



Illustrated diaries are becoming very popular and the Royal Opera House 1982 edition has some interesting full page pictures of moments in the history of the various theatres on the Covent Garden site. These include the impression of backstage technology which forms our cover. The Rheingold's swimming machinery was painted in 1936 by a *Tatler* artist and made available to the diary by the *Theatre Museum*. The technology looks like fairly orthodox Kirby wires, although current fashion plus the growing influence of the Health and Safety at Work Act tends to favour the easier option of not restricting audience imagination by such imposition of reality! Perhaps it will all soon be done by swimming holograms.

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Flying Stalls

An eminent theatre consultant was at work with his steel rule. Not in the rarefied atmosphere of his consulting room, but while visiting a patient with a seat problem. The consultant was tall and thin, so the measurement being taken was not width between arms, but distance back to back. The phrase on his lips was from the airline industry: *seat pitch*.

And why not? There are strong affinities between flying an aircraft and a theatre.

Both frequently fly with empty seats. There is nothing more un-saleable than a seat in an aircraft after take-off or a seat in a theatre after curtain-up. No good putting the ticket back on the shelf or into the fridge for sale tomorrow.

Not surprisingly, theatres and airlines use similar marketing methods. At the play or in the air, it is unlikely that the person in the next seat has paid the same price. There is a high no-strings charge for the few whose lives are too flexible for apex fare or subscription ticket, and not flexible enough to stand-by.

First New York and now London have established half price ticket booths to unload surplus theatre seats. The airlines use bucket shops.

Theatre price differentials are based mainly on sightline: in the air they vary with seat comfort and service. How long before theatre seats divide into first, club and steerage. *Royal Irving* with free champagne and sleeperettes, *Gracious Garrick* with choice of spirits and reclining chairs, *Theatric Tourist* on benches with permission to buy beer in understaffed bar (all the usherettes would be up front with Irving and Garrick).

Well, at least a theatre audience can leave before the end without a parachute!

But, removing tongue from cheek, there is one area where theatre must surely always follow the airlines' example: the maintenance of highest possible technical and safety standards irrespective of the number of occupied seats.