

# A SWAN FOR THE AVON

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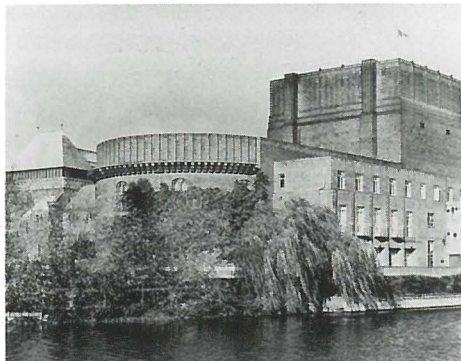
At five minutes to showtime, the Swan Theatre crackled with the buzz of expectancy as I crossed her threshold to find each individual of a full house already absorbed into that corporate identity which enables an audience to properly assist at a performance. The Swan is a throbbing vital place whose intimacy will cherish actors when they are sincere but expose them when they are not.

The Swan achieves an ambience that is

totally different from, but parallel to, the great days of fibrous plaster. It is a very simple space, but totally without that bleak neutrality of the black box which has debased the word 'studio'. It revels in the lightness of fresh new natural timbers set in happy juxtaposition with the old warm mellow brick shell of the original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. These timbers, including the sixteen Douglas fir trees that provide the main 27ft high support



*The original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre  
1879–1926.*



*The Royal Shakespeare Theatre's Conference  
Hall as it was in 1984.*

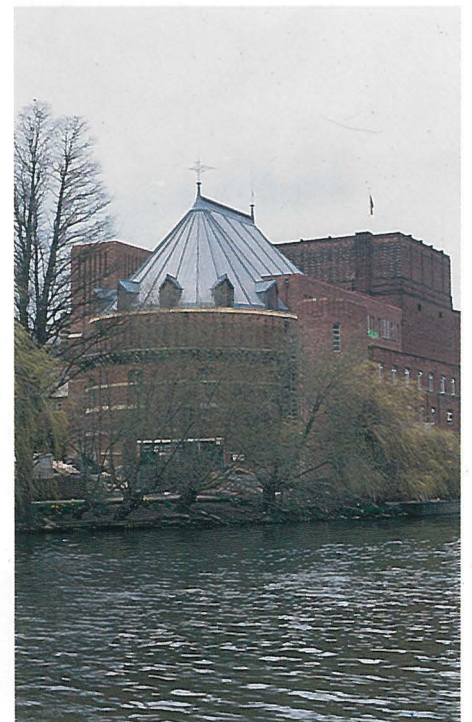
columns for the galleries, are organic. The bricks may be chemically inorganic but they have absorbed life from over a century of housing performances and rehearsals.

The original gothic revival Shakespeare Memorial Theatre of 1879 was destroyed by fire in 1926 and when Elizabeth Scott's replacement opened alongside in 1932, the shell of the old theatre was adapted as a rehearsal room, known as the Conference Hall, presumably to house Shakespeareana conferences associated with the Library and Art Gallery which had survived the fire and have now become foyers and bars for the new Swan.

These refurbished areas will also continue to house the RSC collection of paintings, costumes, props and ephemera. There will be a series of exhibitions, the first one illustrating the progressive changes in staging from the mediaeval performances through to those of today. I had a quick peek at this when it was nearing completion and my appetite was whetted to return shortly wearing my theatric tourist hat — report to follow in a future Cue. The collection will be open during the day to paying visitors, but the Swan's audience will have free access during the intervals.

The Swan sets out to capture the spirit of the jacobean theatre rather than attempt a historic reconstruction. The aim has been to recreate a relationship between audience and players that is as close to the original as can be possible within today's requirements of safety and expectations of comfort.

The Swan is in courtyard form with audience seated at ground level and in shallow galleries wrapping around three sides of the deeply thrusting stage. Audiences in the galleries of a courtyard like to lean forward and indeed their responding



*The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon  
February 1986.*