



Within whose magic tents

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Since its inception in 1972, Bubble Theatre Company has played to over a quarter of a million people, presenting 40 shows in most of the 32 London Boroughs, covering an area of 610 square miles. This outstanding success has been due largely to the portable structure itself: its original appearance and its informal atmosphere, together with its ability to be erected almost anywhere, have helped to break down the psychological barriers which inhibit the vast majority of people from going to the theatre. In every borough, the Bubble audiences represent a genuine cross-section of the community, which is rare in or outside Greater London.

However, this theatrical version of taking the mountain to Mohammed poses special technical problems and 'touring' takes on a new meaning when it involves touring a theatre as well as a repertoire of plays. From the outset of the venture, which was initiated by the Greater London Arts Association, Glen Walford, the first Artistic Director, was adamant that to avoid the technical problems which arise when playing in cold and draughty council halls, the company needed its own portable structure which could be erected in parks and on any small open space. At least this guarantees that one has a standard performing area and the same back-stage facilities wherever the company travelled to.

The original structure used by the Bubble was designed by Polyhedral Developments. It was made from nylon reinforced P.V.C.

and was erected over a tubular steel framework with steel sides. Covering an area of 845 square feet, it held up to 110 people. The structure was made up of individual domes joined together which formed a clover leaf with the stage in the centre. A second identical structure was linked to the main 'Bubble' by a covered walkway and was used to provide refreshments and other Front of House facilities. The experiment of touring a theatre to London communities proved to be an immediate success and by 1974 it was decided that to increase the seating capacity, a totally new structural concept was needed. A firm of architects, Castle Park Dean Hook, were employed and in due course the tent which is in use today was developed. The Polyhedral Structure was acquired by the Christchurch-based Balloon Theatre Company.

The present structure is called a 'Tensi Dome' and it was originally designed in Sweden by Barracadaverken. The Tensi Dome is a frame supported structure in which cloth and arches interact to form a self-supporting weatherproof enclosure. The dome consists of two tubular steel arches and a P.V.C. coated polyester fabric cover, tensioned over these arches, and anchored to the ground by over 80 3-foot earth pins. The external arches are inclined at an angle of 45 degrees to the ground level, and the centre section is mounted between them. Owing to the weight of the arches and the anchorage to the ground, the central section acquires an advantageously curved shape which completely takes up

loads and transmit these to the arches. The inclined arches are anchored to the ground by means of a cloth stretched outwards with a maximum inclination of 60 degrees to ground level, and also by means of steel wires extending from one-third divisions of the arch to the corners of the ground anchorage.

The Bubble also use a smaller Tensi-Dome as a bar tent and display area, which is 1:4 smaller than the main tent. In both tents, the cloth and wires are dimensioned so that each Tensi remains steady when there is a full load even if one of the short sides is dismantled or if the cloth is damaged. The central section of the dome is also supplemented by safety wires.

In many ways the Barracuda structure serves the Bubble's purposes extremely well. It provides an internal space of 250 square metres which is completely clear. There are no supporting poles which would interfere with sightlines, as the arches and the baseplates to which they attach support the fabric. The cover itself meets the appropriate Council and British fire-resistant standards, and it is a striking bright yellow on the outside, and its dark green inside blanks out daylight. However, it does present practical problems when one considers that it has to be moved almost every week during the summer months. The Tensi-Dome is most commonly used as a cover for tennis courts and it was not custom-designed for use as a mobile theatre. It takes a crew of ten men the best part of 24 hours to move it from one site to another.