



by John Wyckham.
Surely there can be no Theatre Consultant of experience who has not had to face, at some time in his or her career, the problems posed by the title of this piece? In the United Kingdom particularly, recent years have seen a scaling down in the theatrical aspirations of many local councils faced with trying to provide leisure amenities for their rate-payers during a period of serious recession.

GOOD FOR ALL OR G

PURPOSE built theatres and concert halls are few and far between, being generally too expensive for consideration by all but the largest district or city councils. So, there has been an up-surge in the demand for multi-purpose theatres, halls, studios – call them what you will! Councils facing up to the problem of whether or not to build at all frequently make their decision to proceed in the firm belief that by using the word “multi-purpose” the resultant building will become a panacea for both political and artistic success. Many are ignorant of the complexity of modern regulations relating to the construction and management of places of public entertainment and tend to relate to the halls (often 60 or more years old) presently existing in their boroughs.

Happily Dartford Borough Council was quite exceptional when, in 1977, it voted in the most general terms to proceed with the building of a much needed Civic

Hall, where none had previously existed. Apart from wild guesses as to its logical seating capacity (some said 3,000, others 300) and pressures from some members for a flat floored hall with a platform at one end, none really knew what was wanted. However, all were agreed that the best way to proceed was to go and look at some other local authority halls and theatres, and to learn something of the “do’s” and “don’ts”, their successes and failures, from their opposite numbers in other boroughs.

Mindful of possible carping criticism from their electors, and charges of “wasting the rate-payers money”, the decision was taken to limit these proposed visits to those buildings which could be reached from Dartford, by coach, in a single day. At this juncture, their appointed Architects, Building Design Partnership under the leadership of partner Bill Jack, approached John Wyckham Associates to assist in arranging these visits. Thus we

became involved, and were later commissioned to assist in writing the Architects’s Brief and to join the BDP Design Team as Dartford’s Theatre Consultants.

Dartford had no theatre, no cinema, nor any hall in the Borough which could seat more than about 400, and the best of these was privately owned. For municipal banquets, receptions and the like the Borough Council had frequently to resort to hiring accommodation in Gravesend, or elsewhere. The outline Brief from the Council to its Architects was naively simple and straightforward – design us a Civic Hall of sufficient size to meet our needs and capable of hosting everything from ballet to banquets!

Then came the difficult bit – attempting to rationalise this oversimplified and all embracing Brief to ensure that the resultant building succeeded as a multi-purpose one where so many others had failed. The rest is history, and time alone will tell if we have found a

formula for enduring success. As I write ‘The Orchard’ as it was renamed after the administrator was appointed (Colin Bissett take a bow for persuading the Council to drop ‘Civic Hall’), has been open some seven months and the word is that, whilst it is living up to the hopes and aspirations of virtually all who were behind the original decision to build, it has exceeded the expectations of many.

So! what has been the secret of our apparent success? Have the pitfalls of the past been avoided? Have vast quantities of expensive machinery and modern technology been incorporated? A qualified “Yes” and “No” to the last two of those questions is appropriate, although I hasten to add that, apart from necessary changes resulting from a different site, there are things which we would want to change if we were invited to copy the building elsewhere for another client.

It would be extremely tedious to explain here the often traumatic