

*Picture of our first model, simply a large box with elements like lifts, tumble cloth and flying shafts being installed. Box made of softwood. Elements made of balsa and cord.*

Luckily at that time we had several keen model makers who were now itching to have a go at the lifts and bridges. Others wanted to research other aspects of the building's history and the lighting control. A small group wanted to start cataloguing the retrieved documents which, it had been agreed, could be stored at Central for their own safety and indexing. The 1983 project had set itself.

They were planning to make models of all lifting machinery, being a single trap downstage prompt side and grave trap centre, two bridges upstage of the grave and farthest upstage a row of three separately operated platforms each one being 4x8.

In the end these were not all completed owing to the more conventional workload of stage management students, perhaps enthusiasm got the better of practical considerations. Initially the modellers concentrated on taking detail photographs and measurements. Then scale drawings were made at the scale (1:12) the models were to be. The individual pieces of wood could then be cut to match the drawings. Obeche, spruce and pine were to be used in the construction. The most significant advantage that we held was that we seemed to be the only people using the building. I imagine that being alone in this empty theatre, deserted and yet still equipped, albeit a generation out of date, was a major part of its fascination. One problem we had to accept at that point was that the 'sliders' or lids to the traps had been rendered inoperative by additional joists being placed through the middle of them. In addition, the BBC in their tenure of the premises had laid a hardwood strip floor over the existing floor and extending over the orchestra pit. What with this and time constraints we couldn't adequately ascertain the details at the upper end of the bridges and traps.

At the end of this part of the work in 1983 we had a working grave trap and bridge. The upstage trio of platforms was made but not all working, and the pieces had been cut and partially assembled for the remainder. We were in fact pleased with the work because it had been thoroughly done and we had gained as a by-product drawings which will expedite future work.

What needs to be done is to finish a model of the floor, complete with sliders and link it to the machinery, and move on to the thunder run, which lies upstage of the lift machinery. By the Spring of 1984 when another batch of students were ready for project work, the hardwood floor had been lifted and we could see and precisely measure the sliders and apertures. I personally felt a genuine excitement at standing on the floor, covered for so long and now exposed. I have seen and worked in theatres with similar machinery but invariably the upper end of the system had been covered in order to suit the needs of later generations. Bear in mind that all of our work is intended to actually 'work' so the individual wooden elements of models are not merely cosmetic but doing the same job as their life size counterparts. The importance of doing this is easy to emphasize. Here we have a situation where the genuine artefact still exists and the model can be precise. I say this because, having worked the Theatre Royal Bristol before its machinery was removed I have a sneaking suspicion that the model displayed in the foyer is not absolutely correct in all detail!

We have also been able to make detailed drawings of both the Dress and Upper Circle cantilever systems and a model of the Dress Circle steelwork. This was possible because by April 1984 the architects and builders had extended their exploration of the theatre's structure beyond test holes dug in the basement and had made access into some of the building's voice spaces. This led to our undertaking a detailed study of the

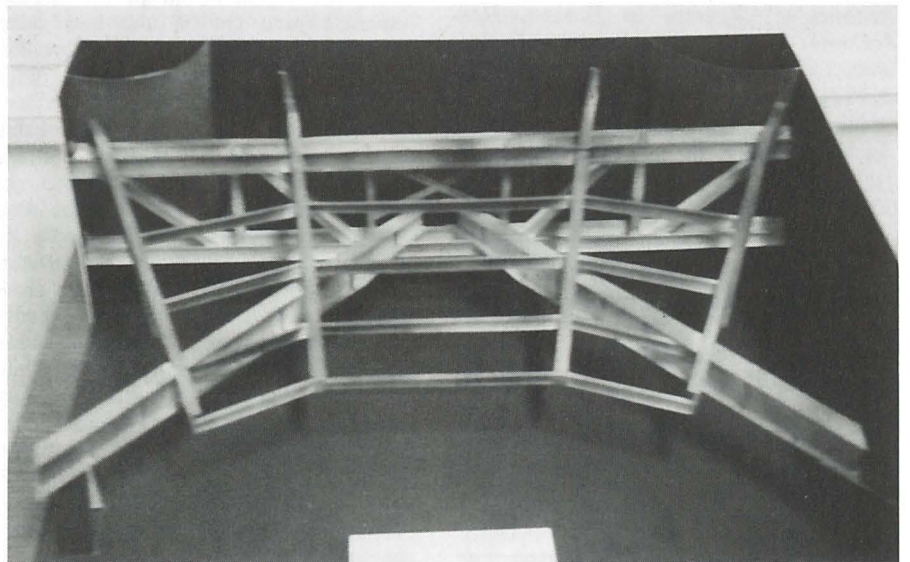


*Researcher inside Upper Circle cantilever taking measurements.*

support system for the Dress and Upper Circles. This is a relatively early example of cantilevering. The students crowded into both the cantilever areas dragging measuring tapes behind them as well as photographic equipment. I can only say that I have rarely seen such dirty people! This model is made of card sliced by a guillotine and then fabricated into the various sizes of steel beams. The beams are then glued together and given the faintest hint of black spray paint.

The real value of the cantilever model is as a teaching aid to explain one of the most significant technical advances made available to designers of auditoria. Which soon became one of the watersheds in the history of theatrical buildings.

The grid of the Playhouse also provided fodder for investigation. We had procured copies of drawings prepared by the GLC architects Dept one of which showed the



*Model of the cantilever steelwork supporting the Dress Circle at the Playhouse Theatre, Charing Cross, installed 1905. Girders are made of white card with a fine black spray applied. The black card at rear and right represents the brick walls of the building.*