

This Atmosphere Divinest Shrouds thee

STAHL THEATRE, OUNDLE

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I had to suffer the humiliation of a television interview to help publicize the Oundle theatre before it opened. It was mercifully brief, but in the course of it I said something suitably glib about churches and theatres having a lot in common, both really being performance spaces, and it was only when I thought about it afterwards that I realised it might be true, and that apart from the obvious similarities of seating plan etc. good theatres and most old churches have in common that intangible quality, atmosphere.

There was not much atmosphere evident

when I first saw the Congregational Church in West Street, Oundle in 1977. It had been empty for some time, and Oundle School had bought it with the intention of converting it into a theatre for the boys, with the possibility of putting on public performances with small scale professional tours. The exterior of the building was listed, and the interior was complete with pews and organ, all rather shabby. It dated from 1879, and was built on the site of an earlier mediaeval church.

It was tempting to say that nothing should

be done beyond a coat of paint and improved services, since superficially a theatre already existed, with seating, a possible acting area, even a small timber gallery. But the closer one looked, the clearer it became that the building would have to be gutted and re-built from a bare shell to achieve everything that the school required. An architect was appointed (Robert Weighton, Cambridge), and it was during this closer look at the building that we all realised that the church interior, which at first sight seemed gloomy and depressing, actually had great potential with an impressive roof structure and semi-circular apse at the 'stage' end, which were theatrical assets to be exploited.

The school had asked for a variety of staging arrangements to be possible in the finished building, including in-the-round. It was interesting trying to see how this could be achieved, but in the end it was clearly impossible, the narrow town centre site, circulation and exit requirements, and the rectangular shape of the main building made it inevitable that we settled for the original

