

THE BUILDING NEWS.

LONDON, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1867.

THEATRE BURNING AND THEATRE BUILDING.

SINCE Her Majesty's Theatre was burnt on Friday night last, much has been written about its splendour, its size, and the immense loss the public have sustained in its destruction. We might also write in a similar strain, and descant on the beauty and rank which have graced its boxes and stalls, the genius which has enraptured generations of listening spectators, and the unsurpassed acoustic qualification of the theatre now numbered "amid the wreck of things that were." But we prefer to offer a few observations on theatre building and theatre burning. We are surprised that Her Majesty's Theatre was not burnt long ago, for it appears almost to have been built for that purpose; almost every part of its interior consisted of wood, every particle of which was as dry as powder. The means of egress and ingress which the theatre possessed were remarkably defective, and had a fire broken out during an ordinary performance, the consequences, in all probability, would have been appalling. We have scores of times entered the theatre, and almost as many times shuddered at the thought of fire breaking out when the theatre was full. There was only one entrance to the gallery, the amphitheatre stalls, and upper boxes, and that was narrow, crooked, and circuitous; and had a panic rush at any time occurred, it would have been impossible for many to have descended the staircase without crushing, injury, and death. In fact, so thoroughly have we been impressed with the unsafe condition of the theatre that we have always preferred to be as near the door as possible, in order to be prepared for escape if necessary. Whilst, therefore, lamenting over its destruction, we feel there is much cause for congratulation that its fire doom was fixed at a moment when it was empty. The late theatre was erected in 1791, from the designs of Michael Novosielski, and has consequently existed seventy-six years, a very long life for a theatre. Its predecessor, however, on the same site, existed for eighty-four years, but that was before gas was invented, and long before even architects professed to render buildings fireproof. It was opened during the first throes of the French revolution. It was altered and enlarged in 1819 by Nash and Repton, when the Pall Mall and Haymarket fronts were built. Excepting La Scala, at Milan, it is said that the late theatre was the largest in Europe. The Italian opera was introduced in London in 1708. Since that time it has been a growing institution, and young ladies look forward to the opera season as new-fledged members of Parliament look forward to the opening of Parliament. This being the case, we may expect that a new opera house, built more in harmony with modern wants and modes of construction, and subjected to fewer liabilities to destruction by fire, will arise, phoenix-like, from the still smouldering ashes in the Haymarket. An opportunity will, therefore, soon arise to tax the abilities of some scientific architect. The question naturally arises, how shall it be constructed so as to afford the maximum of safety, combined with all the capabilities to make it commercially successful? Just now there are not wanting advisers in the public newspapers who are ready to give no end of suggestions on the best manner to build a theatre. Journalists, in fact, take theatres under their special protection, and it is therefore natural that when an old one is burnt down, or when a new one is to be erected, that they should have something to say on the subject. The State, also,

has much to say about the matter; for does not the Lord Chamberlain say when a theatre shall be opened, and when it shall be closed? Has he not also a control on what is presented on the boards? We may, therefore, as a matter of course, expect to hear much from non-professional pens on theatre building.

The first thing that suggests itself on this subject is the manner and the materials of construction, in order to make the building as much as possible fire-proof. To do this absolutely is obviously impossible. Almost everything appertaining to the stage of a theatre is combustible. The platform itself must be of wood, the scenery, the "properties," the dresses, and other appurtenances, must consist principally of very combustible material, which must be brought into close contiguity with gas light. It has been suggested that iron drop curtains should be provided, so that if a fire broke out on the stage it might be shut off from the auditorium. This, it has been said, would give the audience time to disperse, and perhaps be the means of saving one part of the building. The answer to this is that such a curtain would soon get red hot and so become a means of mischief. On this point, Mr. Dion Boucicault recommends a process to extinguish fires which is well worth consideration. He says:—

