

THE DUCHESS THEATRE

CATHERINE STREET
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

A Case for Listing



by

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Nature of Request

A request was received from the Urban Strategies and Listing Team of English Heritage for information on the Duchess Theatre, Catherine Street, City of Westminster, to assist with an assessment for listing.

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The Duchess Theatre, Catherine Street, London WC2, City of Westminster

Brief History

The Duchess Theatre, along with the Vaudeville and Fortune Theatres, is one of the simplest and smallest of the West End theatres, designed to seat less than 500 spectators. It was erected in 1928-9 by contractors F.G. Minter Ltd, to the designs of architect Ewen Barr (1879-1953). The client was Arthur Gibbons, and the lessee was the West End and Country Theatres Company Ltd.¹ The site, an awkward irregular trapezoid at the Strand end of Catherine Street, had previously been owned by Willy Clarkson, a theatrical costumier, but he had not been able to develop it because of the problem of 'Ancient Lights', which prevented building so high that immediate neighbours were in permanent shadow. Barr's solution was to build down, rather than upwards. The Duchess Theatre, named after the Duchess in Alice in Wonderland,² was opened in November 1929, with a play called *Tunnel Trench*.

In 1934, the management of the Duchess Theatre passed to the author and playwright J.B. Priestley (1894-1984), who had premiered his play *Laburnum Grove* in the theatre the previous year, and which had had a long and successful run. Priestley's wife Mary Wyndham Lewis (former wife of the author Dominic Bevan Wyndham Lewis) supervised the redecoration of the auditorium in 1934. During Priestley's management between 1934 and 1936, three more of his plays were staged : *Eden End*, *Cornelius* and *Springtide*. Two more plays followed after Priestley's retirement from management of the theatre, *Time and the Conways* (1937), and *The Linden Tree* (1947). The theatre closed at the beginning of the war, but re-opened in 1942 with Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. Three plays by Harold Pinter were staged at the Duchess in the 1960s, and *O Calcutta*, famous for its full nudity, opened there in 1974. The theatre was used by the management of the Players whilst their space under the arches at Charing Cross station was being refurbished, and was subsequently sold in the 1980s to Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Company, who are the current owners.

The Building

Exterior

As a consequence of the Ancient Lights law, Ewen Barr's two-storey, stone-fronted elevation of the Duchess Theatre is modest, and almost domestic in scale (Figs 1& 6). It is neo-Tudor in style, divided by three tall, canted bay windows, each glazed with small leaded lights, and linked at first floor level by a decorated stone balustrade. At the base of the bays are bands of stone panels carved with linen fold and superimposed with Royal emblems: the Tudor Rose, portcullis, Fleur de Lys, Prince of Wales feathers, and carved initials 'DT' for Duchess Theatre. The central entrance is emphasised by a long canopy – originally of blue and silver – extending across the façade with a segmental hood over the doorway. Elsewhere in the building the windows are metal Crittal casements, and behind the façade, the top storey of the building is faced in white glazed brick.

¹ *Survey of London* Vol. XXXVI, 203

² Theatre Building box file, Theatre Museum Archives

Interior

The upper storeys of the theatre are set back from the front elevation, and the effect inside is that the circle balcony in the auditorium is narrower in width than the subterranean stalls, and the stage is necessarily small and close to the audience. The circle gallery is hung from principal steel girders at roof level, which obviates the need for support by obstructing columns. Within this confined space Barr has succeeded in conveying some architectural theatre, with the walls of the auditorium close to the proscenium arch rising unbroken into the high, curved ceiling (Fig.3).

The auditorium and foyer were originally decorated in art deco style by Parisian interior designers Marc Henri and Gaston Laverdet, and were described in some detail in *The Architect and Building News*, November 1929 (see Figs 8-12). The theatre was also featured in *Architecture Illustrated*, February 1931 (see Figs 13-17). Nothing remains of the original colour scheme. The auditorium walls were finished in a textured pale stone colour, and the ceiling stippled with turquoise blue. The coved ceiling was adorned with simple bands in graded relief. The original stage curtain was blue with a patterned geometrical border in purple and pale blue, with splashes of orange-red. The ceiling in the auditorium above the balcony circle comprised a circular saucer dome with concealed cornice lighting installed by Arthur Mansell. Below this, on the side walls, were two decorative panels divided into a triptych by baseless fluted colonnettes. A low relief depicting an avenue of trees flanked the central panel which contained a classical female nude holding up a mirror, with the masks of Comedy and Tragedy at her feet. All this, as well as the canopy on the front elevation, was the creation of Arnold Auerbach (fl.1925-1945), a Hampstead-based sculptor.

The seats were upholstered in striped silver and blue cloth. The Royal boxes were placed, unusually, at the back of the upper circle. The Royal retiring room had originally a ribbed gold ceiling, mottled blue and gold walls, and blue carpet. In the foyer and circulation spaces the ironwork was painted silver, and the floors covered in a plush royal blue wall-to-wall carpet. The corridors had illuminated glass cases for the display of somewhat whimsical sculptures of Hamlet and dancers. The semi-circular entrance hall had a ceiling of silver plaster and pink glass, lit by lights behind, and linked to a hexagonal foyer. There was a circle bar to the right on the first floor, and the stalls bar was decorated in buff and pink.

The tight site resulted in the placing of the dressing rooms above the roof of the auditorium with – unusually in a theatre – a lift, which also gave access to the offices and machinery housing on the roof. The stage was small with especially restricted wing space. The orchestral pit was only large enough for a few musicians, a reflection of the decreasing importance of performed music in the theatre since the Victorian and Edwardian eras. A new system of counter weighting the scenery so that heavy sets could be operated by one man was installed: the Duchess had a single-purchase, twenty-two set system.

The Architect and Designers

Ewen Sydney Barr was a partner with E. A. Stone and Partners in London for fifteen years, a firm specialising in theatres and cinemas, and with whom he designed three West End theatres: the Piccadilly (1928), Prince Edward (1930) and Whitehall (1930), as well as several of the 'Astoria' cinemas. Barr was solely responsible for the design of the Duchess Theatre. He began private practice in 1945 but died less than ten years later, and appears to have designed very little else.

Marc Henri and Laverdet's first scheme for a West End theatre appears to have been the Piccadilly (1928), of pale green and gold with stylised Japanese landscapes on the fronts of the boxes and the balconies. This was obliterated in 1955. The next was the Duchess Theatre, then the internal decorations of the Prince Edward and Whitehall theatres, with which Stone and Barr were associated. Arnold Auerbach is listed as a 'painter and sculptor' in Graves's list of *Royal Academy Exhibitors*, and was based in the 1920s at the Mall Studios in Parkhill Road, Hampstead, just before Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson moved in. He made mostly bronze heads.

Redecoration in 1934

Redecoration of the theatre, under the supervision of Mary Wyndham Lewis, was carried out in 1934. According to the *Survey of London* a warmer colour scheme of 'rust and old gold'³ was introduced, along with art works in the auditorium, foyer and corridors. Mary Wyndham Lewis recorded her additions to the interior as follows:

Mr Maurice Lambert, the brilliant young sculptor, was commissioned to design and execute two great panels in low bas-relief, for the niches between the proscenium and the dress circle. He had the most difficult task in working out his bas-relief with less than three inches in depth in which to work. Patrons can see for themselves how well he triumphed and universal admiration has been expressed for his design of figures holding conventional masks above applauding hands. In the corridors and staircases are various illuminated glass cases and arrangements have been made with various galleries to keep them replenished with works of art. We feel that these works of art will add interest and pleasure to a visit to the theatre.⁴

Lambert's two bas-reliefs cast in bronze are still *in situ*, (Fig.4). They show a certain uneasy tension between the stylised faces of the women and the masks they are holding, and the naturalistic but disembodied pairs of clapping hands floating around them. But the theme clearly celebrates the joy of live performance and good acting. A recent critic was less than impressed:

Depicting figures bearing tragic and comic masks above pairs of clapping hands, these panels are undoubtedly among the very worst pieces of sculptural art in the capital and demonstrate perfectly why Britain was largely left behind in the revolution of modernism which swept the continent between the wars.⁵

³ *Survey of London* Vol. XXXVI, 203

⁴ Theatre Building box file, Theatre Museum Archives

⁵ Heathcote 2001, 2.72

Maurice Lambert

Maurice Lambert (1901-1964), was the son of a painter and brother of the musician Constant Lambert. He was apprenticed from the age of seventeen to the sculptor F. Derwent Wood, with whom he trained for five years. He exhibited in London galleries from 1925, at first emulating the style of artists such as Jacob Epstein, Frank Dobson and Constantine Brancusi. He later emerged as a versatile artist carving in a variety of materials such as marble, alabaster, hardwood and stone, and combining materials such as metal, glass, wood and concrete in a more experimental way. The Tate Gallery has a sculpture by Lambert entitled *Swan*, (1932). He exhibited at the Royal Academy and became an associate in 1941 and taught sculpture at the Royal Academy Schools from 1950-58, being elected Academician in 1952. His best known work is a life-size bronze statue of the ballerina Dame Margot Fonteyn (1956), which was purchased for the nation under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest. He made a number of portrait busts of, among others, Dame Edith Sitwell, Lord Devlin and one of J.B. Priestley in 1949. Despite his prolific output – he exhibited at the Royal Academy every year between 1945 and his death in 1964 – Lambert’s reputation is not outstanding. The *Dictionary of National Biography* entry noted: ‘Lambert’s undoubted early promise as a sculptor was never really fulfilled since in later years, he became dogged with the illness which finally caused his death.’⁶ The *Times* obituary stated that Lambert was a ‘sculptor who did not easily fit into either a typically academic or typically modern category. His early work proved him to be an artist of talent and vigorous intelligence and was already highly accomplished in craftsmanship, though critical opinion was somewhat uncertain as to the direction of his art and the extent to which a modernity of appearance in his work was more than superficial.’⁷

Assessment of the Duchess Theatre and Comparison with Inter-War Theatres in the West End

Contemporary comment regarding the Duchess Theatre was mildly approving rather than ecstatic. *The Architect and Building News* reported that, ‘a first impression is one of pleasant restfulness produced by good colour and lighting, and then by good detail well placed.’⁸ The journal added that: ‘a good view was obtained from every seat in the house. This is largely due to the fan shape adopted for the auditorium, which is also good for acoustics. The theatre is comfortable, agreeable and charming, without the need for a lot of money being spent on flamboyant decoration.’

The smooth, clean lines of the interior of the Duchess, with a little fluting and art deco moulding on the walls and ceilings with the fan motif, certainly make a stark contrast to the flamboyant decoration of some contemporary theatres. The Streatham Hill Theatre, for example, also of 1929 and a suburban rather than a West End theatre, is a late design by theatre architect W.G.R. Sprague (1865-1933), but which in style harks back to the opulent Edwardian period (Fig. 18). The Dominion Theatre (1929), is another example of the use of an established decorative style, in this case, French Renaissance. The architects were William and Thomas Ridley Milburn, and they

⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography* 1980, 626

⁷ *The Times* 20 August 1964

⁸ *The Architect and Building News* 29 November 1929, 659

designed the huge auditorium to show films as well as to present stage shows (Fig.25). The best of what survives today is an elaborate foyer with a grand double staircase, stone balustraded balconies, mirrored wall and Chinese-style chandeliers (Fig.24). *The Architect and Building News* reviewed the theatre and the commentator was disappointed: 'A stock thing little better than it was done before, and a lost opportunity'.⁹ More recently, the entry in *The Guide to British Theatres* described the style of the Dominion as 'the rather frigid neo-Renaissance of the 1920s Milburn houses.'¹⁰

The interior of the Duchess, by contrast, is closer to a modern style, but it is not nearly as whole-heartedly art deco as the 'jazz moderne' of the contemporary Savoy Theatre, (Figs.19-23). The Cambridge and the Savoy were two theatres highlighted as being of special interest by the author and architect H.S. Goodhart-Rendel in his short section about inter-war theatre design in his well known book, *English Architecture Since the Regency* (1953). He selects these two as being the best of a bad lot:

Little has been said in these pages of theatres or of cinemas because in an account as brief as this they have little claim to a place. Among London theatres no recent ones, and very few less recent, are as good as the play-going public has the right to expect. Their exteriors have, almost without exception, made no pretension to being more than routine products of architects whose forte was a knowledge of the requirements of the stage. Their interiors have been the work of similarly specialising decorators of whom no more as been required than they were experienced, but seldom inspired, in providing. Among the newer ones, the interiors of the Cambridge (1930) and of the Savoy (1929), the latter a redecoration only, stand out as being distinctly agreeable, which is more than can be said for most of the rest. Like commercial architecture generally, that of theatres reflects passing fashions, not always very favourably, and in its latest development before the last war had become a trifle stark.¹¹

The Savoy theatre, built the same year as the Duchess to the designs of Easton and Robertson, with the interior designed by Frank Tugwell and Basil Ionides, is a riot of metal and glass, marble, decorated niches, and layered ceilings richly ornamented with Aztec and Sunbeam motifs. The coffered walls of the auditorium are decorated with scenes from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, in a form of 'deco-Japonism'. The passages contain etched glass fittings. But not a scrap is authentic. It was entirely, and faithfully, copied by Whitfield and Partners following a serious fire in 1991. It is listed grade II*. The decoration of the Duchess may not be as seductive, but at least it is genuine.

The Cambridge Theatre possesses another famous art deco interior, a classic 1930 geometric scheme by the Russian émigré Serge Chermayeff (1900-96), within a building by Wimperis, Simpson and Guthrie, and his best surviving London interior, lovingly restored in the 1980s by designer Carl Toms. The ceiling arcs over the auditorium and a series of receding vaulted ribs bridge the gap between the proscenium and the auditorium. The boxes are decorated with geometric art deco tableaux picked out in gold, an urban night scene and a rural landscape with radiating sunbeams. Wacky deco light fittings and ashtrays adorn the walls. The Cambridge Theatre is listed grade II.

⁹ *The Architect and Building News* 4 October 1929

¹⁰ Earl and Sell 2000, 107

¹¹ Goodhart-Rendel 1953, 275-6

Goodhart-Rendel's view notwithstanding, other notable contemporary West End theatres worthy of comparison with the Duchess include the Adelphi, Prince Edward, Whitehall, and New Victoria (now Apollo Victoria) theatres. The Adelphi is a Victorian theatre practically rebuilt to the designs of Ernest Schaufelberg in 1930. It is listed grade II, and was once a gem of art deco but has undergone a degree of alteration. The exterior has been changed and the interiors restored in a bland deco pastiche, rendering it a pale shadow of the original (see Figs 26 & 27). The Lalique glass fountain lights have gone, as has the staircase clad in black marble. There are good hexagonal light fittings in the auditorium, otherwise the theatre is not particularly distinguished.

The Whitehall Theatre, listed in 1994 at grade II, was built in 1930 to the designs of Edward A. Stone, with whom Barr had worked for many years designing theatres and cinemas. The interior is impressive, the decoration by Marc Henri and Lavardet (hotfoot from their work at the Duchess) has been described as 'among the finest examples of art deco among London's theatres.'¹² Although some has been lost, including a cubist mural in the bar and streamlined art deco boxes, much of quality has survived, including a panel above the stage with Venus emerging from a seashell borne on waves, and cubistic murals around the auditorium in gold, silver and copper colours (Fig.28). In the ceiling is a shimmering metallic octagon with concealed lighting. A black, tinted silver, green and pink colour scheme elsewhere was restored in 1985 by Ian Albery, and the interior of the Whitehall Theatre is now more flashy than its contemporary at the Duchess.

