

At The Court of King Cotton

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The first performance at the Royal Exchange by the 69 Theatre Company in 1973 was inside a temporary tent theatre costing £8,000 to build, and designed by Laurie Dennett. The tent was a 450 seat temporary scaffolding structure initially put up for only three weeks. Its success was so great that it remained for nine months playing to capacity houses until the insurance companies refused insurance.

This was half way through the design process for the theatre that is now built there, it has cost a million pounds, and was opened by Lord Olivier on 15th September 1976. The 69 Theatre Company is now the Royal Exchange Theatre Company and started life at the 200 seat University Theatre in Manchester. This episode in its history, which goes back even further to the 59 Theatre Company and the Old Vic, is important in that it was from these back streets that the 69 Theatre Company was able to persuade the Arts Council, the local authorities and the public to support and finance a theatre which it wished to build within the then disused Royal Cotton Exchange.

This building, which is situated right in the city centre, was originally the nub of the cotton trade of England and possibly the world. The main floor area of the hall within which the theatre is situated (and which is only half the original size) still comprises 1½ acres of parquet flooring, three glass domes up to 37 m high, and relatively crude mock Victorian decorations. This unlikely choice of a site for a new major regional theatre was suggested by a great friend and supporter, P.Q. Henriques. As the story goes, the inspiration came to him while he was lying in his bath following the rejection by Manchester City of our proposal to build an impressive multi-million pound theatre on a virgin site.

Richard Negri, then head of Wimbledon School of Theatre Design and now one of the Artistic Directors of the Company, was asked to conceive a way in which this space could be used. From his work at Wimbledon and the University Theatre, his long association with the Company and because the new theatre was to be a "temporary" building (only a 25 year lease) he was able to lead us into a situation of designing a theatre to perform in *now* without too great a concern for our grandchildren.

I hope this partly explains why the theatre contains many intentional limitations in the conventional sense and why we chose architects and engineers who had not worked on a public building before. (At one stage we were in discussion with engineers who designed cranes and the landing gear for lunar modules.)

The theatre comprises a theatre module suspended within the Cotton Hall, a magnificent foyer totally surrounding it, and

full front of house and production facilities which have been moulded into adjoining existing areas (the workshops have replaced and take no more space than the original loo's—only gents at that time!).

THE THEATRE MODULE

The term module grew affectionately during the long design process because it is the heart of the project and its distilled nature contrasts with the rest of the building. It is theatre in the round based on a seven-sided figure and seating up to 740 people. There are six rows of seats on the ground floor and two rows each on two balconies, no seat being further than 9 m from the stage.

The original intention was to support the balconies from the floor; however there are shops and arcades beneath and it was found that the structure of the main building would

Regulations lay down that the structure of a "building" must be clad in, or constructed from, fire resistant material, and also demands that the public must be able to exit *directly* to the open air in case of fire. There was a conflict in the mind of the City Building Surveyor as to whether the theatre module or the existing Royal Exchange was the "building". He eventually decided it was the theatre module. As we were neither able to protect the structure due to weight considerations, nor able to provide a direct means of escape for the audience, we applied to the Department of the Environment in London for a relaxation of these regulations. This was agreed on condition that the hall around the theatre became a fire-safe area. All fixtures and fittings in this space had to be made from inherently non-inflammable material, the adjoining spaces had to be separated by fire resistant walls and



not take the extra load in this way. Consequently there is now an elaborate outer structure to the theatre which is taken back to the four main columns in the hall via four small polished steel bearings. This in turn supports a roof structure, a little like a bicycle wheel principle from which the balconies are hung on only 25 mm thick rods. As a bonus there is now very little interference with sightlines by the structure.

It is perhaps appropriate to mention fire regulations and precautions at this point.

protected by both heat and smoke detectors. At one stage we found this situation financially crippling, but it now means that there are very few conditions placed on materials that we can use on stage. Even though we do not have an iron curtain this freedom is unusual to open stage theatres in this country.

The module is enclosed in clear glass, there is therefore a close relationship between the inside and the large outer area, and it is possible to affect the atmosphere