian stage tend to stagger artists newly arrived from overseas. These, accustomed to the leisurely three months allowed on the British and American stages, are inclined to show signs of collapse when told that three weeks is the limit of preparation here. On occasions a new show has gone before its first night audience 14 days after the arrival of the script.

This speeding up is due to the usual short runs of shows in Australia. Very often a fresh show is under way before the rehearsal of that which is to precede it is finished. Such runs as those of "Rose Marie," "The Desert Song," or "The Maid of the Mountains" of from 23 to 30 weeks are rare in Australia. Counter attractions cause short runs. And here,

for the good of the souls of theatre lovers, let it be set down that Australia holds the reputation of having the most capricious public in the world.

**The Captain's Bridge**

THE usual experience of those who penetrate behind the scenes through the stage door is one of disillusionment. One would think, however, that for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, disillusionment should be their very last sensation. I confess that with an inebriated looking back-cloth representing an impressionist's idea of a city, and with four men arguing over a mass of canvas on the floor, it did look like a moth-eaten barn. But that aroused wonder about how it could be transformed into a scene of gorgeous luxury when necessary.

However, I was taken to the prompt side—the right hand side as seen from the auditorium—and was shown what is equivalent to the bridge of a battle-ship. Behind the wing of the proscenium is the lair of the stage manager during the performance. From this spot he can see everything on the stage, and before him is a bright array of keyboards and switches and telephones. With these he can play on the theatre as an artist can with the keys of a piano. Communication with every part is under his eye and command. He can talk to the conductor, he can talk to the man in the flies above, or to him in depths beneath the stage. He can reason with lighting experts, and he can talk turkey with the official who works scenic changes. Should he be that sort of stage manager—a very rare specimen—he can call down fire and brimstone on any department—a satisfying relaxation in moments of tribulation.

Much of the hard work and activity caused by scene shifting has disappeared before modern practices. Where once, between acts, perhaps 30 men grappled with castles, cathedrals, mountains, and rose-covered porches of the heroine's home, to-day a few men in the flies control all. The scenery for each show is suspended high aloft in the flies. By a system of pulleys and counter-weights each set can be lowered into place on the stage or raised again, as easily as a window is opened. It is somewhat of a surprise to learn that the magnificent rose curtain at His Majesty's Theatre weighs 6cwt. It does not fold or roll up. It slides out of sight into the flies as it hangs. My unaided curiosity discovered that the reason it hangs so artistically is that there is about 40ft. of hefty trace chain sewn into its lower hem. The velvet of which it is composed looks richer at close hand than it does from a distance. It should, because it cost about £600 to make.

**Collapsible Castles**

HEREABOUTS I met Mr. W. White, who, among other things, has to know all about all the scenery used by J. C. Williamson Ltd. since time began. He has a book and index, in which there is a photograph of every scene painted by the company. He knows how to lay his hand on any one of them in five minutes. Besides the vast stores attached to His Majesty's Theatre in Exhibition street, "J.C.W." own an even larger block in Richmond, which contains an enormous amount of scenery and properties—all catalogued and instantly accessible. All their hundreds of back-cloths are also available. Any show they have ever staged could be dug out at an hour's notice.

Some of these curtains are historic. One of the oldest and most treasured is that beautiful painting of the Grand Canal of Venice, used in act 1 of "The Gondoliers." It was painted by George Gordon for the first production of "The Gondoliers" about 45 years ago. It is 46ft. wide by 24ft. deep. It is workmanship so fine that it will bear the closest scrutiny. Many visiting artists regard it as the finest piece of stage scenery in the world to-day.

Mr. White, who is head mechanic,

has problems to solve that are spared most of his brotherhood. Because of the interstate interests of "J.C.W." and the necessity for moving shows all over Australia and New Zealand, all scenery is made collapsible to facilitate transport and save freight. Most extraordinary ingenuity is displayed in this work. We were standing beside a huge platform (he called it a "rostrum"). Mr. White nodded to an assistant and said, "Knock it down." The man pulled out a peg here, gave it a whack with a hammer there, and the platform became a sizeable plank. A flight of steps of palatial proportions flattened and vanished at deft touch. The Arabs who fold up their tents and silently steal away are in the A.B.C. class compared with the stage magicians.

**Property Master's Troubles**

THEN we left the stage and went exploring. Don't ask me where. We went up and down in lifts and climbed and descended stairs till I was dizzy. Just off the stage we found a huge metal saucer with a huge padded hammer beside it. My guide picked up the hammer and smote the saucer mightily. Then I recognised in its deep funeral boom the tone of that bell of St. Peter's of the Tower that gives one the shivers in the closing scene of act 1 of "The Yeomen of the Guard."