Also designed by Edward A. Stone is the Prince Edward Theatre, a sombre brown brick building with a pantiled roof in Old Compton Street, Soho (1930). The interior, like the Duchess and the Whitehall, was originally by Marc Henri and Laverdet, and as with the other two, there is a good degree of survival of the original 1930s scheme, with some restoration in 1993 by RHWL architects (Fig.29). This firm restored the huge deco light fitting in the ceiling, those on the side walls of the auditorium, and the period bars with 'deco-chinoiserie' bar fronts and delicately moulded ceilings. As at the Duchess, the scheme included illuminated display cases which survive, but the Lalique ambro glass around the proscenium arch has gone. This building has been turned down for listing.

A theatre that excited unanimous favourable comment in its day was the New Victoria Theatre, now the Apollo Victoria, designed by E.Wamsley Lewis, assisted by W.E.Trent (1930). It was designed as a 'cine-variety' hall for the showing of film and live performance, but large stage shows were dropped within a month of opening, although live acts and big bands played there throughout the 1930s. Commentators were impressed with stunning lighting effects in the auditorium, (Fig. 30), which Peter Morton Shand called the 'architecture of light', based on 1920s German expressionism. Goodhart-Rendel also admired this building:

The New Victoria Cinema (1930) was the first in England to depend largely upon coloured lighting for the decoration of its interior, suggesting how great the advantage would have been, and still would be, if in every cinema the solid decoration could be extinguished, never to reappear, with the first lowering of the lights.¹³

¹² Heathcote 2001, 3.2

¹³ Goodhart-Rendel 1953, 277

The theatre has been used for stage shows since 1958, and as a venue for composer and impresario Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* since 1984. The show has recently closed, and it is hoped that the auditorium, 'an oceanic outburst of suspended scallops round the giant dome, originally painted in marine blues, greens and silvers'¹⁴ will be restored. The theatre is listed grade II*.

The Listing of Inter-War Theatres

Theatres of the inter-war period were for a long time overlooked for listing. As recently as 1992, the only inter-war theatres in London that were listed were rebuilds of earlier structures such as the Vaudeville, the Adelphi and the Savoy theatres in the Strand, and the *retardataire* Phoenix and Dominion. In 1990, a public inquiry was held over the future of the latter. The outcome was the successful refusal of a proposal to demolish the theatre. In his proof of evidence theatre expert and, at that time, Director of the Theatres Trust John Earl noted this area of neglect by listing inspectors. After stating his regret at the number of Victorian and Edwardian theatres that had been demolished because they had not been considered as serious candidates for listing, he concluded:

It would be tragic to make the same mistake with the relatively rare theatres of the 'little boom' period between 1922 and 1932, dismissing them as unexciting compared to the 'big boom' theatres of the turn of the century, or as retrogressive in the light of what has to come later. The most significant fact about theatre design at this time is that it was going through a period of change and uncertainty. New technologies and production fashions had to be accommodated and the competition of the picture houses was leading audiences to expect something new and special in the way of comfort and smart modern surroundings. There was no consensus, as there had been 30 or 40 years earlier, as to what a theatre should actually look like, and there was much variation and experimentation, especially in commercial theatres, in their decorative treatment. The only common ground amongst all theatre designers seems to have been their total rejection of everything that the old voluptuously enriched Matcham-style houses represented. There is no architectural expression more embarrassing to any generation than that of its immediate elders. It was so then and it is clearly so now.¹⁵

Since then, evidently after a small campaign by the English Heritage Listing Team, the moderne Cambridge Theatre and the small Fortune Theatre (designed by Ernest Shaufelberg in 1924, and an early example of reinforced concrete), have been added to the statutory list. The Duchess has also been previously considered for listing, but was rejected.

Conclusion

The Duchess is by no means the best, grandest, architecturally fine or historically most interesting theatre in the West End. It does not possess the best interior decoration by Marc Henri and Laverdet in a West End theatre. The figures in the auditorium friezes have gone, (whereabouts unknown), and this is a sad loss. Yet much of the theatre survives; as much, if not more than, some of its listed contemporaries. The entire structure of 1929 remains largely intact, complete with gallery-supporting steel joists, the principal spaces including the royal retiring room, the glass ceiling and mosaic floor in the foyer, the veneered wooden doors and, most

¹⁴ Earl and Sell 2000, 99

¹⁵ Proof of evidence by John Earl, May 1990 p.11, paragraph 35.

significantly, the original flying system and grid above the stage by Gimson and Company from Leicester.

The two Lambert bas-reliefs in the auditorium are perhaps not the most outstanding piece of sculptural work in a London theatre, neither are they representative of the sculptor's best work. Nevertheless, the link with J. B. Priestley is of historical interest; the tangible link between theatre and a playwright is probably unique. Moreover, the *Guide to British Theatres* published by the Theatres Trust in 2000 gives it a '2 star' rating, 'a fine theatre which is an excellent example of its type.'¹⁶

In sum, it is perhaps the degree of survival from 1929, the bronzes by Lambert representing the association with J.B. Priestley, and the significance of the architect's move towards a modern, or at least anti-classical, interior referred to in John Earl's proof for the Dominion public inquiry, that might just tip the balance in favour of listing, rather than the overall aesthetic quality of the theatre.

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¹⁶ Earl and Sell 2000, xii

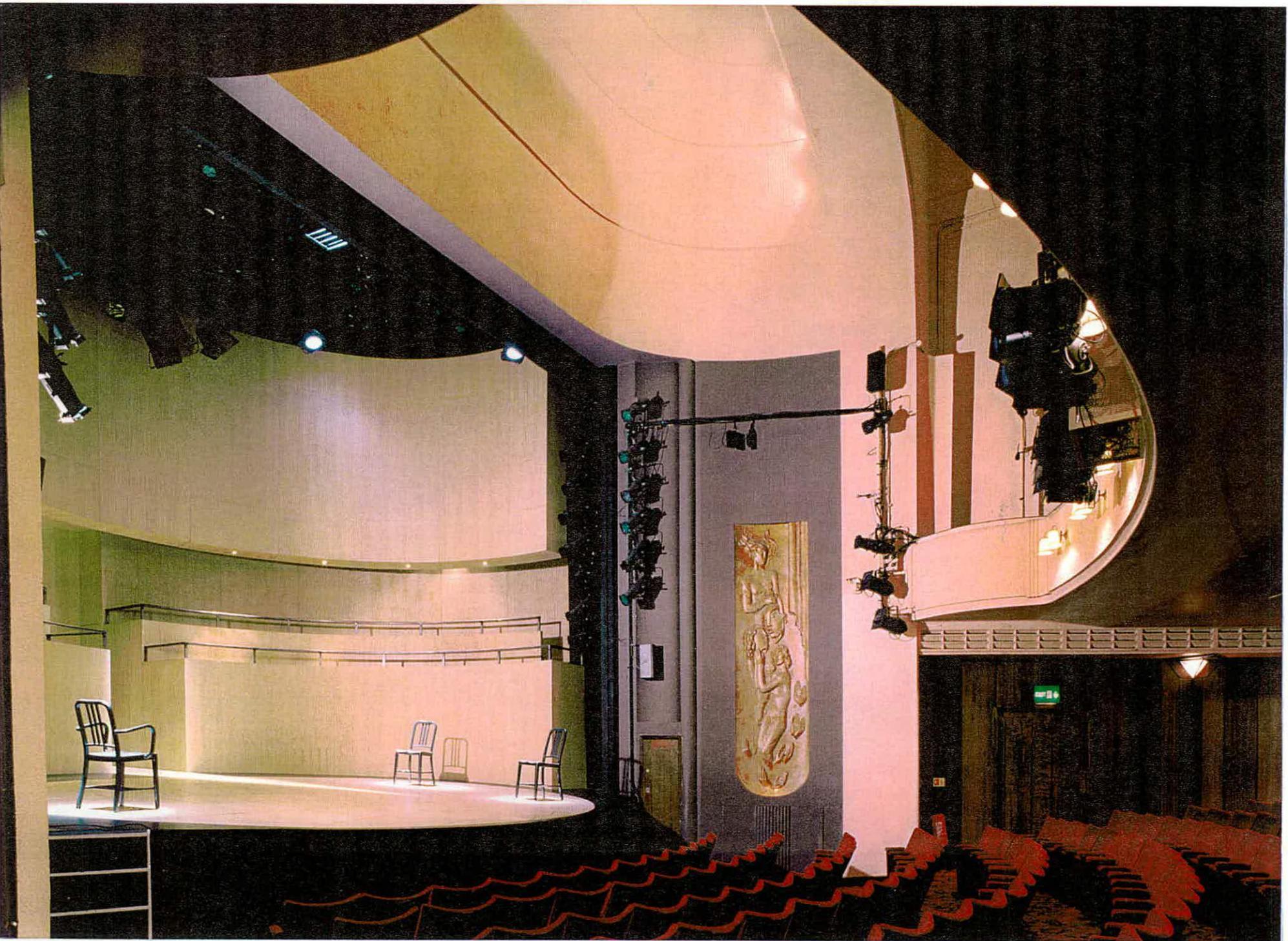
Proof of Evidence by John Earl in English Heritage Historians' File CAM 249
Dominion Theatre; CAM 337, Cambridge Theatre; WM 799, Whitehall Theatre and
WM 108, New Victoria Theatre (now Apollo Victoria).



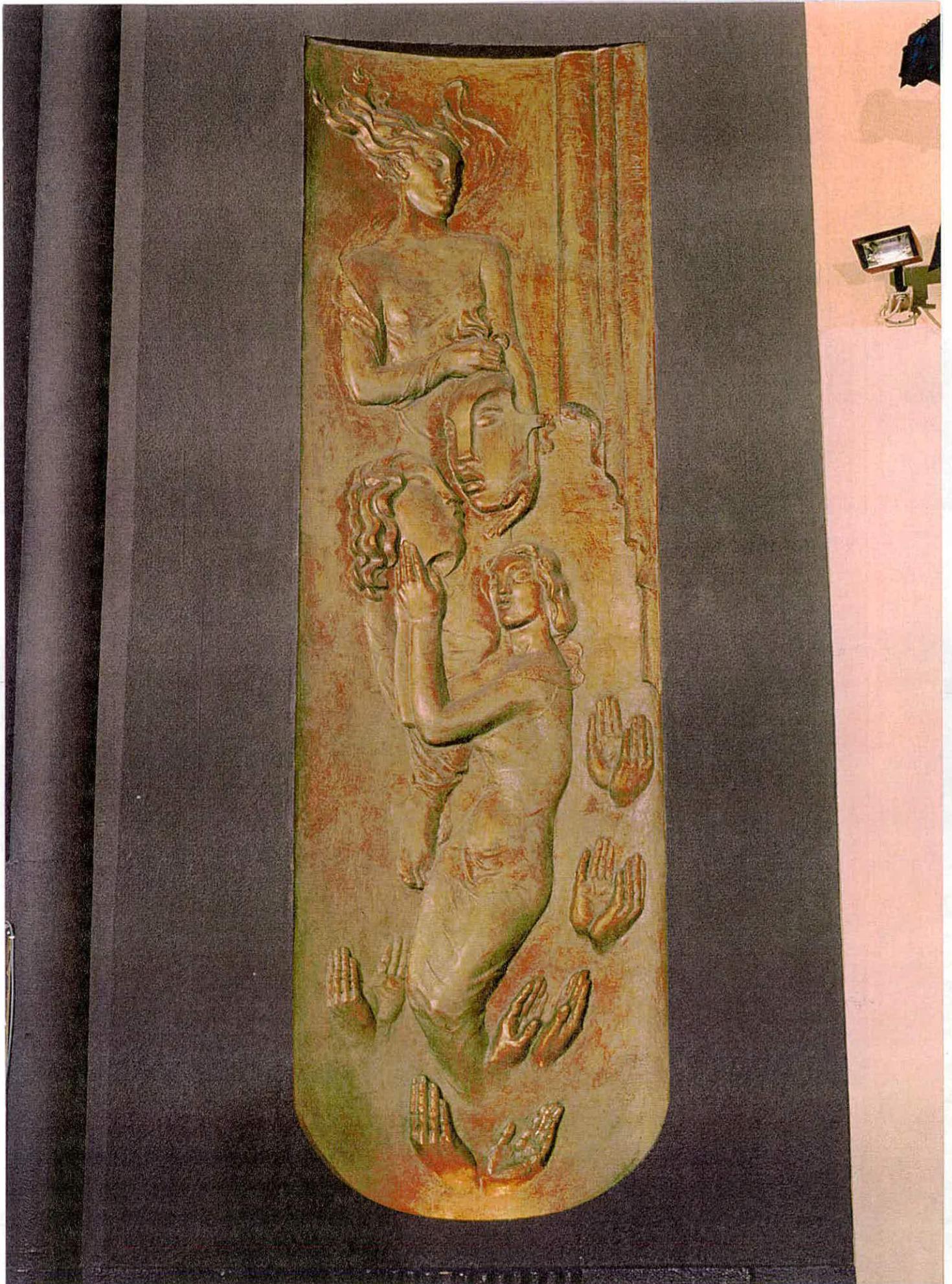
1. The Duchess Theatre (1929) (exterior) 2001 © English Heritage



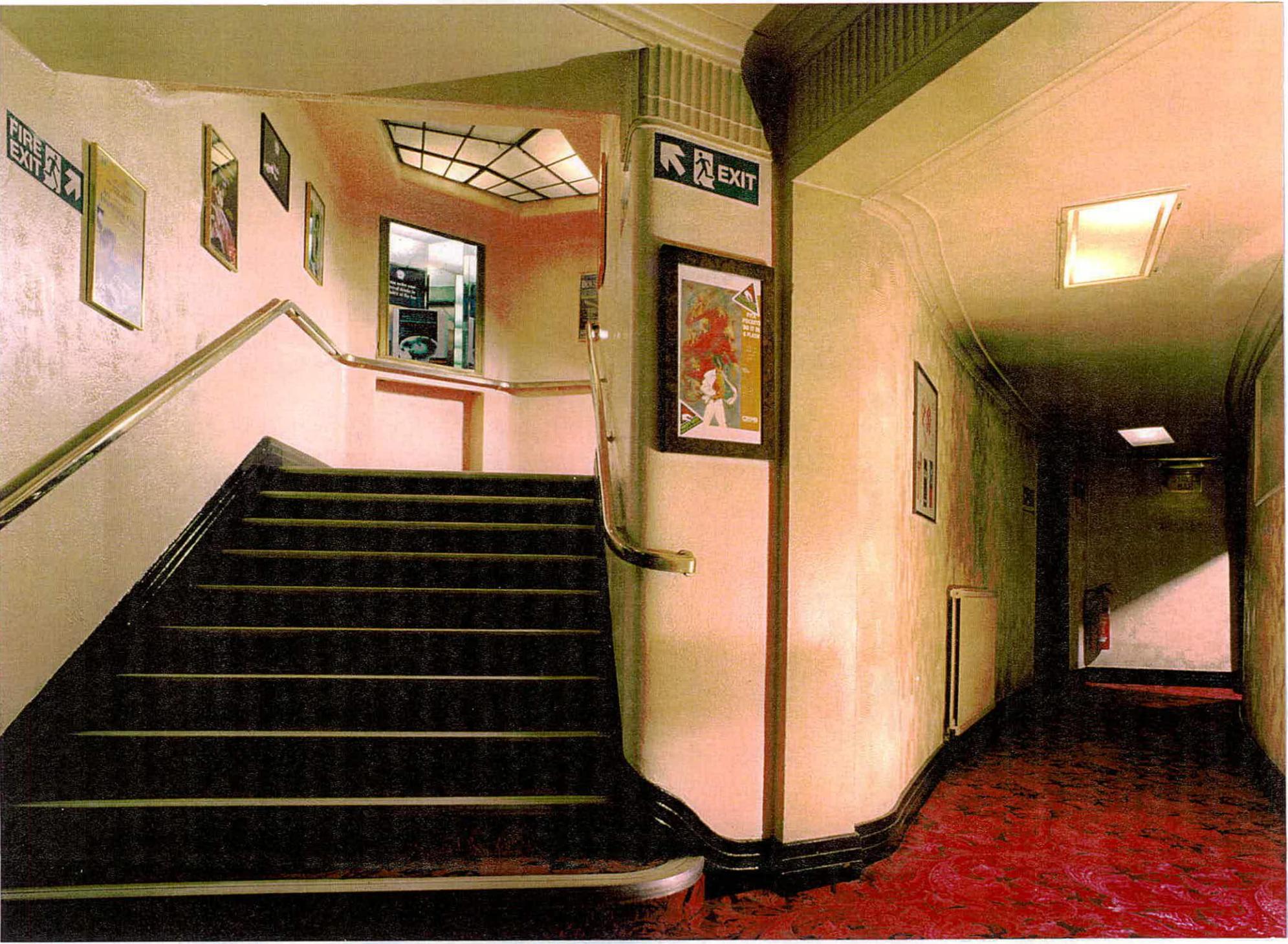
2. The Duchess Theatre (interior) 2001 : entrance foyer and box office



