

# Self Help Seagull

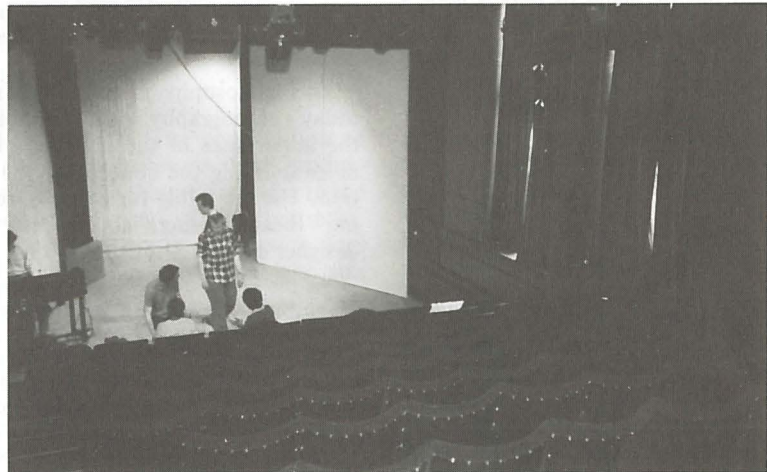
There are not many new theatres opening in Britain this year. And not many foundation stones being laid either. Nor is there much funding available for plushy conversions. £30,000 is not what it was, and by the time these words are printed it will be even less. But £30,000 is the cost of a new theatre that opened this spring. It is called the *Seagull Theatre* because it is in Lowestoft.

A few miles up the coast in Great Yarmouth, the seaside spectaculars continue to give television stars their annual live exposure in a format that will soon become the victim of its integral self-destruct production approach. In smaller subtler Lowestoft, apart from a cosy remnant of an earlier seaside style at the curiously named *Sparrow's Nest* theatre, there is a newish harbour-side pavilion always apparently searching for an entertainment idea, and a couple of fly towers playing bingo. There is a Georgian fragment and, until quite recently, a car park wall carried the unmistakable imprint of an Edwardian gallery stair. So although there is a theatre tradition in Lowestoft, the town has been without a playhouse since the folding of weekly rep at the Theatre Royal a couple of decades ago.

The *Seagull* has restored drama to Lowestoft and, in the words of co-director Patrick Redsell *will offer not only events at Lowestoft but a major programme of activities in the schools, towns, and villages of the area, drawing together the skills of groups of local amateurs who will work closely with the small team of part-time staff.* Patrick Redsell is Drama Adviser to Suffolk County Council and the *Seagull* has been created within Education Department premises. It is a conversion of an 1895 Board School – a very typical example of Victorian educational architecture. The *Seagull* functions as a community theatre.

For amateur drama it not only provides a home but acts as a catalyst. It mixes these amateur productions on a 50:50 basis with professional drama drawn from the best of the small alternative theatre companies on the small scale touring grid.

The theatre has been formed from a room 15ft high, 21ft wide, and 60ft long. The stage occupies 24ft of this depth and is at floor level. The stepped auditorium has 108 seats in 12 rows of alternative nines and tens to allow staggering for sightlines. Lighting bars are positioned to give good angles and there is a surprisingly spacious lighting and sound control room at the rear



of the auditorium. The theatre opened with a couple of 18-way 2-preset boards but will shortly get a 48-way, 3-preset, 3-group dipless x fade Eltec desk. The lighting instruments are CCT Minuettes (20 fresnels and 8 profiles) plus 8 Furse JFR. It is good to see, particularly in an education authority building, 137s relegated to just about the only job that they were ever really fit for: houselights.

The foyer is theatrically red and has a huge mirror facing the doors to give a simple but dramatic illusion of space. There is an exhibition area and essentials like box-office and bar. On receipt of a small donation, the Seagull logo will not only fly, but pelt the punters with polo mints. Cupboards in the exhibition area rather surprisingly house the dimmer packs giving a conveniently accessible patch.

One large ex-classroom presently serves as dressing room, green-room etc. It is hoped that funds will eventually become available to divide it both horizontally and vertically.

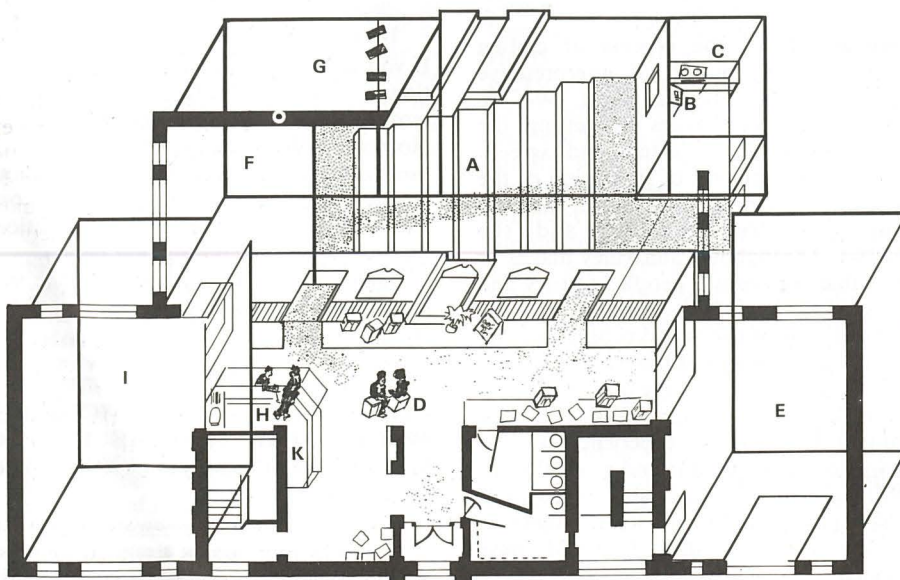
The rambling nature of the old school building has enabled accommodation to be found for ancillary activities such as administration, lighting and costume hire, sound studio etc. And there is a drama studio the same size as the main theatre. Indeed there has been a drama centre for some years prior to the conversion of the *Seagull Theatre* itself and so the building is already established as a centre of theatrical expectation.

The *Seagull* cost £30,000 and was funded in the following way:

Suffolk County Council Education Department .....	30%
Business Sponsorship .....	25%
Waveney District Council Lottery Fund .....	20%
The Larter Group .....	15%
Gifts, Grants & Individual Contributions .....	10%

Donations included a fire escape made by a local shipbuilders and bar furniture made by local high school pupils. Wherever possible local firms were used – not just builders but Norfolk theatre technology specialist firms like *Eltec* and *Ancient Lights* who have now become East Anglian specialists in the renovation of *Ancient Seats*. Painting was by a Manpower Services Commission Youth Opportunities Scheme. And there was a lot of Do-it-Yourself by a lot of enthusiastic volunteers.

It takes more than a recession to stop anyone determined enough to build a theatre.



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|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| A) 100 seat theatre | E) Workshop      | I) Dressing Room/Green Room |
| B) Lighting Control | F) Stage cloth   | K) Box office               |
| C) Sound Equipment  | G) Lighting Grid |                             |
| D) Foyer            | H) Bar           |                             |

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