

Ticket to Ride

A report by ANTHONY McCALL on new ways of selling theatre-going in New York and London.

The air is thick with new ideas to improve efficiency of ticket sales and pull in dwindling audiences to the starved West End theatres. This autumn alone promises such major changes as a half-price ticket booth, probably in Leicester Square, and the introduction of computerised systems into one or two major box offices. Both, in their own ways, are landmarks, if not revolutions.

They are not the first and will not be the last innovations we shall see in the gradual transition from old-fashioned methods to new. And their effects are likely to be more far-reaching than is perhaps realised. But before looking closely at the innovators and why and where we need changes, let's look at the picture to date. The regions, as usual, are also developing novel solutions to their individual problems, but more of them later.

Things began to get organised when Vincent Burke, one of the Society of West End Theatre's deputy secretaries, returned from a working holiday in New York last year. His report pricked their imagination and the Society asked for more detailed information, giving him six months and a separate office along from the Albery Theatre stage door. His story is largely that of Broadway's rejuvenation: how they fought the odds with self-help and a co-operative effort.

The Broadway story's merit is in its simple clarity: the problems were identified, discussed and solved. Many aspects of the story remain unique to Broadway, because life in New York is different from London. But there are strong parallels.

Vincent Burke returned to New York to delve deeper into detail. He found that even on its new firm footing, the League of New York Theatres and Producers still considers it has a vital marketing role to play.

'Five to seven years ago, Broadway was considered dead' begins Burke, with the confidence of a doctor who knows he will cure his patient. 'Under 10 theatres were open in the summer then; last year that went up to 28. The producers knew they had to attack the problem all together.

'There were a lot of accidental factors in Broadway's revival,' he adds. 'The Musicians Union strike which closed down the Great White Way made New Yorkers realise the theatres' contribution to the city. Restaurants, hotels, taxis, general transport all suffered badly. Even the authorities woke up to their importance.

The director of New York tourism wanted to increase his budget from the New York State Legislature, at around the same time. So he put the lion's share of his annual sum, \$400,000, into research, which turned up the fact that most visitors came for the theatres. His budget rose to an

astronomical \$8m overnight, adopting the slogan 'I Love NY'.

'Another discovery was the demographic changes in the average theatregoer: most audiences were younger, better educated and very aware of theatre.'

It did not take long before the image-makers were transforming New York and its theatres into a fresher, more vital entity. Television commercials focused on Broadway, pushing attendance up by 20%, according to Burke.

After its new image, it was the turn of the 'physical' face-lift, especially the scruffy neighbourhood around 42nd Street (the porno heartland). 'The area was filthy. So the Schuberts paid for the salaries of four extra street cleaners supplied by the authorities. There was also a general campaign to improve the condition of the theatre interiors.

'The Theater Development Fund, a non-profit organisation, set up by the Ford Foundation and various other charitable organisations, started a number of schemes to interest the public in theatregoing. An early scheme was to subsidise worthwhile productions during the first two to three weeks of their run. By buying up 4,000 - 8,000 tickets for \$6.50 and selling them to

an eager public for \$4.50, a subsidy of about one third, producers could rely on a hard-core audience for the first sensitive weeks. It also boosted word of mouth - a vital factor.

'The TDF never stopped a bad show going down, but it provided a breathing space. These voucher sales definitely increased audience attendance. From its inception in 1967, the TDF's role grew until in the mid-seventies, it introduced the TKTS booth: the half-price ticket centre sited in Times Square. It was very controversial at first, as it was in London. But it helped and gradually grew. It sold 400,000 tickets in its first year. By last year it had shifted \$1.3m worth of tickets, bringing the grand total to \$12m.

'Advertising has become important. Until 1974-75 it was used occasionally. Methods were unadventurous. Then Pippin's producer decided to pep them up. Bob Fosse choreographed a one-minute piece with Ben Vereen and two gorgeous girls dancing a number from the show. Producers now don't dare *not* to use TV ads. This places another burden on producing costs, but it works. It also targets the audience. You can pick ethnic minorities, young people or whatever



NEW YORK. 'Annie' - the kids' show that good merchandising turned into a little cult.