3. The Duchess Theatre (interior) 2001: auditorium, stalls, view from below balcony to stage



4. The Duchess Theatre: bronze relief, one of pair, right side of stage, by Maurice Lambert, 1934 1



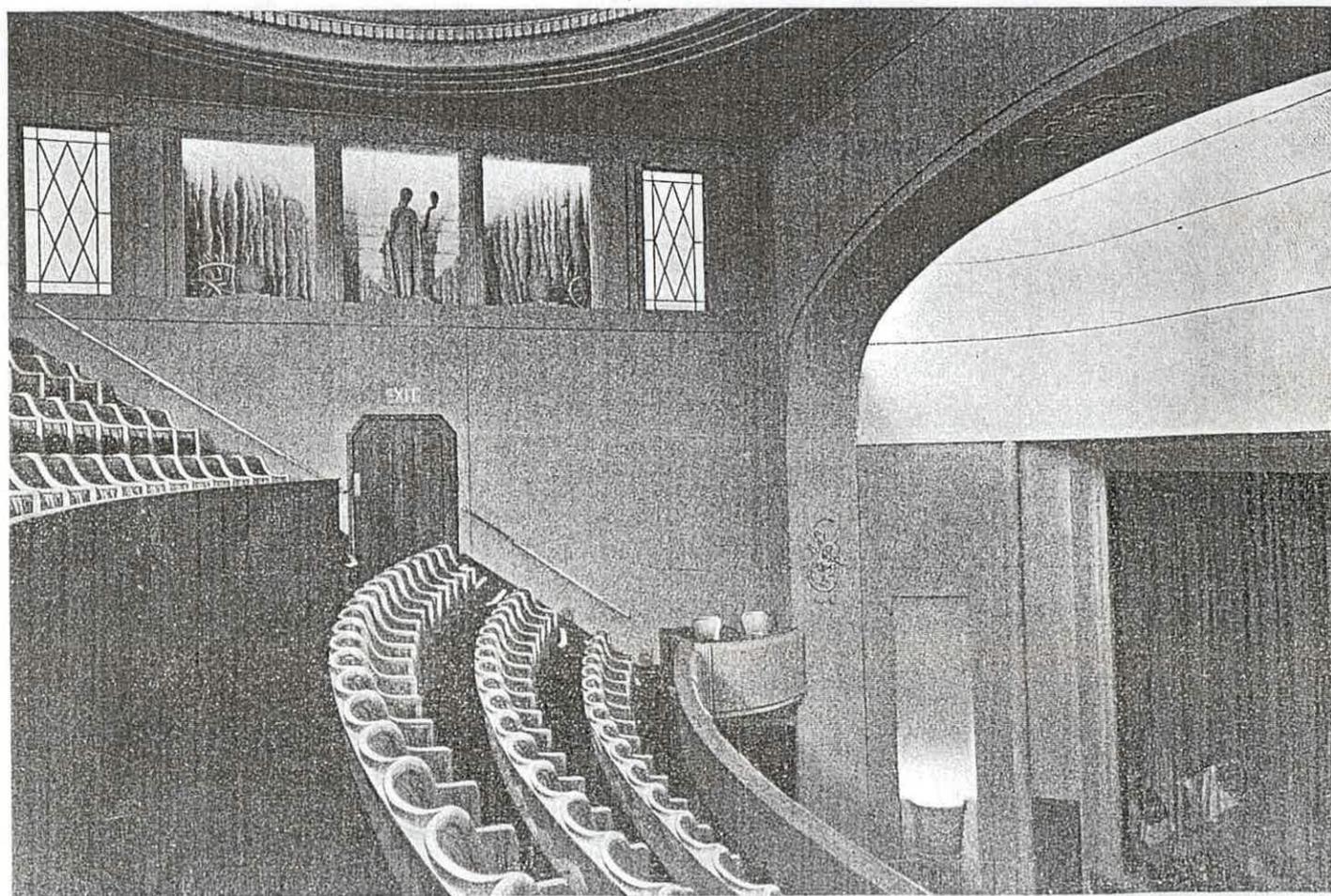
5. The Duchess Theatre (interior) 2001: basement stair and corridor to stalls

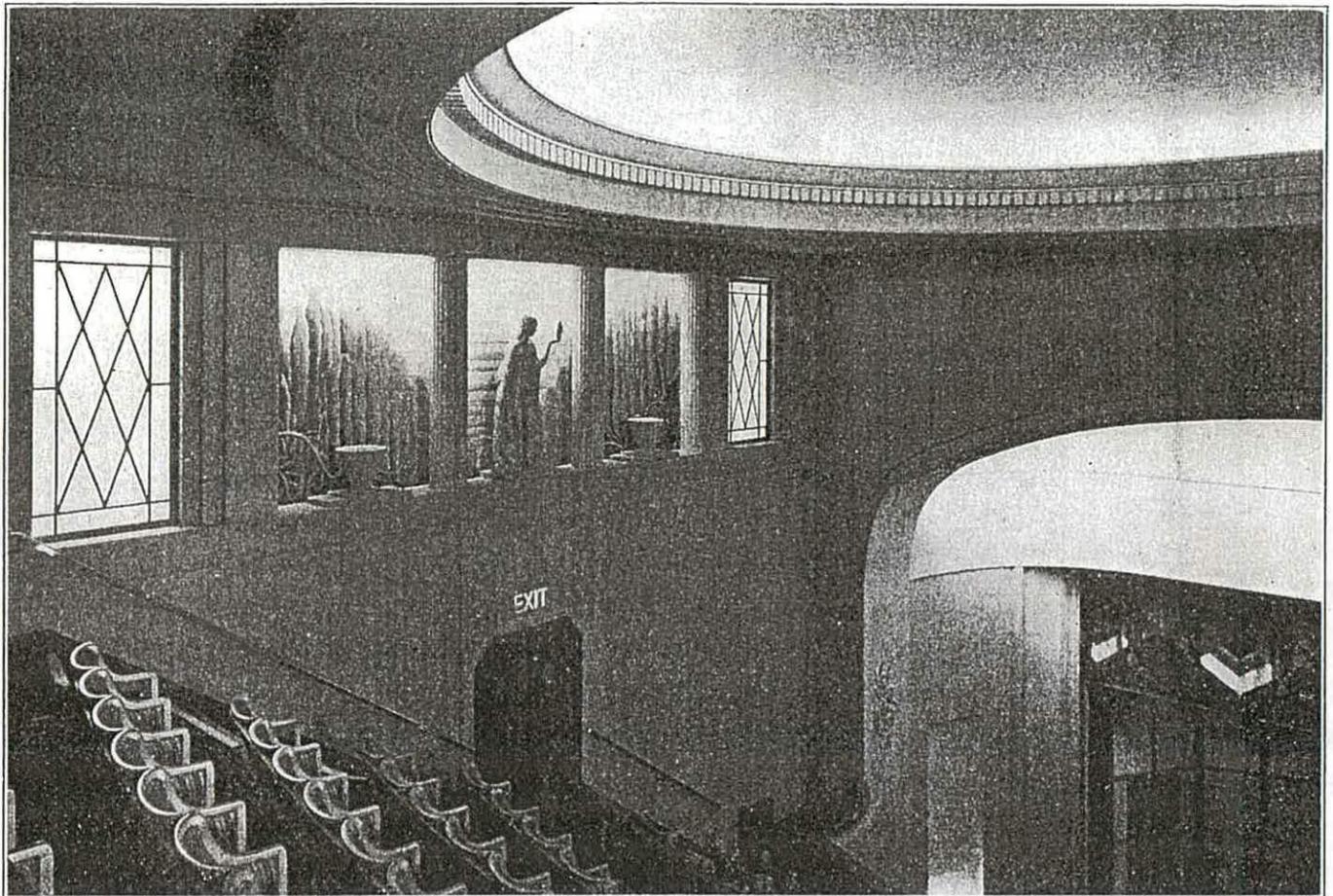


6. The Duchess Theatre (exterior), from *The Builder* 29 November 1929

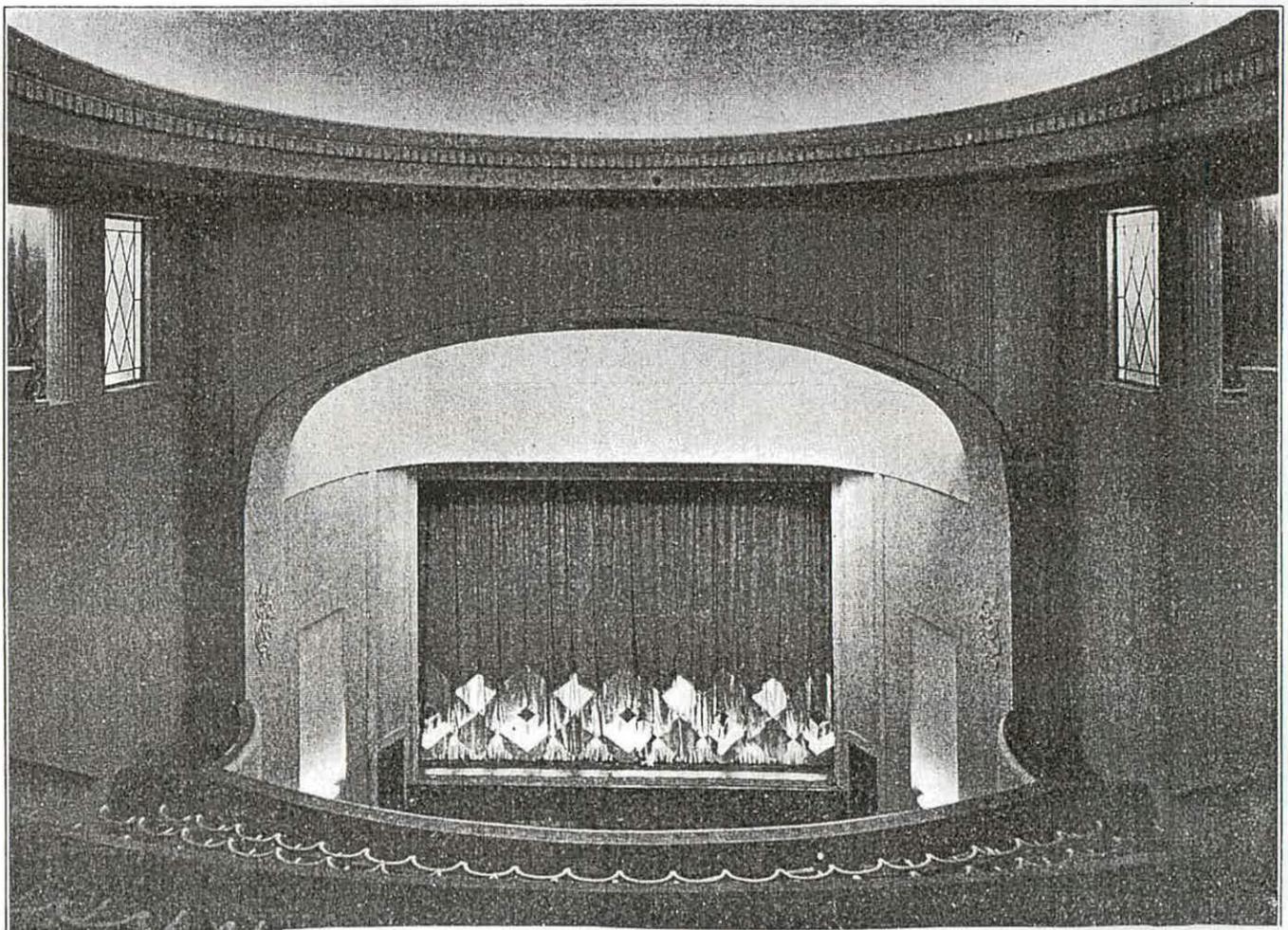


ENTRANCE HALL.

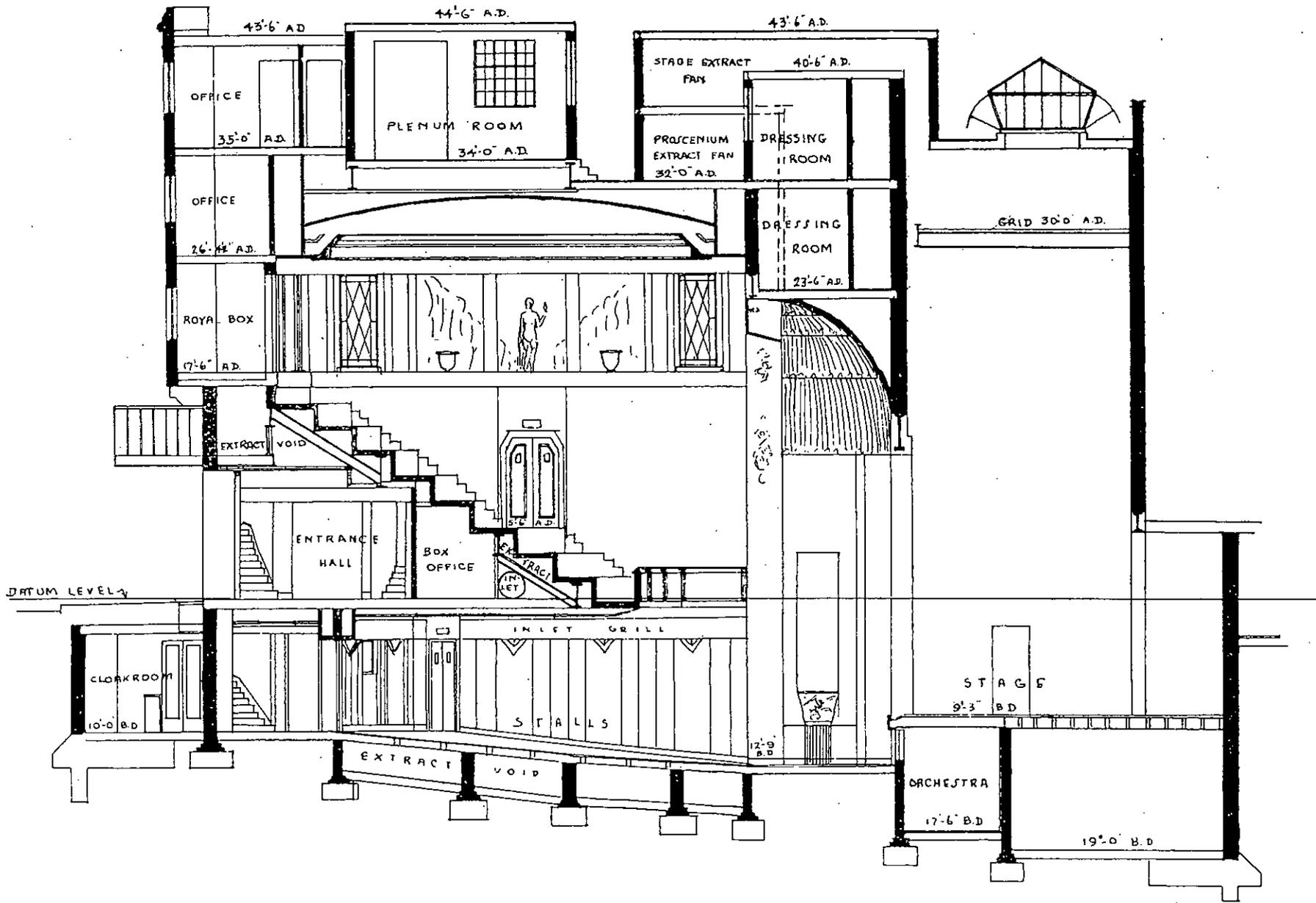




VIEW IN THE CIRCLE, SHOWING ONE OF THE STATUARY GROUPS.

