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Stage Effects and Other Theatre Machinery

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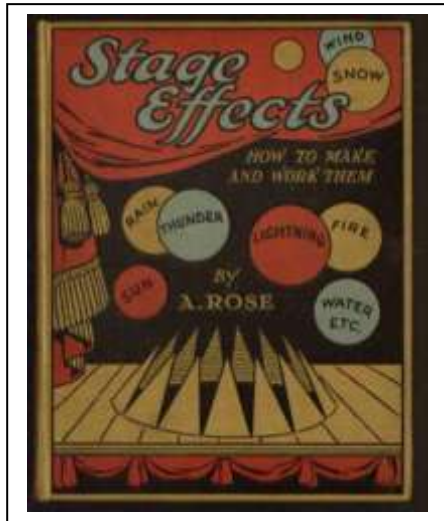
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Richard Allen
CPR Presentation:



Stage Effects and Other Theatre Machinery

I want to share with you two items from my visit – It is presented as a series of thoughts and openings initiated by them....

1.

I entered the collection with an agenda: I wanted to locate the material it held on stage machinery; trap doors, revolving stages, fly towers and winch systems, and - if I was lucky, trick props and stage effects, items that have become known as 'burlesque paraphernalia' or 'side degree specialties'. As well as the larger machines, I went looking for the bucking goat, the exploding cigar and the collapsing chair.

These material instruments and apparatuses are rarely given book length attention in the study of, and writing about, theatre, particularly in liminal practices that slip between the grander narratives of theatre history. We have plenty of collated material on Baroque Stage Machinery, and The Theatre of the Bauhaus for example but very little on the evolution of conventional stage machinery and stage effects (in its broadest sense: the seating units and safety curtains as well as all manner of things that emerge from the prop store). Therefore if we are to find these

things then perhaps we should start with the catalogues and brochures of the manufacturers who made them.

2.

The collection has a large number of manufactures catalogues, particularly in stage lighting, items that might seem banal at first but when placed in context with each other - as a set, they form a particularly detailed and technical history of various elements of stage equipment, and one that gains an increasing charm with age. My particular favorite is this 1948 Hall Stage Equipment Catalogue (The Company is still in existence and has the same logo but has moved from Brixton in London to Luton and they are still manufacturing similar items). The catalogue is beautifully illustrated and contains whole theatre structures and skeletal systems that can be installed into existing buildings or adapted in sections to function with pre-existing stage set-ups - like this sophisticated shifting audience unit that can turn from a raked position to a dance floor in one movement. The most striking thing about these images, coming from a catalogue and not a recorded archive of a performance event is the foregrounding of the technical elements and not the actors or stage action. For example in this image (IMAGE 2) the height and mechanisms of the fly tower are the central focus so we can see the workings 'behind the scenes' as the illustration states - (IMAGE 3 The Hall 'Universal' Curtain Track & Electric Controller No. 300)

- The motor is fore-grounded with the actor as a dot in the space
- 'the space in the corner' – the motor is waiting for its entrance
- The curtain tracks we still use in the department – not the motors

But it was this image that most attracted me and invoked a certain nostalgia as it is a stage space

I am very familiar with a stage unit that 'Hall' could come and install. (IMAGE 4 SCHOOL STAGE)

- British context

- simulacrum of a large stage with small proscenium,
- No Back stage – just hit a wall - door
- deeply bizarre ‘Romantic reviews’ at my local community hall
- Drawn to the materiality of this stage space and how they have continued to influence and impact on, certainly my own, conception of theatre spaces.

3.

I then came across this 1928 book called Stage Effects.... It is a Handbook for the amateur stage manager, to simulate the effects of the larger theaters on a small budget, using Heath Robinson style mechanisms that you could construct in your shed. It is perhaps a handbook for the stage effects we might imagine appearing on ‘Hall’s’ School Stage.

The effects themselves have an innocent and eccentric charm such as the airplane simulator (Image) or the Thunder Cart (Image)— I can just imagine a stage manager pushing this around in the tiny wings of the stage – but what most interested me it is the instructions from the author that reveals how the effects have been conceived and how they should be performed, that is, with the intention towards a naturalistic illusion; an attempt at an authentic evocation of the action it is simulating. He states:

It must be remembered that, whatever means are employed, it is of the utmost importance to practice and rehearse the effect over and over again, until the desired result is obtained and that it may be relied upon for the scene in which the effect has to take place, of course, it is obvious that, whatever the effect is, it must represent nature as near as possible

This might be an occurrence such as thunder or the uncanny page turning of the haunted mysterious book (a particularly adaptable prop that can double as a haunted object or one that it represents the present of wind – Also the coat?). It is perhaps this attempt of the authentic that we might also read into the materiality of Hall’s School Stage as a replica of its big brother with wings – or illusion of wings, the curtains and flies.

If this authentic action of nature is not, in the author's eyes, achieved, then the entire show is as jeopardy of collapse. If the thunder cart does not lull at times to follow the lightning, or the books pages flutter too hard then:

The intended effect may appear ridiculous, and what should create a serious item may bring forth a general titter from the audience – which would spoil the whole scene, even the clever acting being marred by it.

It is the tension in these moments of laughter that these mechanism provoke at the moments of breakdown that offer us a view into the mechanics of theatrical exchange and the nature of representation (A set of questions that my own work is currently engaged with and a view that Nick Ridout has set out in detail in *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*)

Yet, perhaps unwittingly, the author of the book has included an object that's very function is that of the performance of the 'mistake', a mistake that builds on the same ground of laughter as the breakdown in action of the other things: The collapsing chair – (I had found it!) - all be it a particularly crude version compared with some of the advanced models I have seen and read about. This is an object that performs its own breakdown - If it were to make a mistake then it would not collapse at all and the laughter would need to be found in the embarrassment of the actors unable to complete the joke.