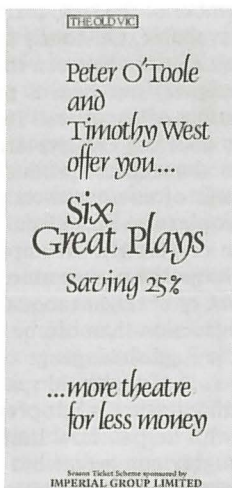


'More theatre for less money'

A record sales drive by the Old Vic this summer has won it the admiration and that sincerest form of flattery, imitation, of its rival theatres. Associate director Jack 'Mr. Joan Bakewell' Emery launched a new subscription scheme by inserting 400,000 specially designed pull-out brochures into the regional section of the Observer Magazine (the only Sunday paper to offer this service) covering the Greater London area. He followed this up with a direct mail shot of some 250,000 to the same area. So successful was the magazine insertion that he used a further 200,000 on a repeat exercise.

The scale of the operation was the biggest ever launched by any arts organisation, he said. No-one had ever inserted a complete booking form into a colour supplement before... and the response was miraculous. For an outlay of £35,000 (which included such costs as redesigning the Old Vic house style) a total of 6,200



The Old Vic's bargain offer as seen in 'The Observer' magazine.

season ticket holders has been built up netting some £117,000 – a handsome return by promotional standards. This represents 40% of the box office target for the six month season (September till March) or 21% of the whole year. The campaign lasted nine weeks, starting at the beginning of June.

'Although no-one had done it before it still exceeded our expectation' said Emery modestly. 'We had aimed for around £70,000.'

Overall cost must be considered very reasonable when considering the excellent knock-on effect on general ticket sales for individual performances and general publicity.

Others have subsequently copied the idea without the same success owing to less well targeted marketing and use of material.

Finally taking full advantage of the publicity potential offered, Emery arranged for the 6,000th season ticket buyer, one Mrs. Judge of Lewisham, to be presented with a magnum of Champagne at the Arts Minister's office in Whitehall on August 5. Needless to say St John-Stevas crowded over such a spectacular promotional burst from this 'grand old theatre' as he put it. 'At a



6,000th season ticket and friends.

time when fears and doubts have been expressed about the future of our commercial theatre, the Old Vic has set an example for all businesses who believe imaginative planning and aggressive marketing hold the key to a prosperous future.'

Imperial Group deserve all credit for pumping £15,000 into the scheme and Timothy West, the Vic's artistic director, for assembling an extremely promising company for the season with Peter O'Toole as Macbeth, returning after a 15-year absence from the London stage, and Lynne Miller, Frances Tomelty, Brian Blessed and Maureen O'Brien in leading roles.

Ill-considered trifles

It has been noted before and will doubtless be noted again that the shortage of information and general material on our outstanding cultural heritage, the theatre, is downright conspicuous. However, in the past year or so four new outlets for commercial theatrical sales have appeared on the London scene and go some way towards filling the vacuum.

The largest premises belong to the expanded Arts Council Shop in Long Acre which stocks books, periodicals and visual material covering all its spheres of activity. The most chic, or perhaps only the most trendy, is That's Entertainment in new lodgings at the Covent Garden Market Building. There it celebrates vintage and very rare as well as current London and Broadway shows (strictly for buffs) in the form of albums and posters. The latter can be attractively, if expensively, mounted for



Victorian revivals at The Theatre Shop.

hanging at an extra £5 to £7. More worthy of praise, perhaps, are the Theatre Shop by the Phoenix Theatre and Top Of The Bill at the bottom of Wardour Street by the Swiss Centre.

The Theatre Shop puts the accent on memorabilia: original designs, Victorian and Edwardian programmes, handbills and prints as well as an invaluable selection of regional theatre information, a theatre ticket service and gift vouchers, redeemable in tickets or merchandise. Behind the venture are ticket agency doyen Eric Kilner and producer Bill Freedman, together with Gerald and Veronica Flint-Shipman of the Phoenix Theatre.

A less specialised and more commercial approach is adopted by Top Of The Bill, which majors on merchandising – reminding us how little this area has been exploited by managements. The shop is managed (like the Theatre Shop, until mid-evening every day, we note with approval) by the theatrical team of Robert Fox, Eric Parsons, Richard Seddon, Andrew Treagus and Robert Knight, all former stalwarts from the Michael White production stable or backstage men in their own right. The ingenious miscellany on sale runs from T-shirts and sweatshirts (their long sleeved versions), to posters, badges, souvenir programmes, LPs and tapes, specialist papers, cinema and theatre books through to greeting cards, mugs and song-books... and a perky red and white bag to pop them into.



Pop art at the Top of the Bill.

These four main outlets may stimulate a wider public interest while we await with impatience the eventual opening of the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. But there is still no serious attempt at providing exhibition space for props and costume designs. Only Charles Spencer and Marina Warner's tiny Decor Gallery in Knightsbridge opens a window on the past and affords a glimpse of historic achievements in this field. This is not simply wasteful, it is discouraging to designers because it denies them permanent recognition in one of the few fields where British artists lead the world. How many more international design awards must we walk off with before we learn to encourage our natural talents properly?

Autolycus column contributed by Mike Walker and Anthony McCall.