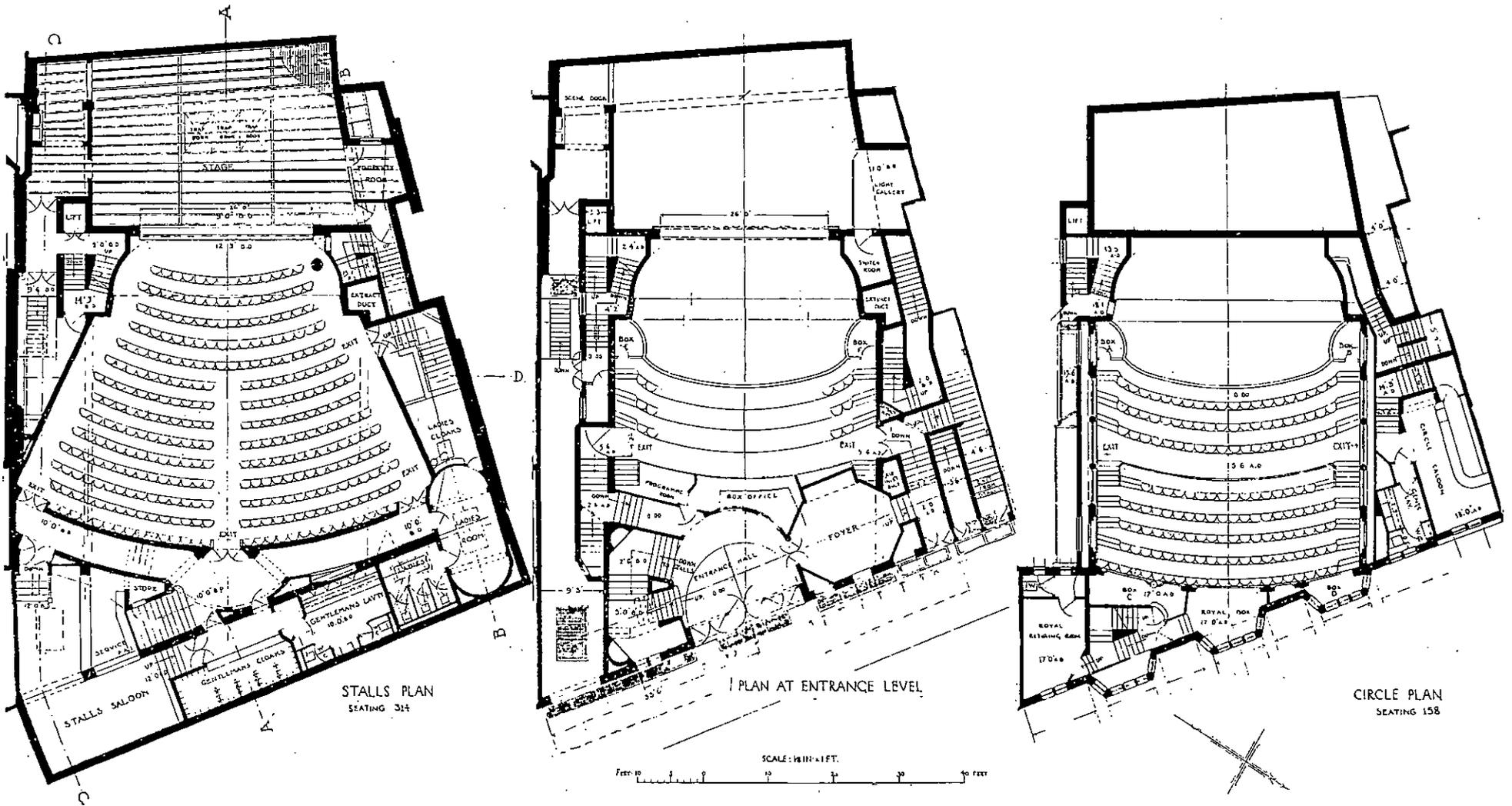


8. The Duchess Theatre (interior), showing Auerbach's triptych; view from rear of circle, from *The Architect and Building News* 29 November 1929



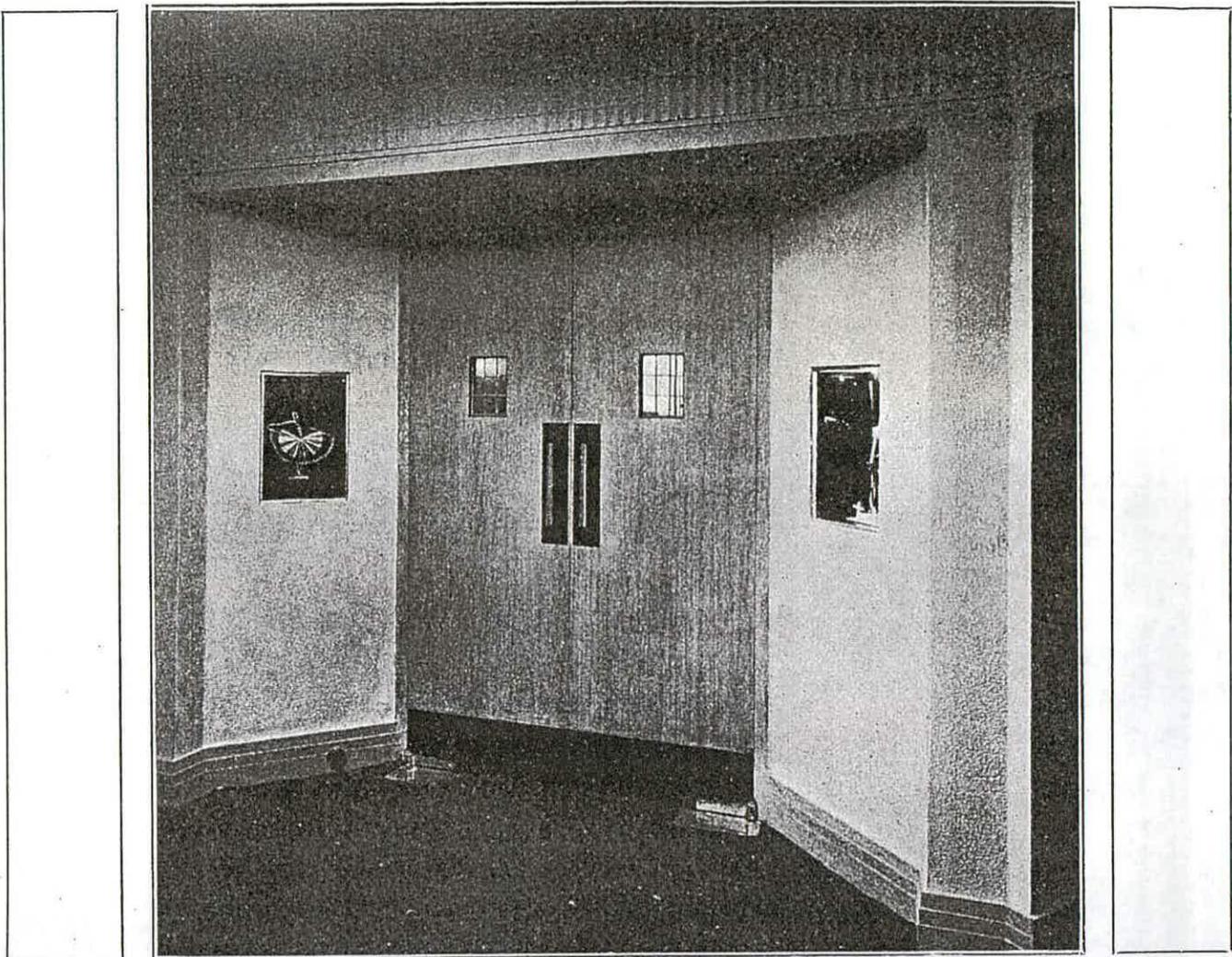
THE DUCHESS THEATRE, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND, W.C.: SECTION. EWEN S. BARR, Architect.

9. The Duchess Theatre (Section), from *The Architect and Building News* 29 November 1929



THE DUCHESS THEATRE, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND, W.C. EWEN S. BARR, Architect.

10. The Duchess Theatre (plans of basement stalls, entrance level, and circle level) from *The Architect and Building News* 29 November 1929

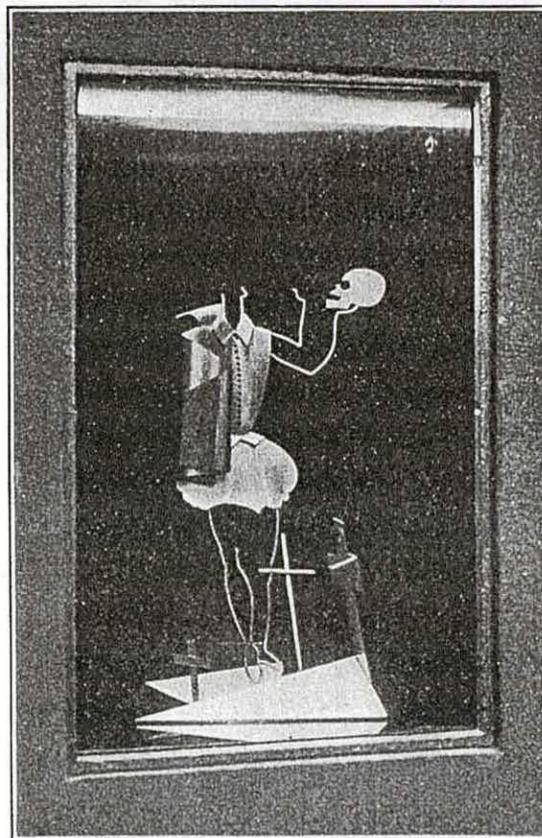


THE PRINCIPAL DOOR TO THE STALLS. AT THE SIDES ARE ILLUMINATED RECESSES.

responsible for financing such buildings should be made to realise that it is not necessary to spend vast sums on flamboyant decoration in order to obtain a theatre which is comfortable, agreeable and charming.

One of the actors in conversation with the writer summed the building up by saying: "So many intimate theatres are like large drawing-rooms, this one is intimate and at the same time it is a true theatre." We have been interested in reading the opinions of the dramatic critics of the daily papers on the "Duchess." The adjective which almost all favour is the word "charming." With this we agree, and what theatre architect could look for higher praise from public opinion?

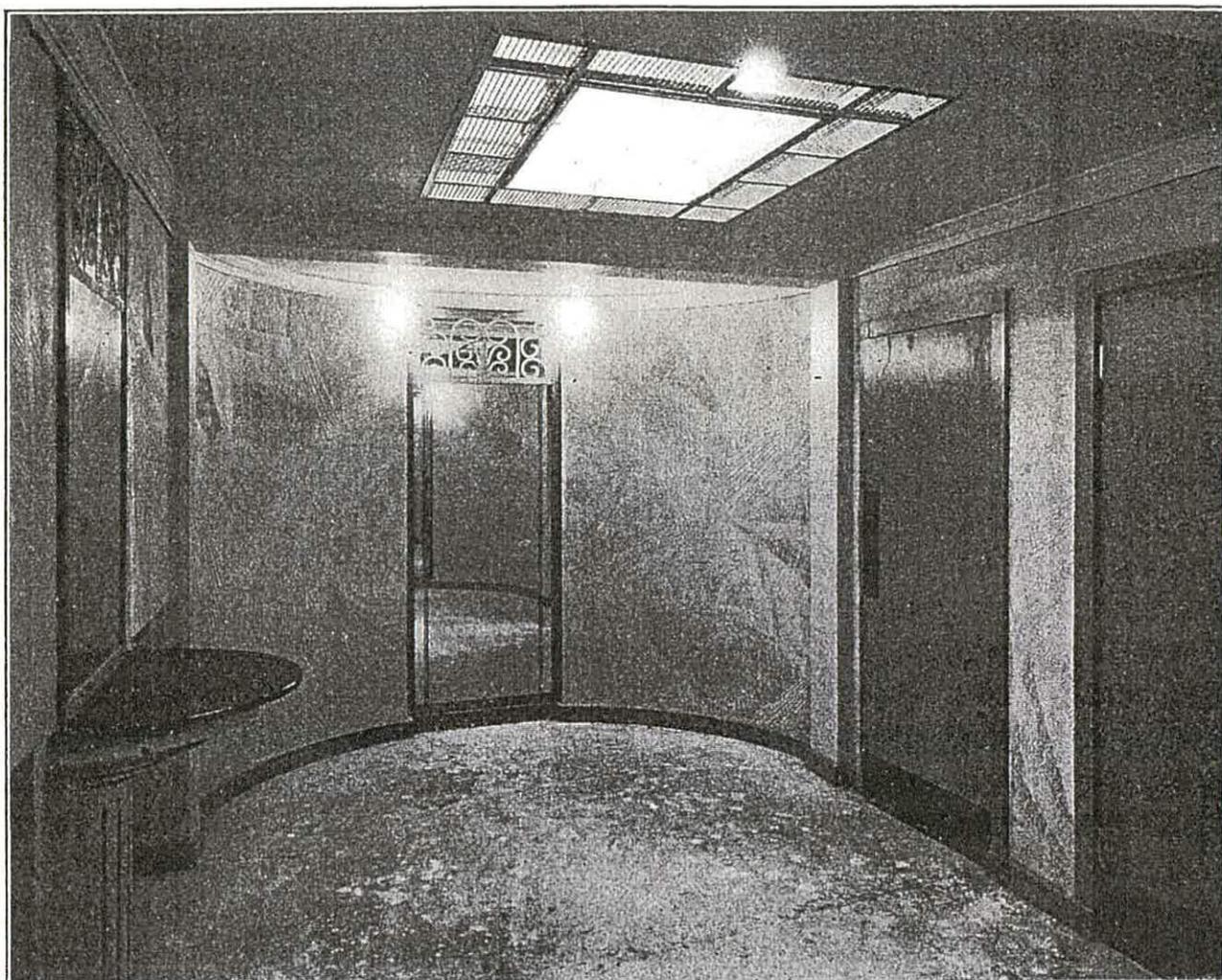
The general contractors were F. G. Minter, Ltd. Sculptor, Mr. Arnold Auerbach. The sub-contractors included: — Marc-Henri & Laverdet (interior decoration); E. Young & Co., Ltd. (steelwork); J. Jeffreys &



