

committee but the Beaumont is a handicap rather than an asset in its present form: the statistics of 22 years' endeavour show failure is more likely than success for any production opening in this house. The Olivier has proved equally intractable for the actor. Successes that sit well in this indoor Greek arena, such as 'Pravda' and 'Antony and Cleopatra', are in the minority. Once again this is the consequence of a committee approach. Michael Elliott, who was on that building committee, recalled "those endless and agonising meetings. . . every illustrious and experienced voice spoke in a different language not only from his fellows but different from his own the month before or the month after." The problems are different at the Barbican which with its wide stage and perfect sightlines lacks any of the faults of the much maligned but strangely enduring main house at Stratford-upon-Avon (1932, modified in 1951, 1962, 1976 and almost every year since). The Barbican would be fine if the taste of today was for the epic theatre of the 60s when it was conceived (which it isn't) and the economics to today's salaries and subsidies likewise (which they aren't to the extent of calling to question the RSC's continuing tenancy of the Barbican).

Whose fault? Not the architect's since the Barbican now is exactly the way Peter Hall and John Bury wanted it to be when they sketched the design in 1964/5/6 in the light of their rightly successful production of 'The Wars of the Roses' at Stratford. Nevertheless the theatre profession generally prefer to blame the architect. They are fond of quoting such buildings as Frank Lloyd Wright's Kalita Humphreys Theatre, Dallas (1959) which has come in for more than its share of scorn at the very real impracticalities of its design. And yet if the theatre profession is to seek out the failure of the 60s then perhaps their keenest criticism ought to be reserved not at the obvious shortcomings of the prestige houses but at the third and fourth categories of building, the routine committee commissioned and committee designed campus theatres or repertory houses and the monstrous all-American multi-purpose theatres. For here it is their blandness and their very practicality which in the end may be more damaging than the eccentricities or excesses of the earlier category.

The architects did what they were told. The owner committees asked for low cost back stages and a bit of glamour in the front of house and this is what they got. In the auditorium itself the consultants arrived with their new sciences and their wild promises. Here the analysis of failure is more complex.

Catalogue of Error

The acoustician, more evident than in America than in Britain, promised the moon. "While the term multi-purpose is still often taken to imply second best, a size-

able number of first rate facilities can be rapidly changed to accommodate a variety of events from music to drama by the use of such devices as moveable walls or ceilings, demountable orchestra shells and adjustable sound absorption. It is easily possible to shift the emphasis from romantic to baroque during a brief intermission and, three or four hours later, to have a stage fully rigged for drama or opera" — Richard Talaske, Ewart Wetherill and William Cavanagh in 'Halls for Music Performance', 1982. This is acoustics as alchemy. With a committee that wanted a building that would be all things to all men, it is small wonder that the American architect dutifully embraced the acoustician and, lest he interfere with this magic, translated the acoustician's model into brick and plaster producing, well, theatres that look like acoustic models.

The acousticians have not been the only ones to get their way in the gang bang of architecture. The lighting designers dug up the ceiling. The sound men festooned the proscenium with clusters which emphasised the frame just when others are trying to escape from it. Engineers asked for the problems of stages, forestages, flying etc to be defined precisely so they could provide solutions: result the sort of massive equipment which is ideally suited to the scenography of a decade or two ago. Strangely the older pre-1920 theatres seem to take the next generation of new technology in their stride in a way the fashionable theatres of the 60s can't.

And then there were the claims of the theatre designer himself, whether he was the architect or the theatre design consultant. Asked for theatres that would serve equally for modern comedy and for classical tragedy, for Shakespeare and for the avant garde, for musicals and for two handers, for romantic illusion and the new realism, they reacted with drawings which show how theatre seating could be made flexible and the acting area adaptable. They had read the textbooks which offer two dimensional diagrams that distinguish between 'restoration', 'classical', 'Greek', 'Roman', 'thrust', 'in-the-round', etc. The consequence was those bland box-of-trick black boxes in which wedges of seats were certainly moved around but only to produce the same bland effect in different permutations.

Reactions to 'modernism'

This somewhat jaundiced view of design by committee has left to the last ingredient 'X' which drained most theatres of the 60s of any character whatsoever. This was 'modern architecture'. Today it is easy to deride the brutalism of a quarter of a century ago but it must be remembered that the functionalist architect of this age just past was an honourable man, true to his materials and with vision of the future that ought to be. He had studied the European 'bauhaus' and 'villes radieuses'. Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Norman Bell Geddes shaped his vision, usually through projects

rather than actual buildings. Add a whiff of socialism in Europe and the WPA movement in America with their emphasis on the 'democratic' single tier, (where only those more democratic than others who sit at the front have any contact with the performance), and, presto, decoration is banished because of its frivolity, multi-layered forms because of their social divisiveness and no back bone remains to resist the claims of all those functionalist consultants.

Small wonder that in Britain and America the truly innovative theatre people retreated either into renovated old theatres (in Britain more new plays came out of the 1888/1952 Royal Court Theatre seating 442 over the years 1956-1986 than from any new theatres) or into 'found space' which they adapted into small cohesive theatres devoid of architecture (though it must be said that a few wise architects lowered their profiles, pretended to be the maintenance man and cunningly injected some style into otherwise prosaic conversions). Pre-1920, pre-committee theatres apart, it was the garages, railway sheds, gasometers, munition factories and any old warehouses which were preferred to anything the modern architect could offer. It is said that at one of those building committee meetings of Britain's National Theatre the irate architect challenged Peter Brook with the question: 'I suppose you would prefer a bomb site in Brixton to anything I could design?' Peter Brook: "Yes".

So much for the 60s, now for the 80s. Can we detect in more recent buildings any difference? Immediately we run into the problem of the lack of perspective. Theatres cannot be judged as a success or failure as theatres until at least 5 years have passed, something to be remembered when most accounts of new theatres which are entered in the second book are no more than "puffs" from owners' or architects' PR offices during the opening weeks. Hence, while we can judge the 60s and perhaps agree with Michael Elliott, it is more difficult to assess the present. Inevitably for anyone who is in the thick of these things one can only exchange a historical perspective for a personal perspective, trying all along to keep the bias of one's own taste under some control.

The recent past

This used to be difficult for the advocate of what was labelled 'the courtyard' movement. (The labelling was deliberate and took place in the opening year of the Cottesloe in 1976 when a label seemed to be the best way to attract attention.) There was opposition. An article in the USITT Theatre Design & Technology issue of summer 1978 "Old and New: The Rejection of the Fan Shaped Auditorium and the Reinstatement of the Courtyard Form" called down the wrath of George Izenour on the author and on the other 'romantics' — his word — who sailed with him. A later article in the Architectural Record of June 1984 "Putting