

Bracknell, Berkshire

THEATRE

By Iain Mackintosh,
Theatre Projects
Consultants



Above: the auditorium in its flat floor promenade format here in use for a community dance class. Below: Palfi the clown entertains the first audience to sit in the Wilde at the acoustic test in March 1984.



Client: South Hill Park Trust
Architects: Levitt Bernstein Associates
(partner in charge: Axel Burrough, job architect: Ron Bayliss)
Theatre Design Consultants: Theatre Projects Consultants
(director in charge: Iain Mackintosh, project leader: John Whitaker)
Structural and Building Services Engineers: Ove Arup & Partners
Acoustic Consultant: Dr. Frank Fahy
Quantity Surveyors: Monk Dunstone Associates
Main Contractor: Wickens & Sons Ltd.

Lighting Control: Duet
Luminaires: Harmony spotlights
Prelude spotlights
Coda cyc/backlights
765 followspot
Dimmers: Permus and Environ



The auditorium from the stage. Lighting bridges form an attractive ceiling and provide access to good spotlighting angles.

century picture frame of illusion. The courtyard form also appeals to two groups of people world wide: those who wish to free theatre from the confines of the proscenium and those who must use their theatre buildings for all sorts of other activities from musical events through to exhibitions, dances and other events demanding a flat floor.

Three things make the courtyard form increasingly attractive to planners of a forward looking arts centre; first the way in which the central area can be raised to stage level providing a large expanse of flat floor; second the theatrical opportunities of providing a range of staging possibilities from conventional proscenium at one end of the yard to arena in the centre; third the fact that each member of the audience is partially aware of the presence of other members of the audience as well as of the performance constantly reminds all that they are present at (the French say "assister à"), a live performance, be it of music, poetry or drama rather than sitting passively in the dark facing a framed picture.

These are the reasons why the courtyard form is attracting so much interest and why although it may appear innovative when compared with the usual straight row single-rake "little" theatre it is in fact a return to older and more durable traditions

Presenting the Prospect Theatre Company in 125 theatres in 21 countries from 1961 to 1973 gave Iain Mackintosh a unique perspective when invited by Richard Pilbrow to join Theatre Projects Consultants in 1973. Theatres for which Iain Mackintosh has been theatre design consultant include: in Britain Eden Court, Inverness (1976), the Cottesloe (1977), Loretto School (1979), The Tricycle (1979) and James Allen's Girls' School (1983); in North America the remodelled St Lawrence Centre, Toronto (1983) and the Martha Cohen Theatre, Calgary (1985), and in Europe Twentse Schouwburg, Enschede, Holland (1985). Restorations include the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds (1964), Theatre Royal, Nottingham (1978), the Opera House, Buxton (1978), the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith (1979) and, currently being planned or in construction, the Playhouse Charing Cross, a mid 19th Century theatre also in Enschede, the Academy of Music Theatre, Virginia and the Monument Nationale in Montreal.

of live performance. In the recent past we could afford the luxury of single purpose fixed theatres, now the stimulation of having to design more versatile spaces leads to the creation of spaces such as this, which not only can "do other things" but may well be better and more lively theatres.

Also included in the February 1981 study were sketches drawn by Paul Jenkins. The theatre envisaged by the theatre design consultants working closely with both client and architect, compares remarkably well with the theatre as completed three years later.

At the end of the job four years later, the theatre design consultant can also report that this was a remarkably happy and tightly knit design team under Axel Burrough's captaincy which produced a building on time, in April 1984, and to budget. That this was a very tight budget (final account £1.3 million) is demonstrated by the fact that the principal criticism is the usual one that results from being unable to afford a forestage elevator or other mechanical devices, the process of altering forms being inevitably labour intensive. There are in the job a few design consultant's 'extravagances' but these were minimal in cost such as the 'reefer' curtain in place of draw tabs and the low voltage house lights clustered round the main columns. Generally this is a cheap and cheerful theatre designed to serve the whole community. ■