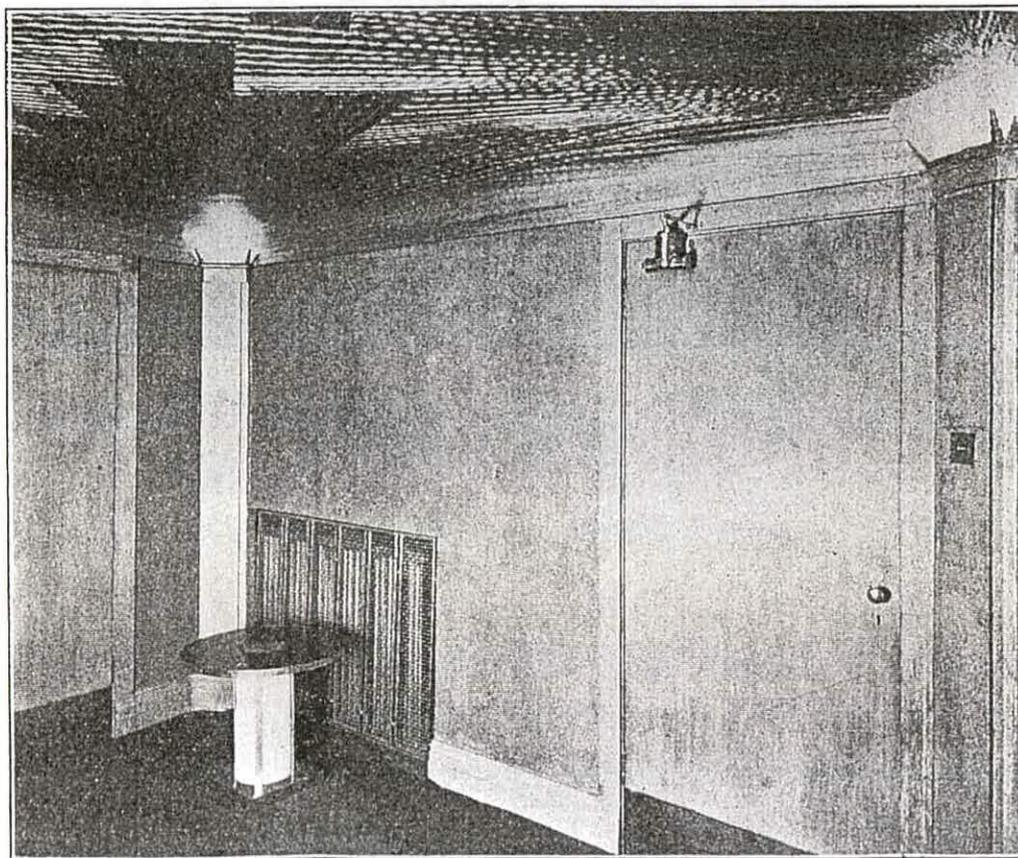
"HAMLET" IN ONE OF THE ILLUMINATED RECESSES.

Co., Ltd. (heating and ventilating); The Berkeley Engineering Co., Ltd. (electrical work); Jas. Shoolbred & Co., Ltd. (furnishing); Gimson & Co. (Leicester), Ltd. (stage equipment); Clark & Fenn, Ltd. (fibrous plaster work); Sturtevant Engineering Co., Ltd. (vacuum plant); Vertigan & Co., Ltd. (flooring); J. Starkie Gardner, Ltd. (ornamental metalwork); Frank Burkitt (fire curtain); Williams & Williams, Ltd. (windows); A. E. Davis (ironmongery); F. A. Norris & Co. (iron stairs); Wiggins-Sankey (Hammersmith), Ltd. (wall tiling); Bell's Asbestos and Engineering Supplies, Ltd. (rubber floors); B. Finch & Co., Ltd., and Alfred Goslett & Co., Ltd. (sanitary fittings).

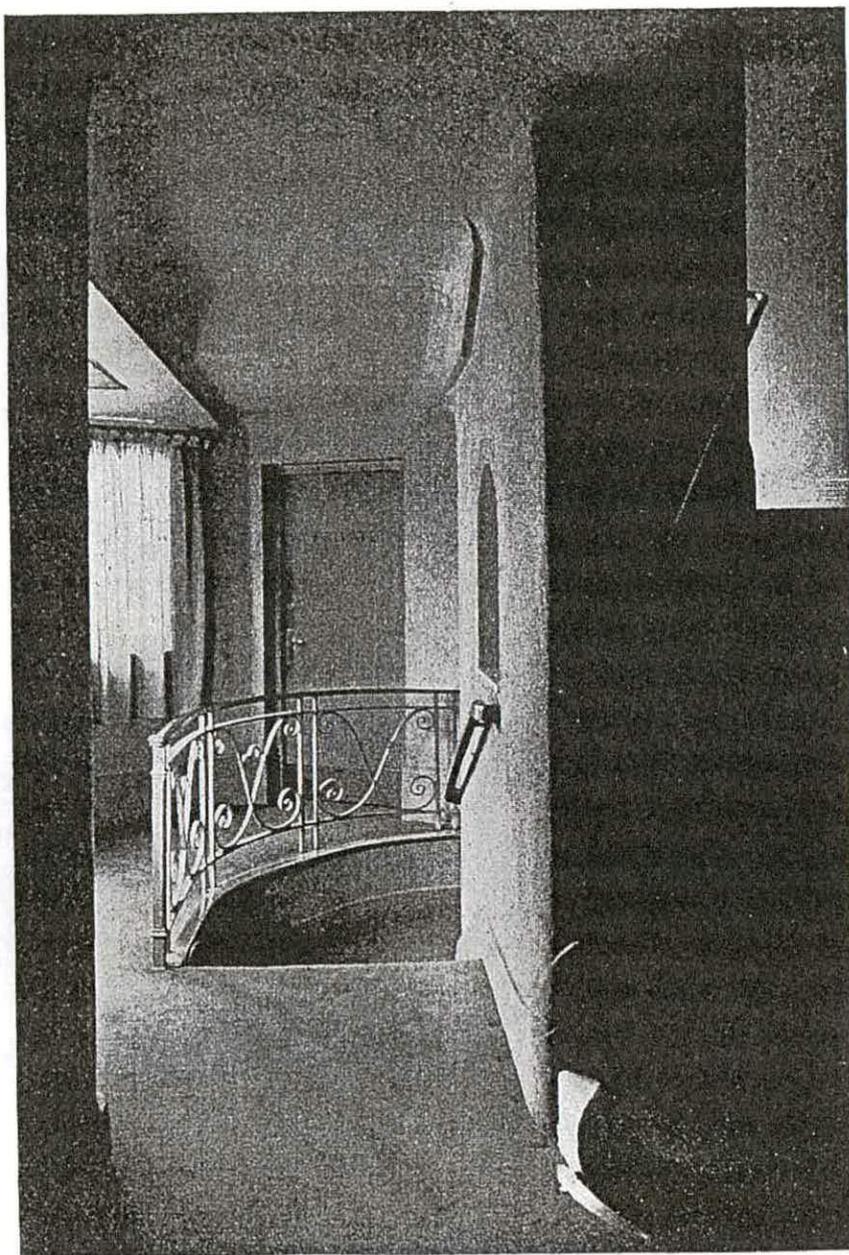
The work of cleaning the interior of the vaulted roof of Westminster Abbey has been taken in hand, starting in the north transept. The corrosion of the stone is said to be about an inch thick.



LADIES' RETIRING ROOM NEAR THE STALLS.



12. The Duchess Theatre (interior): Ladies' toilets at stalls level; Royal retiring room from *The Architect and Building News* 29 November 1929



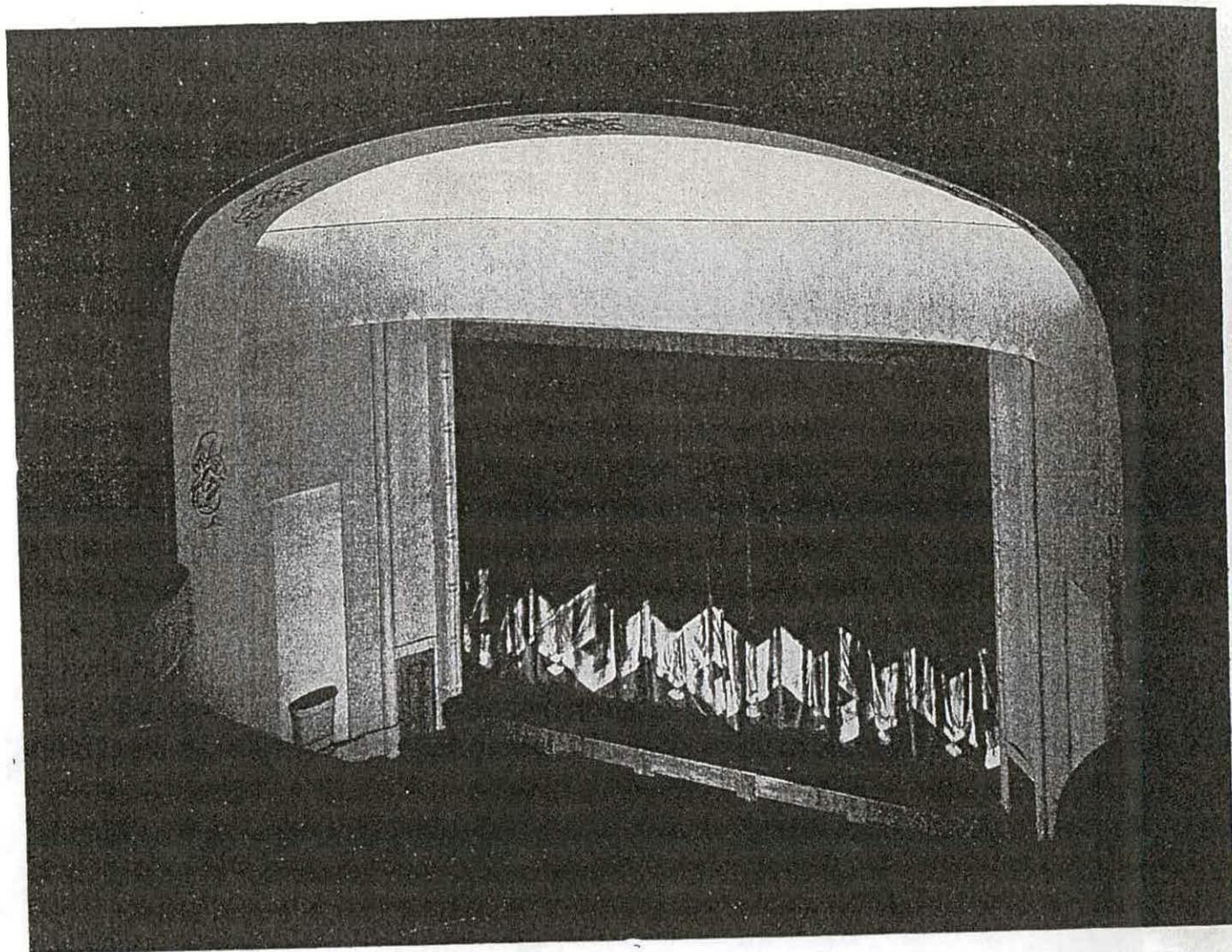
STAIRS TO THE BOXES.

THE DUCHESS THEATRE, CATHERINE STREET, LONDON, W.C.

EWEN BARR, ARCHITECT.

The buff walls and ceiling have a textured surface. The balustrade is silvered and the carpet is saxe blue in colour.

June, 1931.



THE DUCHESS THEATRE, LONDON, W.C. THE STAGE FROM THE UPPER CIRCLE. EWEN BARR, ARCHITECT.

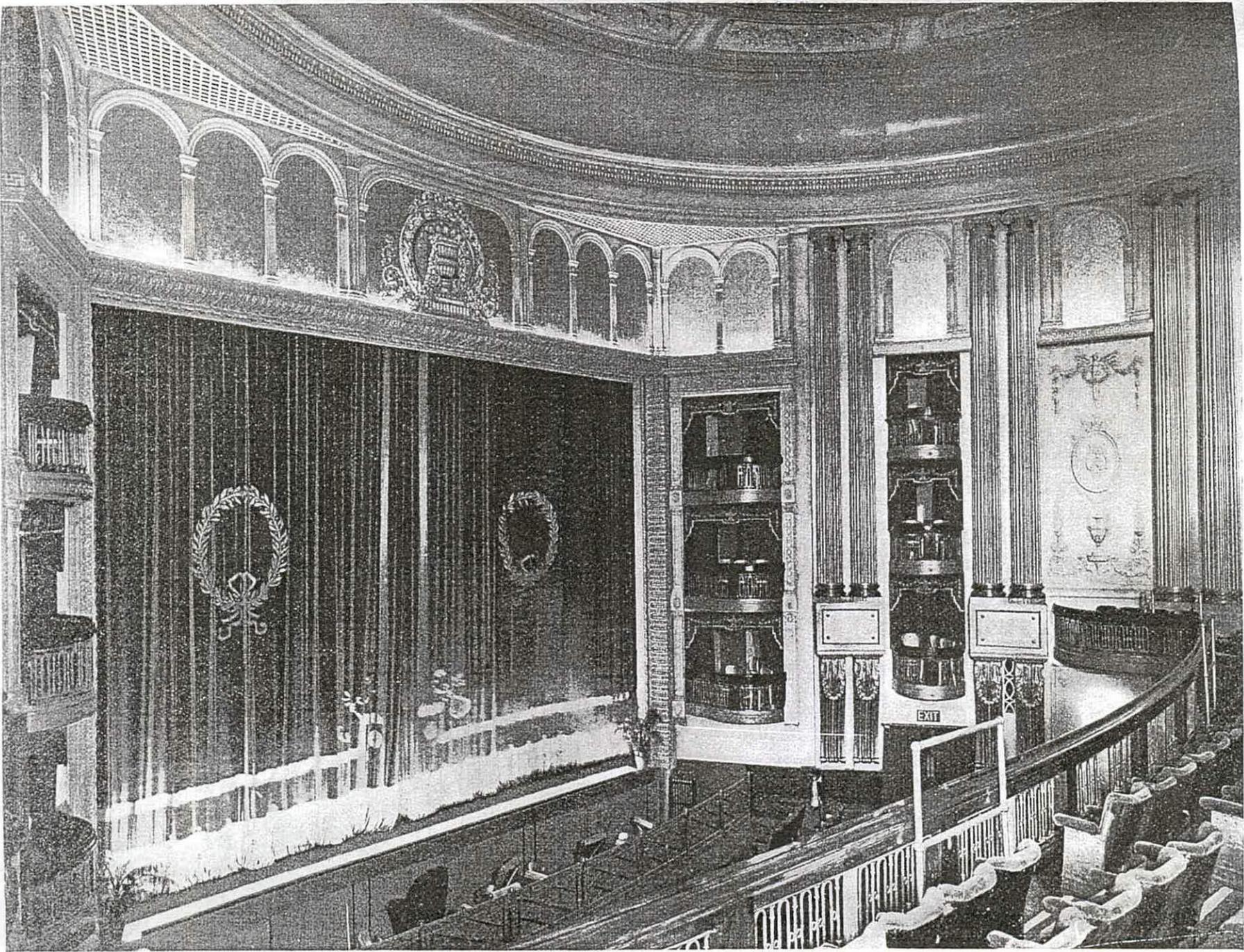
The curtain is saxe blue in colour bordered with a geometrical pattern in shades of purple, outlined with bands of a lighter blue, into which are introduced small spots of orange red.