Above the stage, and co-extensive with it, there is a gridiron floor from which hangs the pendant scenery. Let the timbers of this floor, which is open work, be laid on their under face, with lines of small iron pipe, forming a gridiron, pricked at every inch with holes; let this system be in communication with the water main constant service. Let one lever which turns on the water be against the wall of the stage on the outside, another corresponding lever contiguous, but on the inside, so that the water may be turned on by a person either outside or inside of the building. The effect of this operation would be to let fall a continuous and even deluge, more effectual in checking a fire than the jet from a hose, because it not only addresses itself to the seat of the fire, but to adjacent material. A similar gridiron process should be introduced underneath the stage, another on the rafters over the auditorium, and a fourth in all available places around the ceiling, so placed that the rain from such would fall or be projected on the woodwork of the boxes and stalls. Each of these systems should have a separate main, so that each could be brought into operation separately; yet the whole might be under the operation of one master main, by turning on which the whole theatre, from the back of the gallery to the rear of the stage, could be deluged in a moment. It is of great importance that such a process should be as readily worked from the outside as from the inside of the building. I believe that the water companies supply what they term sealed mains; that is, the constant service of the street main is conducted into the building and the lever is there sealed up; to break this seal is to confess the use of the supply. Such facilities exist, as I am informed; and if they don't, and the companies offer any impediment to their introduction, an Act of Parliament might be obtained to render such assistance obligatory.

The most painful feature of theatres in London and other large towns is the obvious and lamentable deficiency of egress. Though this point has been enforced again and again, still it has not sufficiently impressed itself on the minds of proprietors and architects, and we are afraid it never will until the legislature interferes, and make it penal to build a theatre that cannot empty itself in three or four minutes. If we saw any hope of touching the consciences, and, through their consciences, the actions of those interested, we would not call for more stringent enactments on this point. But we have almost lost all hope in the matter. So intensely selfish are we all become or becoming, that we will not study the interests of others in promoting what are falsely supposed to be our interests. Perhaps this phase of selfishness has taken a firmer hold of the building fraternity, or a large portion of it, than of any other class of the community. Look, for instance, at the condition of the thousands of dwelling-houses that are starting up in every direction. Almost everyone tries to get what he can, with scarcely a consideration for the convenience or the health of his neighbours. He appears altogether oblivious

of the fact that whenever he robs his neighbour he robs himself more. Judging from his acts, this truth, or any portion of it, has never dawned on his mind. Hence we see theatres and other places of public resort built with miserably defective ventilation, and with inadequate means of egress in case of fire. We know that land is valuable, and that architects are compelled to save every inch in order to get the maximum of sitting accommodation, as that is supposed to be the only thing that pays. People not only want sitting accommodation and convenience, but a sense of security, which, if provided, would also pay. The thought or feeling that strikes everyone on going in or coming out of most theatres is, "Oh! if a fire should break out!" which is accompanied by a cold tremour. Now, we maintain there is no necessity for this. Valuable as space is, life and a sense of security are far more valuable; and if theatre-builders will disregard such considerations they ought to be compelled not only to regard them but to provide for them. We alluded just now to the narrow, tortuous staircase which led to the whole of the upper part of Her Majesty's Theatre. Take another fact. Would anyone imagine that the folding doors at the bottom of this entrance opened *inwards*, and not *outwards*. Had a rush taken place, with great pressure, as would have been the case if fire broke out when the theatre was full, the doors could only have been opened with great difficulty, and the stream of people that came or fell downstairs would be dammed up at the bottom. And yet these doors have been in this condition year after year, and no one considered it his duty to interfere and alter them.

Another suggestion we venture to throw out relates to the undue haste in which theatres are erected. Almost all houses are erected too rapidly, and theatres in particular. Look, for instance, at the last theatre built in London—the Queen's, in Long Acre—illustrations and description of which appeared in our pages a few weeks since. The rapidity with which it was transformed from St. Martin's Hall to a theatre was marvellous. As a rule, things cannot be done with astonishing haste and well at the same time, and this applies particularly to theatre building. No doubt, many of our readers have looked with satisfaction at the decorations of this new theatre; at all events, they have been much praised in the newspapers. Should, however, a fire break out at the Queen's it would burn, young as it is, almost as rapidly as Her Majesty's. The decorations are not put directly on the walls, as the observer may imagine, but on *wood*. It would have been necessary to plaster the walls, and plaster would have taken time to dry; hence the application of wood, and the result is that the Queen's, instead of being incombustible, is about the most combustible theatre in London. If the architect were asked, why board the walls? he, no doubt, would say he was pressed for time; in other words, he was the victim of this insatiable thirst for gain which is such a characteristic quality of our too highly lauded civilization. "Everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost," is the practical motto of the age. Let us hope that this undue reckless haste will be conspicuous by its absence during the erection of Her Majesty's Theatre that is to be.