

Palace Revolution

The refurbished Palace in Manchester will be the first theatre to use the new Box Office Computer System.

A report by ANTHONY McCALL

It is one of Sir Roy Shaw's pet topics. Whenever the conversation turns to Arts Council spending and particularly when ratepayers' money is seen to support the status quo at the expense of experimental ideas, he draws himself up, his craggy face visibly chagrined at hearing the old arguments. For his detractors keep on judging the state of the arts by what they see in London.

When will people realise that the most exciting developments take place outside London, he asks? The capital may get the lion's share of the budget, it is a very concentrated centre of activity in the arts world, after all; but the risks, the strides forward are being taken out among the green hills.

This time it's Manchester in the limelight. And that lean and hungry management team at the Palace Theatre are setting a brisk pace, to prove that big is best . . . best in the country. As part of the £3 million renovations, they have revolutionised the box office operation—for a mere £100,000 plus.

Gone are the curling corners of paper seating plans and rows of piled up pre-printed tickets. In their place, a gleaming computer terminal.

The computer hardware itself is one of the new BOCS* models, and the people at the Palace who are taking possession of it comprise one of the top teams in the country. Peter Willets, the Theatre Manager, came from the RSC, Stratford and the Liverpool Empire; Robert Scott, the Administrator, came from the Royal Exchange across the road, and chairs the Arts Council Touring Finance sub-committee; finally Tom Pate, the General Manager, joined from Moss Empires, as head of day-to-day operations. Even Jose Tillson, Box Office Manager, has spent 30 years in the business, 20 of them at the Palace.

Just why the computer was installed, I shall leave them to explain. Suffice to say that with ticket prices the same as the West End and with attractions to match, 'every

unsold ticket will be a personal insult' to quote publicity chief Forbes Cameron, allegedly the wizard among wizards. (He launched the Royal Exchange, too).

They sum up their reasons for buying, or rather lease-buying, the BOCS terminal and computer as follows:-

“1/It will provide a much more efficient and speedy box office operation. This is particularly important since the Palace will be presenting a very broad spectrum of entertainment including variety, pantomime, opera, ballet, drama and concerts of all kinds (any of which may be booked in a single working day).

2/We will be able to produce our own tickets, using BOCS, at a cost of about one-fifth of orthodox theatre tickets. BOCS tickets will be printed at the moment of sale with no wastage.

3/BOCS will allow tickets to be sold from multiple points—the traditional seat-plan can be used by only one person at a time.

4/BOCS will identify immediately the best available seat for a customer and will, for example, facilitate the selling of standby tickets.

5/A full report on the house will be obtained immediately the last ticket has been sold and agencies will be invoiced automatically. Up-to-the-minute progress figures can also be supplied on the spot.

6/BOCS will allow for an efficient and updated mailing list to be maintained. It will also provide a specialised direct mail facility and an instant sales analysis for marketing campaigns.

7/It will have the capacity, in the future, to link directly to the Post Office Prestel computer. People will be able to purchase tickets by telephone, using continuously updated ticket information on their television screens.”

The Palace re-opens on March 18, with bookings from December 1. The hardware was delivered in mid-November for training; and even before that the theatre's free mailing list had been placed on computer and the first mail-out left the Palace *before* it arrived.

Normal discounts are being employed: groups, students, pensioners, standbys, plus day-of-performance allocations, subscription schemes (operated with their

Discount Card), and credit card bookings. But a novelty is the network of ticket agencies who will charge no extra and whose choice of seats will not be restricted by an allocation. Whereas in London, say, agencies make their money by charging customers some 17½% of the ticket value and theatres 2½%, thus 20% in all. Libraries, as they're referred to, also operate on an allocation basis only.

The Palace will be offering top international stars from the Palladium and Royal Opera and Royal Ballet—another Manchester 'first'. Top price for Verdi's "Otello" in May therefore, will be £23.50, but for this, Mancunians will see not only the best British but also foreign singers of the calibre of Gracé Bumbry and Piero Cappuccilli.

Eschewing an 'arty crafty' image, the Palace, says Forbes Cameron, will programme 20 weeks of Art Council product and 32 of commercial entertainment. Catchment area is estimated to extend 100 miles outside Manchester.

The prospect before us

Space-Time Systems are reportedly happy that their first client was outside London, and a touring theatre. It helps demystify the image to start in the 'sticks', and it demonstrates the versatility by adjusting prices and 'best seats' criteria according to the attraction; heavy rock or an evening of ballet. Apron-stage auditoria and theatre-in-the-round have still more unusual requirements.

As Cue went to press, the Palace was the only theatre to have placed a firm order for BOCS. But according to managing director Kenneth Fraser, another 10 are actively discussing the prospect, many in the regions, once again.

Fraser is not looking for the quick sale. He prefers to know that buyers are aware of what they are acquiring; for being a major capital investment, it is important to grasp the potentialities in every area of BOCS's capability. He wants to sell the living proof, not theory. 'I want them to test drive BOCS's, as he puts it.

**Box Office Computer System, announced in Sept/Oct Cue) from Space-Time Systems of 14 Langley Street, London WC2.*