Probably the world's least enviable job is that of property master in a large theatre. In addition to being a walk-encyclopædia he must be an inventive

**By... ICARUS**

represented to give labels for the bottles.

What the property artists cannot do with papier-mache has yet to be discovered. Working from photographs, they can produce masks to any likeness. I saw heads of the screen comedians, Laurel and Hardy, so lifelike that from a few feet distant they could have passed for flesh and blood.

In the property stores at the theatre and at Richmond the mass of strange material is astounding. Ask for a bishop's crozier, a battle axe, a golf ball, a motor-car, a sword of any period, or a basket of vegetables, and any one of them or all can be produced in a moment. Vast rooms packed with furniture can supply any need from a three-legged milking stool to a throne, from a period drawing-room suite to the abby setting of an attic bedroom. From the ceilings hang gorgeous crystal chandeliers side by side with 16th century iron lanterns. One historic stage relic was the spinning wheel used by Dame Nellie Melba in "Faust." In the company's store in Sydney there is the most comprehensive armoury in the Southern Hemisphere. Weapons from a stone axe to a modern rifle are kept there.

Those who imagine that they have seen frocks in quantities in large shops have something to learn from the wardrobe stores of His Majesty's. All the costumes for all the operas and plays staged in Australia are to be found here. Vast cupboards reaching to the ceiling are packed with frocks. The doors bear cards denoting the contents—names such as "Our Miss Gibbs," "Chocolate Soldier," "Paul Jones," and so on recall ancient glories. With the costumes are literally thousands of pairs of boots and shoes—great crates and boxes full of footwear, ancient and modern. Piled up are great baskets in dozens, tagged with the names of the Glibert and Sullivan operas, and containing the costumes for each, which have been returned to store after the recent season.

Costumes for grand opera have a store of their own. Those for each opera and for each act of it have their own separate racks. Pausing by a rack labelled "Faust" my guide indicated a plain grey frock. It was that worn in the last act by Dame Nellie Melba during her last opera season in Melbourne.

**On a Large Scale**

LATER we came on Mr. George Upward, in his scene painting studio. They call it a dock, but it looks more like the scaffold. Here they do things on a large scale. There is an alleged witticism to the effect that "if you want to do something large, wash an elephant." Washing elephants is trifling work compared to that of Mr. Upward. His canvases are anything in size up to 50ft. x 25ft. While we talked with him an assist-



MR. GEORGE UPWARD finishing a miniature stage setting model.

genius. I asked Mr. Eric Richards if he had ever been stumped by the demands of a play. He explained that what cannot be bought or made can be faked. The real problems were mechanical. In one drama the leading actor had to practise a golf shot in a living-room. A crucial situation arose through his hitting and breaking with the ball—apparently by accident—a statuette on a pedestal at the other side of the room. Now it is obvious that no actor could hit the statuette even once, except by a fluke, let alone break it right after night without a miss that would spoil the scene. Especially so, as after hitting his mark, the ball had to roll toward the footlights.

Mr. Richards solved the problem by fixing to the pedestal a spring hammer that was released by a trigger. At the moment the actor swiped at the ball the hammer shattered the statuette, and at the same instant a ball was released from the base of the pedestal, so that it rolled down the stage. The illusion was perfect except on the one night that the actor missed the ball when he swiped at it.

One of the most trying jobs Mr. Richards was given was the manufacture of 900 peaches in one week that were required for "Turn To The Right." Almost as bad was providing 500 bottles for the cocktail bar in "Roberta." The bottles had to be accurate in shape and label. There were reasons why glass bottles could not be used, so the 500 were turned out of papier-mache. The worst part of the job was persuading the agents of the various brands of liquor

ant was putting a neutral ground on a back-cloth, with what looked like a yard broom.

It might be thought that the scene painter tackles his enormous canvases from a ladder. Actually, he takes his stand on a fixed platform, before which the canvas is raised or lowered as required as he works. And he works largely—the nearest approach to Kipling's ideal of splashing "at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets' hair." No ordinary palette could supply the amount of paint he requires. It was an unconventional genius who solved the problem of the scene-painter's palette by adapting to the purpose the most humble of domestic crockery. At work, to the uninitiated, he presents a humorous spectacle.

It is the scene-painter who makes the model stage scenery from which the real thing is built. In Mr. Upward's rooms are to be seen in miniature many of the settings of familiar shows. On one wall hangs the original sketch of the back-cloth from which was made that beautiful woodland scene in the last act of "Merrie England." How it is done only the scene-painters know, but they are able to produce a complete scene in a week.

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