THE DUCHESS THEATRE, LONDON, W.C.
ARNOLD AUERBACH, SCULPTOR.

DECORATIVE PANEL AND CEILING.
EWEN BARR, ARCHITECT

The figure, pillars and vases have a plain surface and are a buff-stone colour.

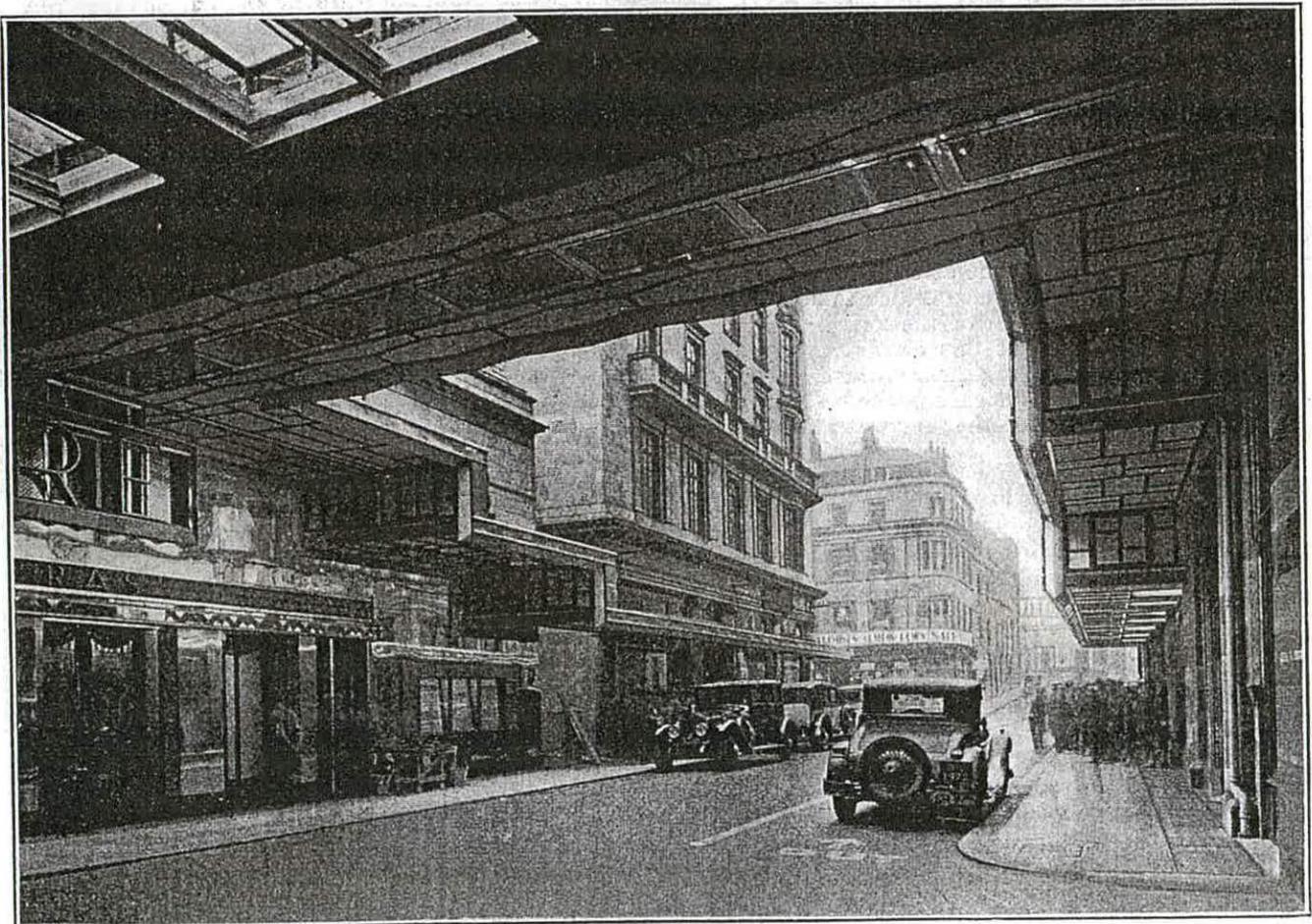


Streatham Hill Theatre, S.W.: Auditorium from Circle.
MESSRS. W. G. SPRAGUE and W. H. BARTON, Architects.

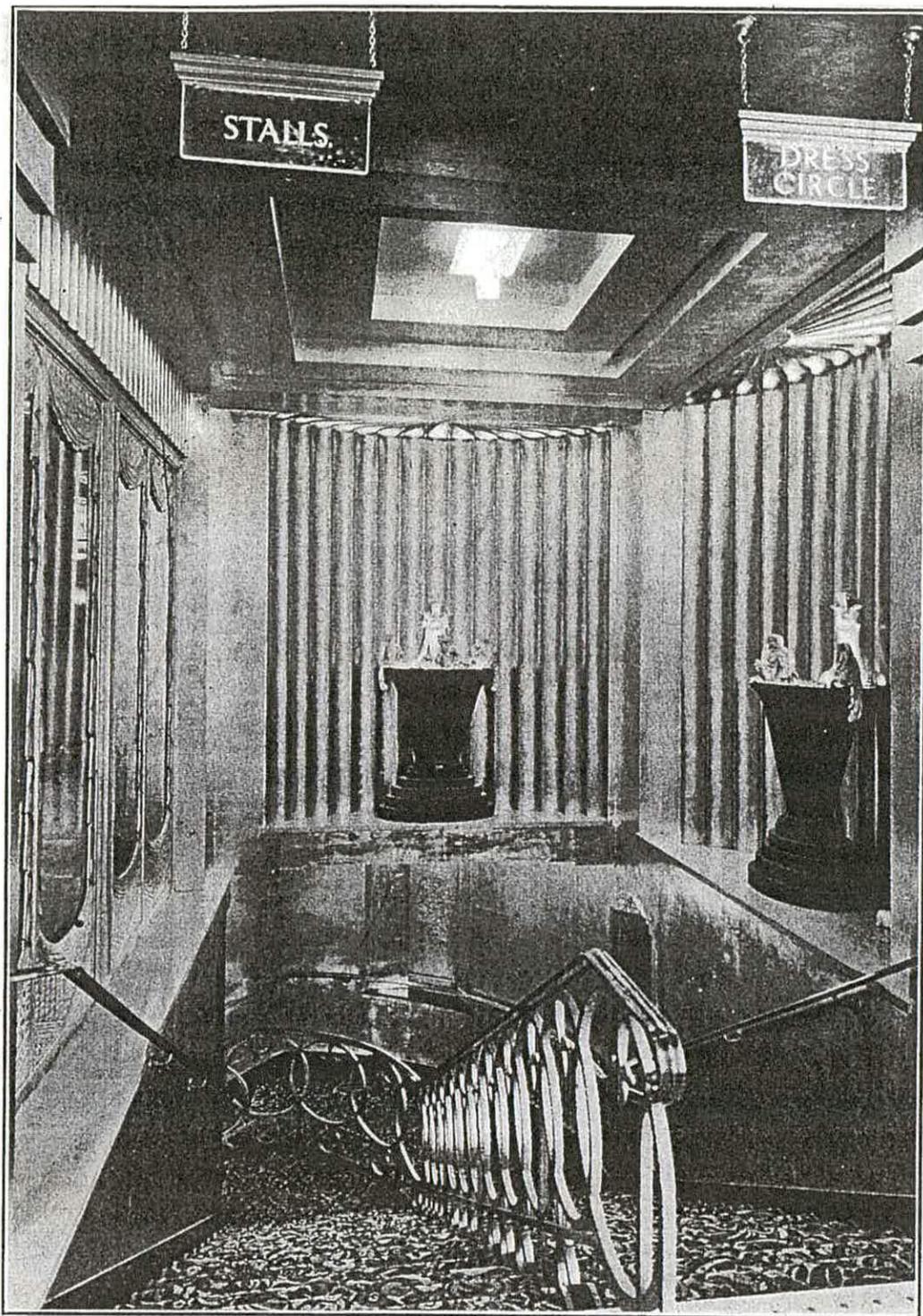
18. Streatham Hill Theatre (1929), (interior): auditorium from *The Builder* 29 Nov 1929



THE NEW MARQUISE TO THE SAVOY HOTEL FROM THE STRAND.



THE MARQUISE FROM THE SAVOY HOTEL ENTRANCE.



THE MAIN STAIR FROM SAVOY COURT. THE WALLS ARE GOLD LACQUER, THE CEILING SILVER. THE LIGHTING VASES ARE SURMOUNTED BY CREAM-COLOURED FIGURES AND THROW A PINKISH LIGHT ON THE FLUTED RECESSES.

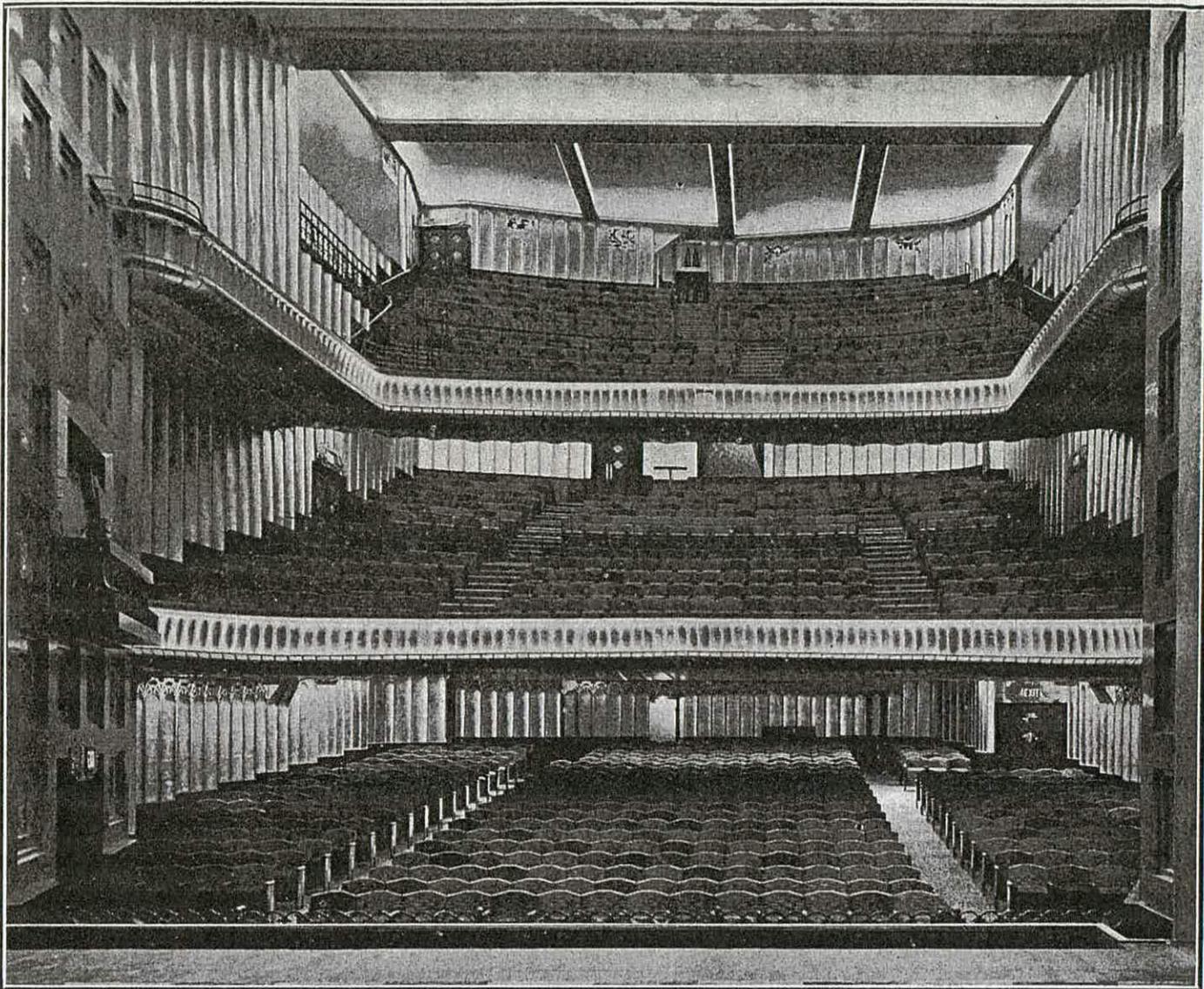
THE NEW SAVOY THEATRE

"If a visiting Continental architect were to ask to see our best modern theatre, where could we take him without shame?" This was said a few weeks ago by an English architect. His question implied a realisation of the fact that at that time we had not one single theatre that in any way compared with the best post-war theatres of Germany, Austria, France and Holland. Fortunately for our sense of shame, the rebuilt Savoy Theatre has now provided an answer to the question.

On arriving to inspect the theatre, one obtains a foretaste of what is to come on seeing the great marquis which has transformed Savoy Court. Under a glittering cover of stainless steel and green lacquer,

cunningly lit, one approaches from the Strand. Through the glass doors of the theatre is seen the dazzling foyer. Downwards, through charming corridors, one is led into the climax of the auditorium. All is glittering, novel, amusing and very, very modern. The outside of the theatre, both in Savoy Court and Somerset Street, has been in the hands of Messrs. Easton & Robertson, F.F.R.I.B.A. The general construction work has been done by Mr. Frank A. Tugwell, and the interior decoration is the work of Mr. Basil Ionides.

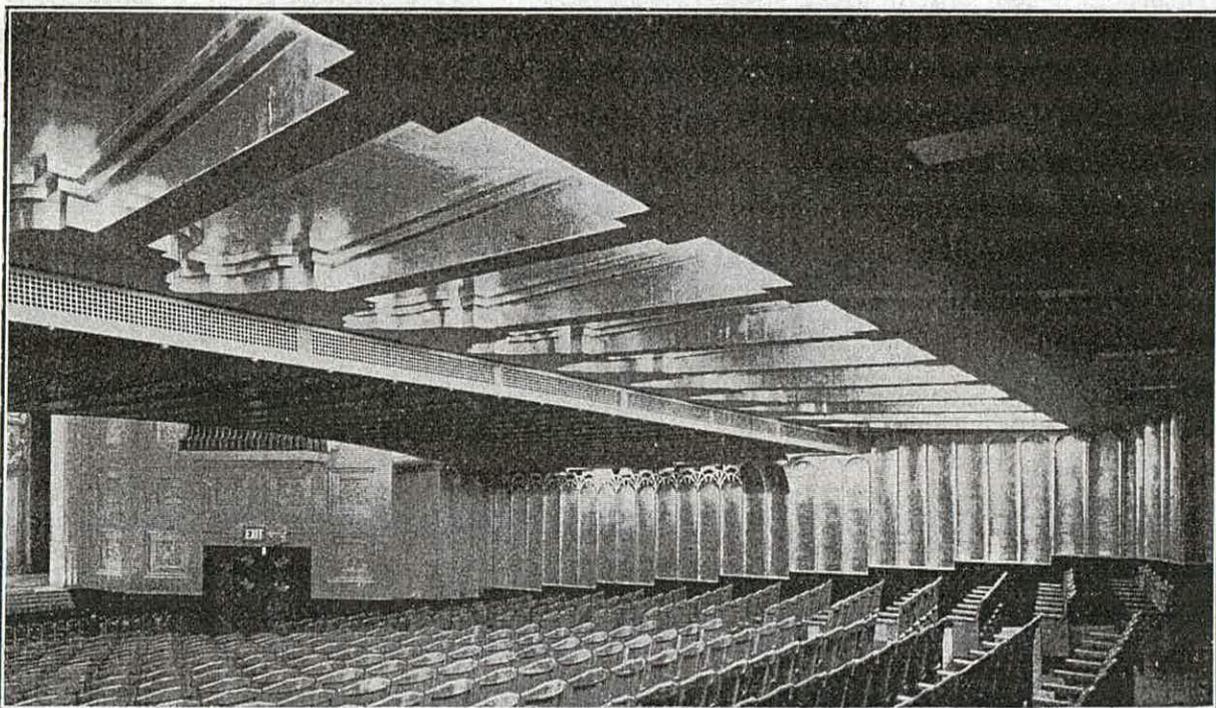
This sub-division of responsibilities at first sight seems curious. In practice, however, it has worked very well. The technical side of theatre building is



THE AUDITORIUM FROM THE STAGE: THE VARIATION OF COLOUR IN THE SEATS IS NOTEWORTHY, AS WELL AS THE LIGHTING ALONG THE GALLERY EDGES.

so intricate and specialised that an individual architect may find himself with insufficient time to consider adequately his decorative effects. When the site is a cramped one, the job an alteration and the work hurried, the technical side will keep one man fully

occupied. Mr. Tugwell has had this rather inglorious but immensely important part of the work. There is, moreover, abundant evidence that it has been very well done. The view from every seat is good; indeed, there is little to choose between any of them. Moreover,



THE SOFFIT OF THE DRESS CIRCLE. THE PANELS ARE LIT FROM ONE END AND COVERED WITH SILVER.



