



LONDON. A personalised public relations programme for Private Lives
 Maria Aitken and Michael Jayston.

according to the TV station in New York.'

Alongside these changes went a general improvement in methods of ticket sales. The mid-seventies brought in telephone bookings and credit cards, which boosted business significantly. Ticketron however, remains the only real ticket agency (it gets an allocation of seats) and is not computerised except for audit control and sales figures. Like the 'libraries' over here, little has changed in recent years chez Ticketron.

'New York is not London,' stresses Burke, returning to the present. 'Nor is theatregoing that similar; because of prices and mugging people tend to book well ahead and organise their evenings further in advance than we do.'

'The Leicester Square booth is analogous to the Laker stand-by. You may or may not get a ticket to the show you want: you take the risk. We are now working on an Apex fare, which will offer a degree of concession. There are different schemes in the air; it is still early days.'

It would be testing Vincent Burke's loyalty to SWET unfairly to quiz him on why things take so long to get moving in London. But a knowledge of producers and theatre managers paints a clear enough picture: many are over-cautious, some are even lazy and prefer to slow the pace of progress. But the New York lessons have impressed them all and made them professionally jealous.

Nor is crisis new to them. This is an industry which has seen crises before and has got through on tried and tested formulas. So new schemes will never go through the committees willy-nilly; they are resisted, or tried with great caution.

Let it be noted that some advances have been made. And one or two giant strides.

Credit cards and student stand-bys are now commonplace – and successful. No fewer than 70,000 student stand-by tickets were generated in the first month of being tried. The NUS says there is now an upsurge of interest and support.

Both commercial radio stations, Capital and LBC, have become involved. At 5.30

p.m. Capital now gives a daily plug to whichever five shows have a good supply of tickets left – at a discount of between a third to a half off. They are usually the better seats which have not been sold. It helps to break down the 'mink barrier' in the front of the house, as Denis Quilley put it.

Marketing and merchandising have improved greatly in the past few years, not only in the theatre but throughout the field of entertainment: rock, classical music, the fine arts, dance and opera. Examples of imaginative radio ads, smart mugs and T-shirts and promotional campaigns are to be found from the Royal Opera House to 'Shaftesbury Avenue' shows like Annie, which employed a special marketing team

to dream up ideas.

Occasionally PR grasps its opportunities and catches the public imagination. In addition to Peter Thompson Associates being hired to launch the West End transfer of Private Lives from Greenwich, Peter Wright of Cue Consultants was taken on by Michael Jayston and Maria Aitken for their personal PR. Using such angles as fashion spreads and phone-in programmes, the two stars notched up another 40-odd media exposures in the national and trade press, from Variety to Lynda Lee-Potter in the Daily Mail; and from BBC's Pebble Mill programme to Thames TV interviews – not forgetting plugs in TV Times, The Stage, Evening Standard and so forth. Owing to the pressure of work on PRs and low, low fees, such opportunities are too often missed for want of a few hundred pounds.

Which leads on to a central question. What are a show's top priorities? Few, surely, can be more important than to coax an audience in for each performance, whether to make money or to justify a grant. Then there is little excuse for failing in that effort. Yet all forms of promotion from box office staff to PRs cannot and do not cope as well as they could. As the lifeblood of the organisation, promotion deserves to be taken more seriously.

Many new schemes have been tried. Reduced rail fares; subscription booking discounts; special offers like cheap dinners or bargain records with small group bookings, reductions for readers of designated papers. But often what's lacking is flair, showmanship. And with all new ideas, co-operation and determination is vital. Yet this is still lacking.

Rupert Rhymes, president of SWET, rightly berated arts writer Michael Owen of the Evening Standard for denouncing the

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