

One Year On

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Amidst all the criticism that has been levelled at some aspects of the Barbican Centre, the Theatre has remained relatively unscathed. The main auditorium in particular seems to have acquired a reputation as something of a haven in a troubled sea. Before going on to look at the areas that work less well and to speculate as to the reasons why, it is perhaps worth recording why the auditorium has remained such a particularly successful element in the Centre.

The answer lies in the very close co-operation that existed between the RSC as the eventual user of the Theatre and the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. The Corporation of the City of London, as the clients, should be congratulated for allowing this dialogue to go ahead with the absolute minimum of interference. The compliment to Sir Peter Hall and John Bury, the Artistic Director and the Head of Design at the RSC during the key period of 1964-1968, and who fronted the RSC contribution to the design, is that, when the time came, Trevor Nunn, the present RSC Joint Executive and Artistic Director, asked for only one basic change to the stage format, which related to the forestage side access areas. And there is only one major regret as to the final stage auditorium relationship, being that the recent RSC production style has been inclined to wrap the audience more round the edges of the stage than would ever be possible at the Barbican, where the line of the safety curtain, being in the front of all the acting area, precludes any real flexibility in this area.

The brief to the architects had been almost impossible — to seat an audience of 1250 — the compromise between the Corporation's desire for 1500 seats and the RSC ideal of 800 to 1000 with 120° from the point of command — 5 feet up from the front edge of the stage, with no member of the audience to be more than 65 feet from this point (60 feet from the front of the stage). The solution of the three circles with just two rows of seats in each circle, which is so much a feature of the auditorium design, was brilliant, but has finally produced the limited problems of the auditorium. To achieve the perfect sightlines to the back of the acting area required very precise sightline calculations — a slight increase in circle depth could severely affect the sightlines of the circle below. The foyer design of the Centre itself behind the back wall of the auditorium gave very limited possibilities for the cantilever required and considerable headaches to the structural engineers, Ove Arup. This all led to the construction drawings being produced to the meanest measurements possible, add to this the discrepancies in the construction, which lost some inches, and the result was not enough room to house the extremely comfortably designed stall seats and leg room at a minimum gangway width, which makes continental seating with non-tip up seats far from comfortable. The front rows of all

three circles suffered in this way, which with the total comfort elsewhere, is regrettable. The problem is perhaps less acute in the top circle (3) where the audience is inclined to lean forward in their seats to get the best view of the action, so sacrificing a little seat depth and seat back comfort is not such a loss. In the ideal world the view from this top circle is perhaps 2° too steep, according to textbook ideals, but the nearness to the stage compared with a more conventional balcony or gallery makes up for the steepness.

As far as backstage is concerned, nearly all the drawbacks stem from the structural and basic contract drawings being completed and signed and sealed as far as the RSC was concerned in 1968 with completion not achieved until 1982. The other major problems being the restrictions and limitations of the site and introduction of the second performing space, which was not part of the original concept. It was at first thought that the Guildhall School of Music and Drama facilities would be available to RSC as often as they wanted. This may have been so in the sixties, but with the great development in the theatre activities of the school, their existing facilities now hardly cope with their own performances of theatre, opera and the teaching and rehearsal process.

The Barbican Centre was always intended to be the centrepiece of the residential aspect of the whole Barbican development. The Barbican concept of a fortress and height limitations — the top of the flytower not to exceed the height of the neighbouring residential block and only the three tower blocks of flats were able to soar into the air — led to the problems of too much of the Centre being underground with very little access to daylight and the outside world. In the light of the neighbouring Whitbread development, this now seems to be a sad restriction. The interest of the RSC in a double-height flytower to assist in repertoire working added to this problem and led to the bottom level of the Theatre being at sea level, measuring 50 feet below ground level. The fortress and centrepiece aspects also led to no real entrance and extremely limited access to the site. This was a major difficulty for the contractors, John Laing, particularly as the majority of the residential development was complete before the Centre got under way.

At the time the building was planned lack of daylight for the majority was not thought to be a great drawback. Backstage conditions in most London theatres were miserable and with very few of the new provincial theatres complete with their so much improved backstage conditions, the airiness and outlook of Stratford was very much the exception. Also at this time with no Other Place/Pit style of work, the actors and stage management in particular spent very much less time in the theatre than is the present pattern. This virtual underground existence, when someone can arrive in the Theatre

before ten o'clock in the morning to leave well after eleven o'clock at night and goodness knows what the weather is like outside, is the thing that can never be solved and would be top of many users list of concerns.

Ventilating and lighting these subterranean areas has also not proved ideal. At the planning stage, cooling as an element of airconditioning was a luxury rather than the norm in this country. That the Barbican Theatre and Hall were going to be cooled was a feature item. For the rest normal airconditioning would have to suffice as an aspect of keeping down already high costs. Being a complex with a central plant room, the long runs of ducting have potential problems of drop off in efficiency and the heat gain from fresh air to outlet point adds to the difficulties. These points have been carefully monitored, airflow is certainly as it should be, but no more. This, plus the heat gain, has already led to the need for at least part cooling to be introduced in a number of areas in the Theatre and in the Centre as well. Eventually it is hoped that this partial cooling will exist in all backstage areas and in the administrative offices. Due to the heat and running cost problems of a theatre with the minimum of daylight and access to fresh air, neon lighting was the basic backstage lighting solution. This has proved to be a very trying light for long hours of rehearsal or room occupancy. In the rehearsal rooms an element of tungsten light has had to be introduced, regardless of the added heat, but in some areas such as the band box, maintenance wardrobe and wigs, daylight adjusted tubes are now in use. The RSC had of course a fair idea in advance of the electricity cost implications of the underground existence, but an electricity bill five times above that being paid at Aldwych is a hard pill to swallow.

The facilities for the actors in the terms of dressing rooms and Green Room, were based very much on Stratford and have worked out reasonably well, once one has got over the lack of daylight and the lack of cooling, now partly remedied. But with only quick-change dressing rooms at stage level and with all other dressing rooms three and four floors above stage level and four and five levels up from the Pit, the movement of



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