THE PROSCENIUM. THE CURTAIN IS COMPOSED OF PANELS IN BRIGHT COLOURS. A GREEN CORD AND TASSEL DECORATE THE WHITE CENTRE PANEL.

the balconies are not unduly steep, and there is none of that feeling of looking into an abyss from which the upper seats of so many theatres, on cramped sites, suffer. The ventilation is unusually good and the acoustics excellent. Two, at any rate, of the peculiar vices of the old theatre have been overcome—bad seats and bad ventilation. Behind the curtain, two outstanding points are the completeness of the lighting installation—the switchboard is a masterpiece of electricians' work—and the excellent equipment of the dressing-rooms. The work was finished before the expiration of the contract time.

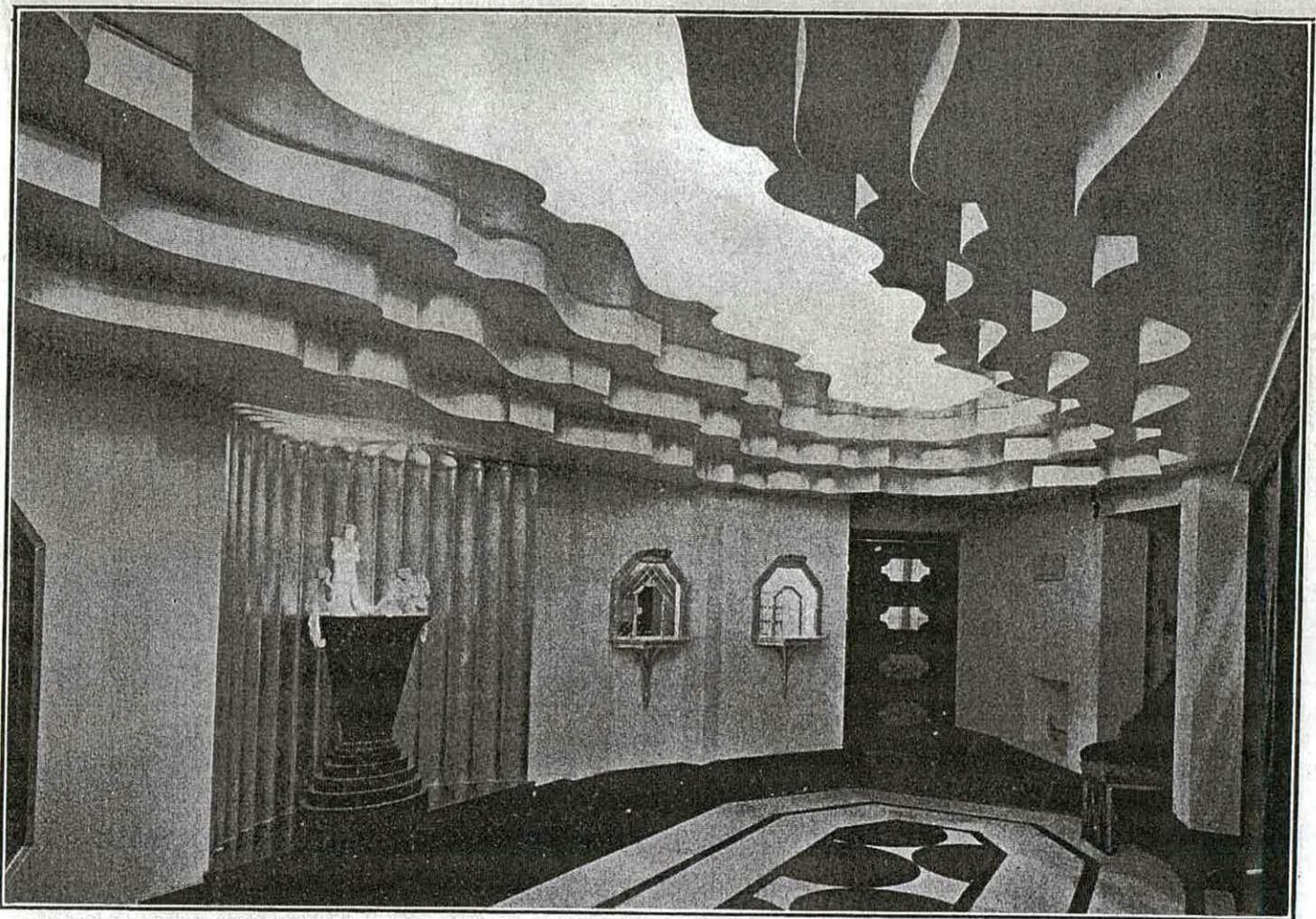
But it is the decoration which will *épater les bourgeois*. Gone entirely are the cream and gold, the swags, cornucopia and plaster caryatids of the typical theatre. Outside, the panelled and modelled terra cotta has been covered with flat surfaces of shining metal. The whole building has an amazing novelty, is very brisk, amusing and not a little beautiful.

What seems to strike the visitor is the abundance of *ideas* which the architects have had.

First, the marquise in Savoy Court rises by two steps from the level of the window-heads to that of the hotel entrance, embracing the doors of the theatre. Over the latter are two lettered signs formed of lacquered bronze on edge backed by panels of veridian enamel. Lights from troughs shine upward and cause the lettering to be partly lit and partly shaded.

Adequate description of the interior is more difficult. No photograph, however good, can ever do full justice to any scheme of decoration. The camera records forms and tones but reveals almost nothing of colour; above all, it fails to give the effect which the human senses register on entering an enclosed and decorated space. One must be content, therefore, to give a list of colours and materials and, as far as the pen can achieve it, a summary of effects.

On entering the auditorium, one's first sensation is



THE LOWER ENTRANCE FOYER: THE WALLS ARE A DAFFODIL YELLOW, THE STEPPED "CORNICHE" SILVER. THE FLOOR IS BLACK AND LIGHT-BROWN MARBLE. LIGHTING IS FROM THE CEILING AND FROM THE VASE STANDING IN A GOLD FLUTED RECESS.

one of stimulation. Floods of light from hidden sources catch the edges of fluted silver and gold panels, sparkling and glittering round the theatre. Amusing shapes on the soffits of galleries are half lit and half in shadow. The proscenium forms a fitting climax with its silver panels framed in gold, each panel of the splayed walls containing low relief modelling, each a charming piece of work. The ceiling panels are glazed and through them a great flood of light descends on the curtain, walls and orchestra pit. Finally, the curtain itself is a blaze of colour and forms a full-stop, as it were, to the whole composition.

A surprising novelty is the provision of only one box, if one excepts a small enclosed space at the back of the dress circle. This, the royal box, is on the right-hand side facing the curtain, in the middle of the splay wall, and is hung with emerald green and crimson. Strangely enough, this lack of symmetry in an otherwise symmetrical scheme is not in the least odd.

The shallow fluted panels of the wall are gold lacquer on a leaf silver base, and between them are little sunk fillets painted a warm pink. These panels cover entirely the walls of the auditorium. But Mr. Ionides has observed and avoided one great failing of most theatres by decorating the soffits of the galleries. First, the usual hard line of the gallery edges has been softened by being rounded-off and decorated with the fluted *motif*. Also the line of it has been cambered slightly from sides to middle. Altogether, the view from the back of the theatre is much better than usual.

Another novelty is seen in the tapestries covering the seats. Each seat has a colour slightly different from its neighbours, all soft and low in tone. The effect is certainly original and pleasing. It is in one way very practical; should one seat have to

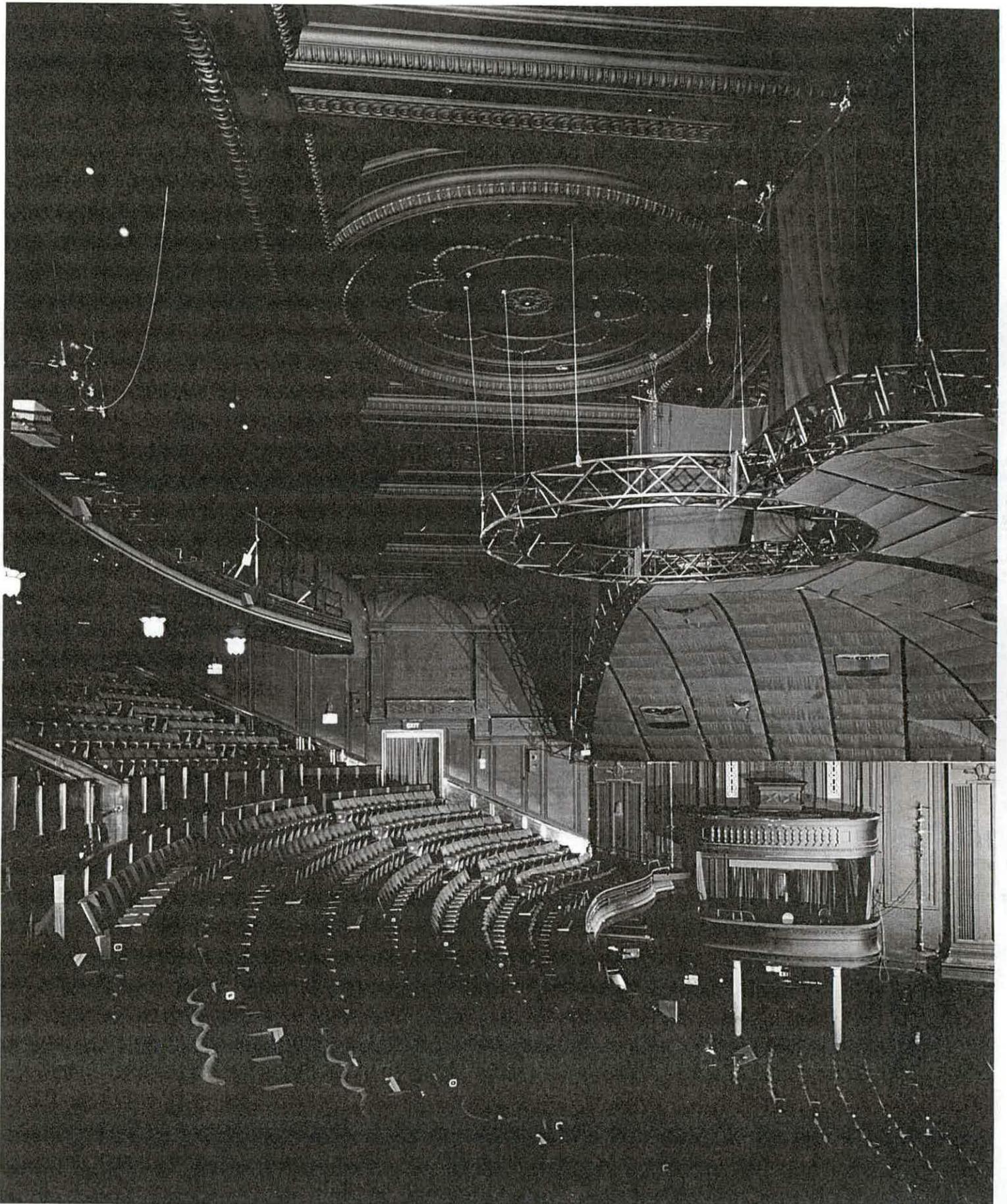
be replaced, the newness of its covering will not be apparent.

Further, there is none of the usual shamefacedness about the ventilation grilles. These have been made frankly decorative, in fact, emphasised by silvered and ornate metalwork; in some cases even, they are made prominent by having strong light thrown upon them. This matter of the lighting is at the bottom of the whole scheme of decoration, which has been designed for it and with it. Briefly, the sources of light are as follows: First, there is the proscenium ceiling which floods the front of the auditorium. Then the faces of the galleries have been covered with vertical flutes, at the base of which are lighting troughs. Each panel in the soffit of the dress circle has a light at one end; there are small subsidiary lights shining on the walls. Under the upper circle is a trough reflecting light on a coved surface and towards the back of the auditorium; a similar trough is fixed in the main ceiling itself. Three points of interest stand out; there is not a single pendant in the auditorium; there is a complete absence of glare; the light is remarkably uniform throughout the theatre. One particularly charming effect is seen at the raising of the auditorium lights; as the dimmer is operated the whole auditorium glows into life.

The foyers and passages merit long descriptions in themselves. Mr. Ionides has tried consciously to make these usually dull places interesting and even amusing. Each little odd space formed by the shape of an auditorium fitting into an irregular site has been seized on and decorated as an entity. One can do little more than illustrate a few of them and comment on some principal features. In both the entrance foyers are large silver lighting vases surmounted by charming groups of cream-coloured figures, the whole standing in fluted recesses covered with gold lacquer.



