

Saved from the Slot Machines

By autumn 1977, the decline of Cromer Pier's *Pavilion Theatre* was complete and its fall was imminent. It awaited the ultimate fate of a pier theatre: stage and seating out/slot machines in. The theatre's owners, North Norfolk District Council, were understandably reluctant to apply this final solution. Without live entertainment, could a holiday resort retain its self-respect? The Council decided to call in Richard Condon, the Irish Magician who has turned Norwich's *Theatre Royal* into a place that audiences are eager to fill. Could Dick rescue a tatty 400 theatre stuck 100 yards out into the North Sea on a rather exposed part of the east coast?

The short answer turned out to be yes!

sightlines, the entire floor carpeted, and attractive comfortable seating installed. The red of the seats and carpets was echoed in the warmth of the walls, with the proscenium arch picked out in black and some side roof sections taken into cream. To compensate for the surrounding seas, the whole idea of cosy warmth was stressed more than it might have been if the theatre had been on land. This worked: so did a bright foyer with all-day catering, including salads and sandwiches featuring that local delicacy the Cromer Crab; and a bar designed to attract normal pub trade in addition to theatregoers.

The stage has no flies and very little wing space. The winch suspensions for the



Richard Condon's Seaside Special 1979 at the Pavilion Theatre, Cromer. Directed by Yvonne Marsh with choreography by Pat Adams, scenery by Inigo Monk and Ted Woodley, costumes by Jenni Goodwin and lighting by Frances Reid.

Dick planned his attack on three fronts: (1) Audience Comfort, (2) Intensive Use, and (3) Publicity. To back him, the District Council found money to refurbish the theatre, underwrite the shows, and tell everyone the good news.

There was a lot to be done. The bare floor was flat and the seats were even more uncomfortable than they looked (if that were possible). The toilets were, to put it politely, inadequate; and the bar was a haven for the teetotal. Stage and backstage were cluttered with the remains of shows long past—as if no one had bothered to do a get-out for a decade.

So, for a start, skip upon skip of rubbish was removed. Then the rear of the auditorium was stepped to improve

lighting bars were overhauled and rope sets re-positioned for tab-tracks, masking legs and isora backcloth. For scenery suspension a series of Henderson Tracks was installed. This solves the problem of storing and handling scenery with a small performance crew (the principle is rather like Georgian changeable scenery without the lower grooves—wings slide on downstage and the “backcloth” is two flats coming on from the sides and meeting at centre). The stage already had a small apron and a further small centre thrust section was built to bring stand-up comedians into a more confidential relationship with their audience. No pit is necessary as the organ, piano and drums can nestle at the side of this new thrust section.

The old 24-way bracket-handle dimmer board and 6-way teak slider were retained for budgetary reasons, although the success of the 1978 season made it possible for this to be replaced by a CCT/Electrosonic *Linkit* system for 1979. As the old board blocked the prompt corner, it is now considerably easier to make an entrance. To simplify staffing, the new lighting desk is normally backstage, but it has extension cables for auditorium use when necessary and this has proved to be invaluable during rehearsals.



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The theatre re-opened in 1978 with a flourish. A barrage of local press coverage built up during rehearsals and on opening night the regional news magazines of both television channels gave extensive film reports. A huge crowd gathered on the cliff top overlooking the pier to watch the first night audience arrive to be greeted by a brass band. A maroon rocketed into the sky to signal curtain up on another restored theatre.

And at £34,000 this restoration was a very cost-effective job.

The initial impetus created by the project has remained and Cromer has now succeeded for that most difficult of seasons, the second. During the summer, the Pavilion Theatre is used extensively, with a revue in the evenings, children's shows morning and afternoon, and concerts on Sundays. Heating has now been installed (somewhat rare in summer theatres)—both to preserve the new furnishings against the winter chills and to allow an extension of the season with concerts and local amateur productions in spring and autumn. The future looks good and posterity will be grateful that a traditional pier theatre has been saved from the slot machines.