

The Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith

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THE FORTHCOMING demolition of the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, has already aroused a considerable protest from the theatrical profession and the play-going public. A strong body of opposition did not persuade the developers to retain the Lyric as the focal point of the proposed "Hammersmith Centre."

It was the Hammersmith Borough Council who initiated the plans for destroying this historic theatre. In a letter dated 7 July 1969, their spokesman stated: "The retention of the Lyric would severely prejudice the entire redevelopment of the shopping centre."

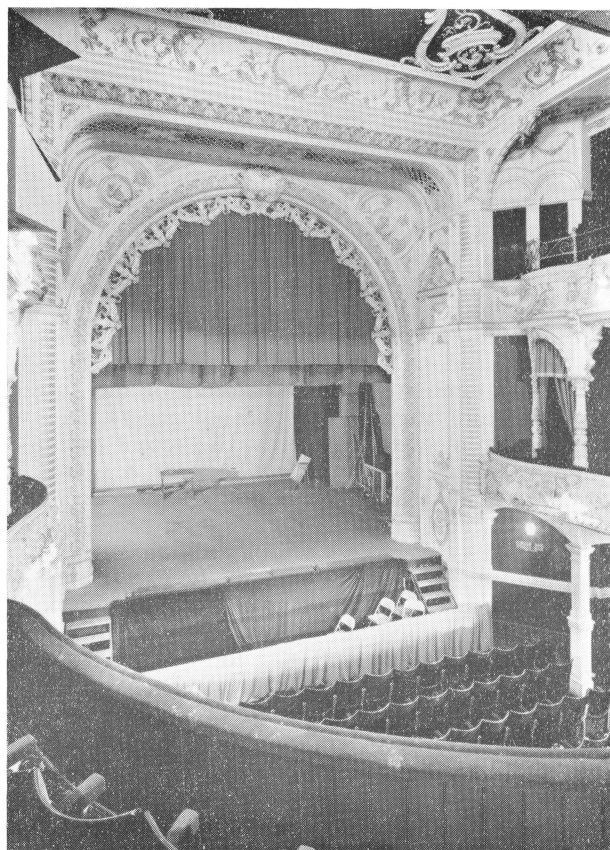
In September 1969 a public enquiry investigated the redevelopment scheme for an area to the north of King Street. The shopping complex plan showed a blank space where an "entertainment centre" was tentatively placed. It was proposed to demolish the Lyric, an action which contravened an order specifying the theatre in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Ashley Barker, speaking on behalf of the G.L.C.'s Historic Buildings Board, commented: "The auditorium is splendid, and capable of giving delight to present day audiences. The acoustics are remarkably good, and no seat is more than 60 feet from the stage."

The case for the objectors was convincingly presented. A non-profit making trust, organised by experienced professionals, said the Lyric was ideal for the changing character of West London. Their spokesman continued: "It would be bad if a theatre of the quality, tradition and aesthetic value of the Lyric were to be demolished." For the Theatre Advisory Council, Hugh Jenkins, M.P., observed: "So universally acclaimed a piece of architecture needs to be preserved in its entirety." The Vice-Chairman of the Hammersmith Society stated: "A revived Lyric, because of its acknowledged merits, has a far greater chance of making the new Hammersmith Centre a landmark in London, and attracting the public, than any new and flexible theatre which has been advocated." The spokesman for the Society for Theatre Research commented: "Only the Royal Court, which has no claims to beauty, could compare with the Lyric's contribution to theatrical history."

The destructive forces of redevelopment have already disfigured much of our heritage, particularly in London. Should the Lyric be replaced by a modern, functional, civic type of theatre, examples of

which have encumbered artists and repelled audiences? The Lyric possesses an intangible quality, a unique atmosphere, which somehow anaesthetises its inconveniences and its shortcomings. V. H. Loney, the Inspector nominated by the Ministry of Housing to make report, listed every minute structural defect in the building, and his opinions can be open to contradiction. "Externally it has no merit . . . it has past theatrical associations of some distinction . . .", surely the understatement of the decade. A reader, unaware of the Lyric's charm, might well ask why it was not pulled down 20 years ago, when it was Britain's foremost shop window for new theatrical talent.

A Community Hall is said to have been built on the site of the Lyric in about 1839, and it is not



Interior of the Lyric.

(Photo: G.L.C. Photograph Library)



A view of the Lyric in 1894
before Frank Matcham's
additions.

(Photo: John East)

known if part of the structure was incorporated in a multi-purpose emporium, the Lyric Hall, opened on 17 November 1888, by a journalist, Charles Cordingley.

The Hall's many shortcomings brought Cordingley into serious conflict with the Board of Works and later with the L.C.C. He conceded defeat, and the Lyric Opera House was erected, using the shell of the Hall. A balcony, a gallery and four boxes were added, exits provided and offices were tacked on to the front of the existing facade. It opened in November 1890 to sparse attendance.

The author's grandfather, John M. East, was the actor-manager of the Lyric from February 1892 until March 1904. East's gregarious personality, the high standard of presentation and his work for charity won a devoted following from an exclusively local audience. Each Monday John East would tour the streets standing on the back of a brewer's dray, shouting the merits of his latest production.

In 1895 the enormous success of the Lyric led Acton Phillips, the owner, to commission Frank Matcham to design improvements, notably to the auditorium. Matcham excavated downwards, and the increased height from ground to roof allowed the dress circle to occupy the position of the old pit, and the gallery was in line with the former balcony. Matcham provided a brilliant auditorium, almost unspoilt to this day. Devoid of pretentiousness or pomposity, there is a degree of frivolity, but the keynote is one of ease and enjoyment. The plasterwork is bold, fluid, and exactly judged to give the correct effect. The enrichments are disposed with skill to emphasise architectural elements which are not overlaid or obscured. Further additions were made in 1899, which included filling in the vacant space over the single storey frontal area of the

theatre.

After the departure of John East, the Lyric was largely used by touring companies. It was shut for long periods during World War I. In 1918 Nigel Playfair took a long lease, and during the 1920s many famous names in theatrical history were billed there.

However, during the 1930s the fortunes of the Lyric declined, and it was not until after the end of the second World War that a revival took place. The Lyric became Britain's most exciting experimental theatre and many more famous artists appeared there. In 1965, owing to the failure of the final management the Lyric closed for good. In 1968 the property company purchased the Lyric.

A document dated 25 June 1970, from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, states: "The Minister accepts the Inspector's recommendation that he should permit the demolition of the building." This is subject to the fibrous plasterwork of the auditorium being taken down and stored, and where that is impossible, moulds shall be made and stored. The validity of the Minister's decision "may be challenged by the making of an application to the High Court."

In 1971 the G.L.C. Historic Buildings Board admitted that they were shocked to learn of the demolition of the Granville, Waltham Green. The Board has since visited other existing pre 1914 theatres and music halls, and they have recommended a number to be listed as of historic and architectural importance. It is a pity the Board failed to save London's most famous suburban theatre, the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, still standing and capable of being restored to its former opulence. Nothing can rob the Lyric of a respected place in the annals of stage history.