24. The Dominion Theatre (1930), (interior): foyer © English Heritage 1990

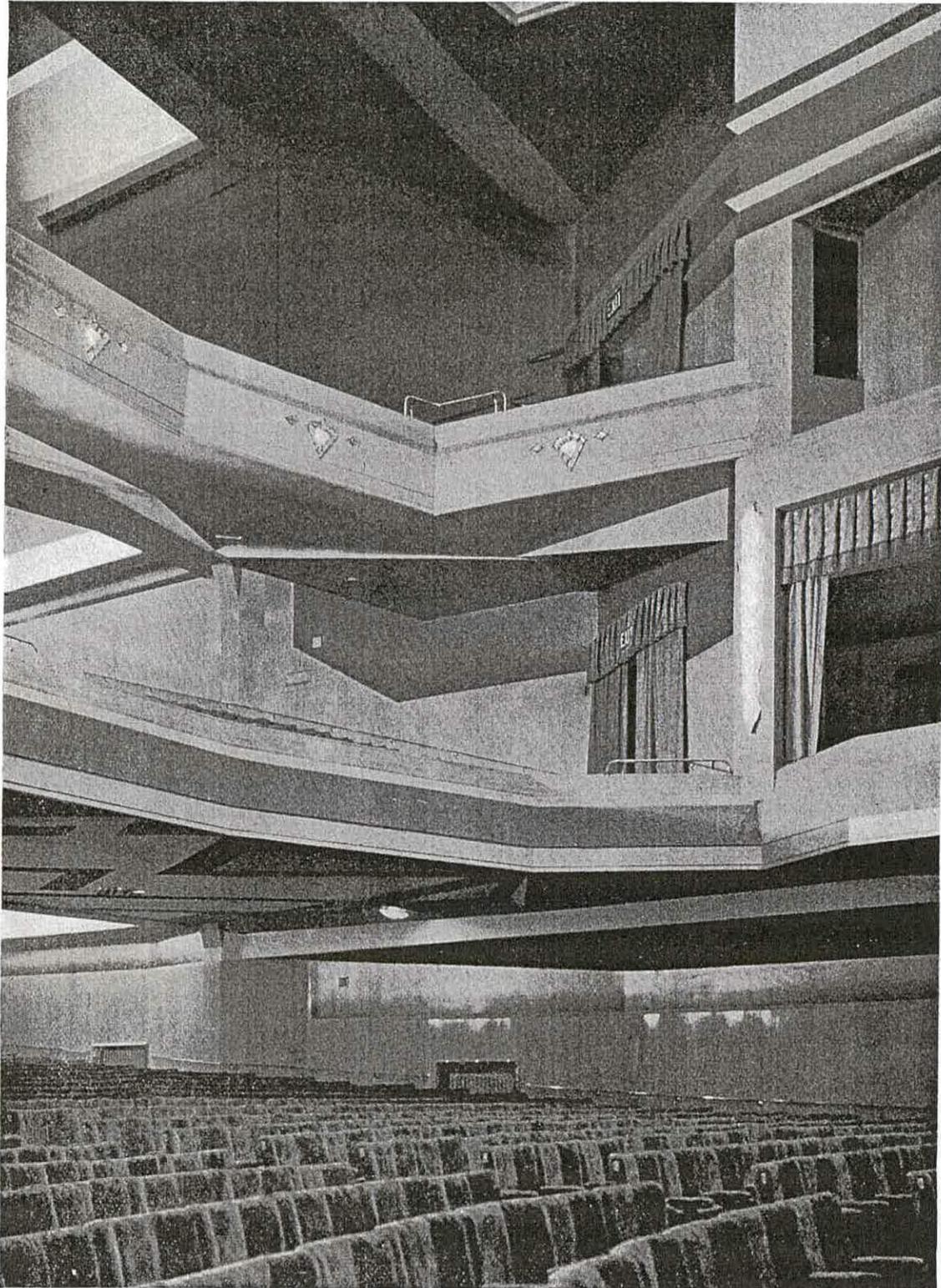


25. The Dominion Theatre (interior): auditorium © English Heritage 1990



26. The Cambridge Theatre (interior): auditorium ©English Heritage 1993

February, 1931.

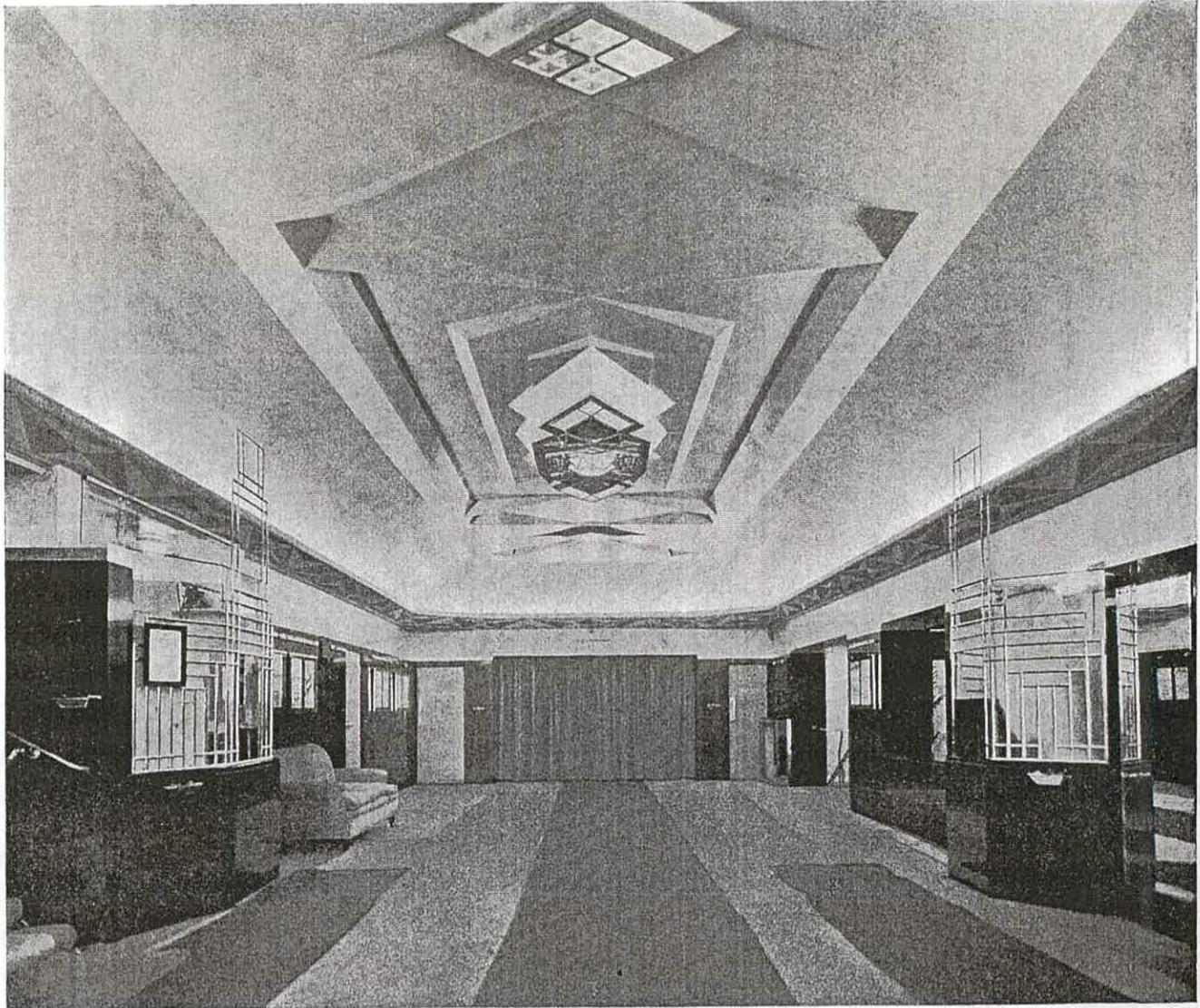


THE ADELPHI THEATRE, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.2. SIDE OF THE AUDITORIUM.

E. SCHAUFELBERG, ARCHITECT.

The internal woodwork of the auditorium is composed of sycamore and gaboon mahogany, stained a flame colour and polished. The soffits under the upper circle and circle are decorated with rectangular forms painted in green and gold. The auditorium ceiling is deep buff and gold.

February, 1931.

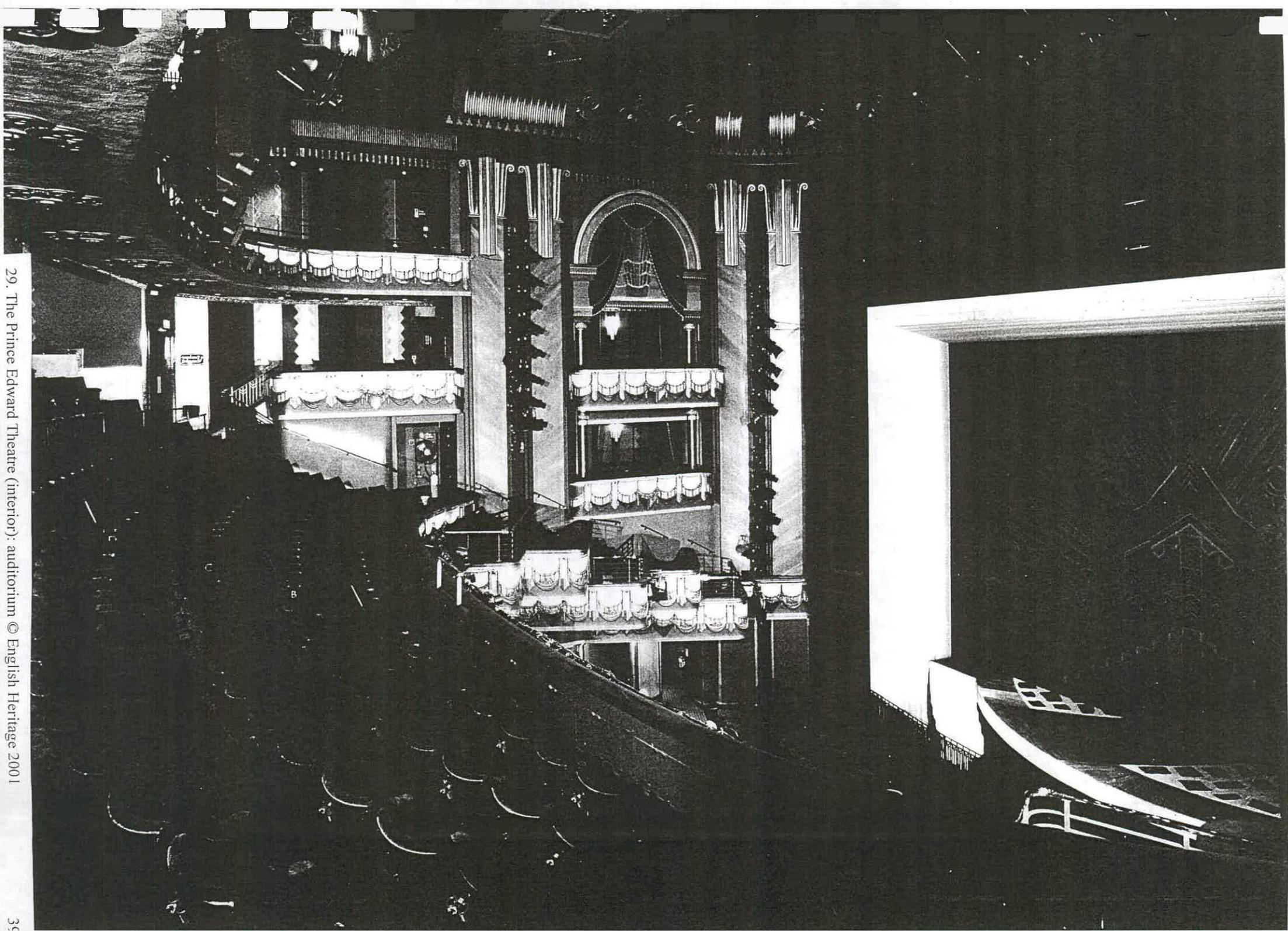


THE ADELPHI THEATRE, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.2. ENTRANCE FOYER AND PAY BOXES.
E. SCHAUFELBERG, ARCHITECT.

The ceiling is a rose buff colour, with slightly recessed planes of rectangular form, painted in soft shades of blue, grey and red, framing the central light. The pay-boxes are of black glass and chromium plate.

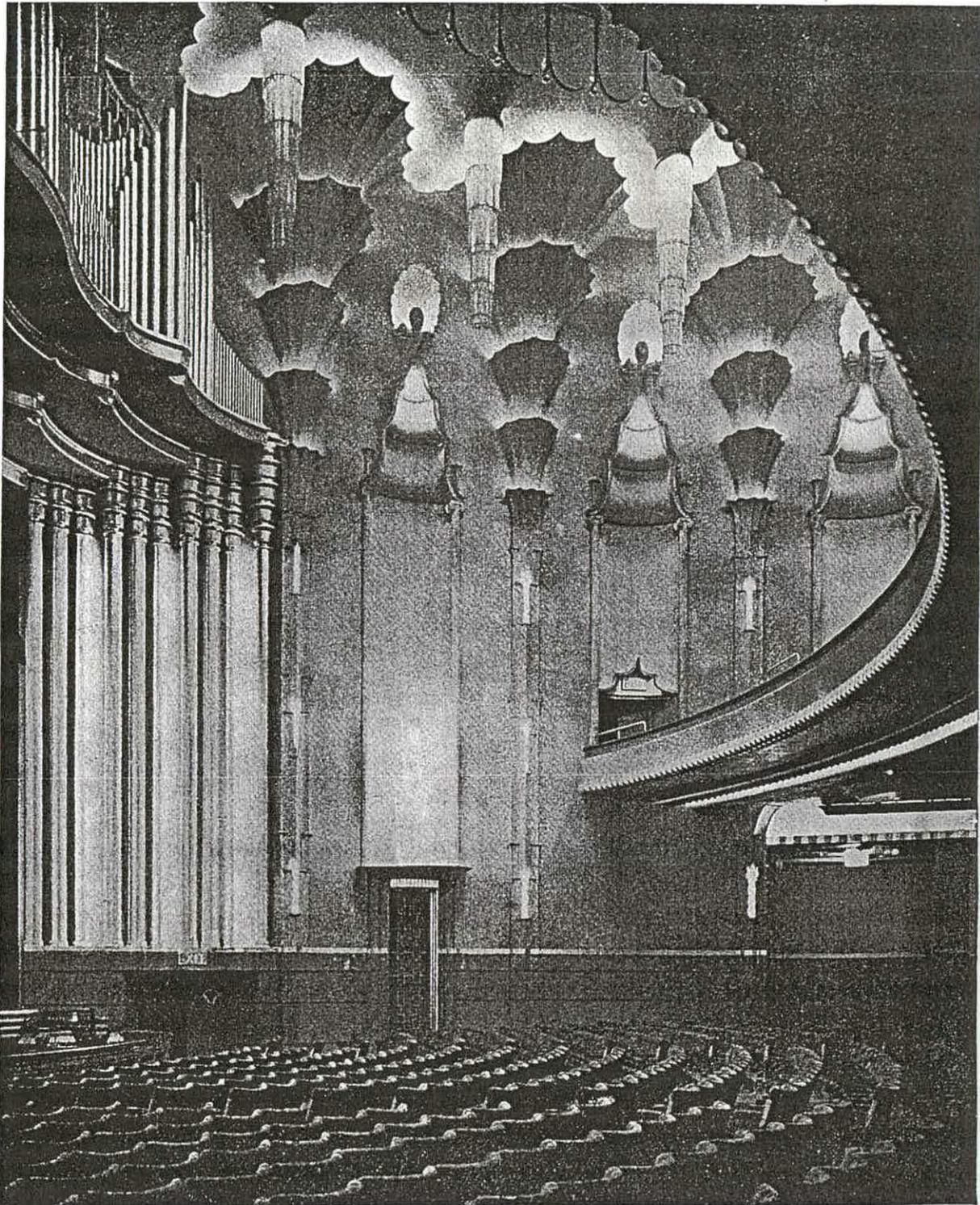


28. The Whitehall Theatre (interior): auditorium © English Heritage 2001



29. The Prince Edward Theatre (interior): auditorium © English Heritage 2001

January, 1931.



SIDE OF THE PROSCENIUM OPENING AND AUDITORIUM, SHOWING LIGHTING EFFECTS.

W. E. TRENT, ARCHITECT. E. WAMSLEY LEWIS, ASSOCIATED ARCHITECT.

All the subtle pale varying tints of mother-of-pearl have been used for the colour scheme of the sides of the Auditorium, the lighting effects being arranged to harmonise with the idea.