

West End as slow to solve its problems. It remains a sad truth, however, that things could be progressing at a far brisker pace if there were more freshness or enthusiasm.

Eric Kilner, former managing director of Keith Prowse, has for years been advocating major practical changes such as scaled seat pricing (from an early-week and matinee 'low' to a weekend 'high'). Sweeney Todd already adds £1.50 to its top price on Saturday. Better staff and better facilities for booking at theatres and agencies: in a word, why not make it easier for tickets to be bought? More sales outlets should be available too, all over the country. Not just for theatre but all forms of entertainment, to draw in new and untried audiences wherever possible. Wide, not narrow appeal should be the aim. Kilner is a mine of good ideas with over 20 years experience in selling tickets behind him. He is closer to the ticket-buying public than most ivory-tower producers and theatre managers, whose talents must, one imagines, lie elsewhere.

Common sense and applied marketing is to be found ironically in the subsidised sector, within the big companies and the Arts Council domain. An interview with Jodi Myers and Peter Verwey of the Council's marketing department built up a complex picture of marketing strategies and collected experiences (failures as well as success) from fringe theatre to large-scale touring opera. Others like the Old Vic's Jack Emery, ENO's Howard Lichterman and the RSC's Peter Harlock are all in their different ways making giant strides with every new opportunity. Here are some of the recent findings, especially in the regions.

Touring companies build up local reputations (like the RSC in Newcastle), but in addition, certain shows benefit from marketing ancillary benefits as added

inducements. Granted that dance and opera are specialised events and often require less selling, the more accurately you can define your audience the more effective good print material will be, even in those fields.

Good mailing lists are, not surprisingly, considered the most valuable form of promotion. With careful working out, you can even use parts of the list for different events.

For repertory performances, audiences are being asked to go to the theatre several times a week, therefore discount subscription seasons and other bargains are essential.

'Sunday booking facilities are a priority,' stressed Jodi Myers, 'since so much advertising goes into the Sunday papers. Yet with all day free to arrange bookings, people have to wait till Monday, another busy workday.'

A variety of selling techniques are in use, from social chats or lectures at colleges by company members to sub schemes at places of work. Workshops usually arouse interest; Ann Meyer held one at a pithead in Yorkshire for English National Opera North - with the help of Arthur Scargill!

Co-operation with local businesses like record shops to sell opera tickets, or in the case of Oklahoma! recently, the Egg or Milk Marketing Boards can produce results. Printed vouchers offering 50p off tickets for every two pints or half dozen eggs per week extra worked reasonably well. The redemption rate was about 1% from a total of 200,000 vouchers, which is about typical for this kind of operation. 'Not that we're satisfied with this,' adds Jodi Myers, 'but word of mouth was excellent from this exercise, so the promotion got noticed and then talked about. Not bad for cold selling - and to people who normally don't go to musicals.'

There are eight Arts Council marketing

officers covering the country; each has comprehensive contacts in local education, other local authority departments, local media and so forth and keep in constant touch all year round, not just when a company visits. They are based in Newcastle, Leeds, Liverpool, Nottingham, Birmingham, Oxford, Bristol and Winchester. Tried and tested ideas are fine, they find, but there's nothing like surprise to prick people's interest. Freshness is all.

Small companies find it difficult to get their own promotions off the ground, especially since different times of year and different theatres call for different techniques. This summer, the Actors Touring Company, London, took a three-week season to an unusual venue, the Oxford Union. Although Oxford is a good theatre town, the public was foxed by the new venue: advertising made no difference for the first week. Special print material however, worked better.

Habits are important to build up: Norwich Theatre Royal sells the theatre more than the show, to avoid selling from scratch with every new touring show.

With computerisation as this year's big word in box offices and telephone sales the new thing for renewing lists of former patrons and cold canvassing, there is plenty afoot. The Post Office actually runs a section called Phonenumber under John York Williams, which lectures on telephone selling techniques!

Whether it is to be civic theatres who try out box office computerisation first or the subsidised companies who have been working with Kenneth Fraser, managing director of Box Office Computer Systems, to develop the right software, either way it will mark the first change since 1884, when counterfoil tickets and numbered seats were introduced.

Jodi Myers feels strongly on the subject: 'A welcome atmosphere and efficiency are the vital ingredients for a box office' (the very term originated as a joke-word in Variety). 'They should have longer hours and be better manned all over the country. Can the staff *sell* tickets? If not, why employ them?

'This is possibly the number one sales point of a theatre, and thus of vital importance, not just an ancillary function for underpaid clerks.

'Especially in the subsidised sector, there is no consultation whatever with the publicity people at the planning stages of a production. How many industries do you know where the salesmen are given something to sell without any reference prior to it? A subtle shift of balance here would be valuable.'

Overnight changes are too much to hope for, but as Britain's recession bites deeper, affecting theatregoing still further and cutting back remaining margins, it is time for singleminded and concerted progress in sales methods. Let's remember, it is just four years ago that Tony Field, the Arts Council's finance director, launched *exactly* the same half-price ticket booth scheme in London, only for it to be boycotted. It is an unfortunate, but an illustrative, moral tale.

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