

## REVIEWS

Alette Scavenius

### Magiens huse: Danske teatre gennem 300 år.

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Alette Scavenius' book, whose title can be translated as *Houses of Magic: Danish theatres through 300 years*, is a huge undertaking not only in volume but also in scope. The result is a book that fulfils several purposes, both as an attractive coffee-table book and as a scholarly treatment of its subject.

The focal point of the book is the 46 purpose-built theatres in Denmark, of which 30 are still standing. The only exception from this rule is *Hofteatret* – the Court Theatre, which is included albeit it is a theatre fitted into an existing space; the armoury above the royal stables. These 47 theatres are presented in 44 chapters of varying length, bearing the name of the theatre – or theatres – in question. All entries are supplemented by an assortment of magnificent pictures, drawings, floor plans and/or illustrations.

The entries are organised according to chronology, i.e. when the theatres were built. Each chapter opens with a sidebar, listing the dry facts such as the building date, audience capacity, dates of refurbishments, dates of decommissioning or destruction (where applicable), name of architect (where known), and of the patron(s) financing the building. The book covers both public and private theatres, erected by means of bourgeois patronage as well as royal or governmental financial support. The majority of the buildings discussed were erected prior to World War I, with only the final eight theatres having been built afterwards – three of them post-1945.

To the best of my knowledge, this book fills a vacancy not only in Danish theatre literature but also in Scandinavia, too. A comprehensive presentation of all the purpose-built theatres in one

country has never previously been done in Denmark, Sweden or Norway. The closest to such a publication, that I can think of, is Richard and Helen Leacroft's *Theatre and playhouse* (1984). However, their book was a comprehensive survey of the different kinds of purpose-built theatres – from the ancient Greeks to the 1970s. Scavenius' focus on theatre buildings and architecture is similar, but with a Danish lens; thus the end result is a different kind of book all together.

To Scavenius, the theatrical event commences as one approaches the building, its exterior shaping your expectations and contributing to your experiences of the performance presented within. This explains why each chapter tends to describe the façade of the theatre in great detail. Whenever sources are available, the decoration of the theatre's interior – the foyer and auditorium, are also dwelt upon as well as the organisation of the stage and backstage areas.

The level of detail regarding each theatre varies, but is – sources permitting – meticulously presented. The kind of information given in each chapter and the organisation of this information is not identical throughout the book – it does not follow a template. This has to do, I assume, with the availability of sources. Although Scavenius sometimes speculates based on the existing scraps of sources, for instance as to who was the architect for the earliest Opera House, she makes it absolutely clear when she is doing so.

Whereas some chapters revolve around architects and architecture, others are focused on the theatrical entrepreneurs or managers behind the erection and/or running of the given theatre.

Sometimes the individual persons involved almost take over the narrative, transplanting the theatre in question to the periphery of the chapter – such as in the case of the Alhambra Theatre, which is almost more a story of its instigator, Georg Carsensen.

As some entrepreneurs, architects and managers were involved in more than one theatre, some information is given more than once in the book. This means that, to a certain extent, the chapters can be read in whichever order the reader prefers, as the chapters work quite well independently of each other. However, some explanations are only found in one place, and not repeated whenever the subject in question is discussed. It is occasionally a little confusing when these explanations are not given at the first mention of the subject, but rather at a later occurrence in the book. The context for the so-called “Court Theatre season of 1855-1856”, marking the breakthrough of a new and more realistic acting style in Denmark, is for instance given on page 110 – while discussing the Casino Theatre – and not upon its first mention on page 56 in the chapter on the Court Theatre.

Although I am familiar with many of these theatres and Danish theatre histories from previous readings, the book provides new information and produces new narratives and interpretations. I was quite intrigued several times by these novelties. For instance, I have previously read about the different theatres erected just outside of Copenhagen by the Price family between 1801 and 1817, but I had no idea of how well equipped their third and last theatre was. Nor did I have any idea of how extensively Danish theatres were targeted by pro-Nazi terrorism during World War II.

In the three instances in the book where the chapter is devoted to more than one theatre, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of which of the theatres the given information pertains to. This is also, infrequently, the case when a theatre that has been rebuilt is discussed. It is not always clear which version of the building the given information is valid for.

The majority of the theatre stages discussed in the book were organized as baroque stages, i.e. raked stages fitted with changeable sets of scenery made of canvas and painted for an illusionistic, three-dimensional effect. When discussing one of these stages, Scavenius describes one type of scenery as “praktikabel” – i.e. practicable – and explains it as a decoration painted on both sides. This is an explanation of the term that I have not come across before. In scholarly discussions of the baroque stage and its staging practices, as in Richard Southern’s *Changeable scenery* (1952), practicable is used to describe items that were actually functional and could be used as what they were presented as – i.e. doors one could open and close or chairs one could sit on.

All in all, this is a magnificent book that presents a valuable contribution to Scandinavian theatre literature. What makes this book stand out, and serves as an essential aid in regard to understanding the description of the theatres, are the large quantities of images used throughout the book to visualize what is discussed. In addition to new photographs taken by Kurt Rodahl Hoppe of all the theatres still standing, a well of archival sources has been tapped into – presenting a delicate and enticing book, which elucidate its readers via their eyes as well as their minds.

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