

Infinite Riches In A Little Room

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In 1973, Britain's new National Theatre building was well under way. Two differing performance spaces were included: The Olivier, with its 1100 seats and a thrust stage, and the Lyttleton, with 890 seats, a conventional but up to date proscenium theatre. Lack of money had cut short the design of a third Auditorium, which existed only as a bricked-up void.

The importance to the National Theatre for developing this space was threefold: the ability to host medium and small scale visiting companies (without having to share the Box-Office revenue of a larger Auditorium whilst maintaining its own company), a flat floor that could serve as a television studio, (the NT had long been eager to record its work) and a flexible space which could serve as the National's experimental Studio.

Iain Mackintosh of Theatre Projects Consultants (the Theatre Consultants for the National Theatre Building) who submitted the design study in 1973 for the development of the third space, wrote at the time of the Cottesloe's opening in 1977:

"A studio Theatre is an utterly simple space in which a performance can be given with the minimum of technical preparation". . . "A flexible space in which far reaching experiments, possibly about the very nature of Theatre, and certainly about actor-audience relationships can be made. . ." He concluded "The central issue is probably the opposing demands of simplicity on the one hand, and the demand for total flexibility on the other. . . . The Cottesloe design proposals are aimed at giving people enough, but no more than is essential to experiment. . . . Only by leaving a lot to the user can the designer of brand new theatres encourage the improvisation and the vital response to the problems of Theatrical relationship more often found only in converted premises".

The Cottesloe – a Studio Theatre? In the sense that it is an Artists' workroom – yes. Its proportions are room sized within its enclosing galleries: 32 feet 6 inches by 43 foot 4 inches. However 'Studio' and 'experimental' labels are hard to lose. Experiment with what? One pressure on any repertoire complex is to plan in such a way that its theatres offer a sufficiently diverse and interesting programme as to maintain high Box Office revenue. This emphasises the sense of suiting product to the Theatre.

A play of other than intimate proportions and of average appeal could do well in the Olivier or Lyttleton, the choice determined by availability of theatre in the season, and scenic or production style. If the product is valid and potentially exciting, but of unsure public appeal, the Cottesloe, with an end stage capacity of approximately 300, could

offer a respectable 50 performances – spread over 5 or 6 months in a repertoire calendar, with a total audience of 15,000.

The Olivier would swallow this up in some 14 performances. Experiments therefore, with the nature of text or unusual subject matter, could sensibly be served by the third smaller space – not a studio, I venture, but perhaps the neatest of three performance spaces.

"INFINITE RICHES IN A LITTLE ROOM?" were the words I read on the cover of a large plastic folder which formed my principal inheritance in 1977, on being appointed Production Manager for the Cottesloe, having spent the previous six years variously as Stage Manager and Head of Stage Operations. The folder contained Iain Mackintosh's sketches of proposed layouts for the National's as then unopened third auditorium, to be called the Cottesloe after Lord Cottesloe, Chairman of the South Bank Theatre Board responsible to the government for building the new complex.

My familiarity with the space was confined to observations in the gloom of a late night amble through steel columns, across planks and round mysterious voids, taken some months before. This cursory nocturnal glance was made in an effort to understand something of the nature of this last playhouse to be completed, and was taken half-heartedly, almost negatively, for at the time I was responsible for the scheduling and staffing of the National's stages, and had reached the point of wishing that the last theatre would never open, in the hope of getting to grips with the complexities of running the other two.

The departure of my predecessor, who had supervised the fitting out of the Theatre to designs developed by John Bury (then the National's Head of Design) Denys Lasdun (Architect), and Iain Mackintosh, meant that I was responsible for what had affectionately been known as the 'hole in the wall', it was ready for occupation, but with no immediate product, staff or management.

A policy? Yes. Peter Hall, Director of the National Theatre following Laurence Olivier in 1973, called a company meeting – and sat on what was to become the 'end stage' – as opposed to the many other performance arrangements that have been explored in the last ten years – and described his view of the Cottesloe as the Kitchen of the National, and himself as earnestly seeking the moment when he could don the chef's hat and begin the 'misen-place' for a feast that would last a generation.

The tenth anniversary of the opening on 4th March 1977, with Ken Campbell's eight

hour Science Fiction spectacular ILLUMINATUS, marks a fraction of the time it will take to understand the full nature of our young child, however, we are nearly in our teens, and our pubescent appearance is certainly not all spots.

In fact Peter Hall had to wait five and a half years for his debut as play director in the Cottesloe, for the opening of Harold Pinter's trilogy OTHER PLACES in September 1982, which won six British media awards.

Whilst it was only a part of the original policy for the Cottesloe, Peter Hall's analogy of a Kitchen – whose dishes would be served up on the National's other two stages – rang somewhat hollow until 1982 when three productions made the great leap: In December 1981, THE MAYOR OF ZALAMEA (Calderon de la Barca, Director Michael Bogdanov, Designer Stephanie Howard) moved to the Olivier, and subsequently on tour to Denver, Ohio. DON JUAN (Moliere-John Fowles, Director Peter Gill, Designer Alison Chitty) moved to the Olivier and then the Lyttleton, and subsequently to the then newly restored Theatre Royal Glasgow. In April 1983, Bill Bryden's production of A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM transferred from the Cottesloe to join the repertoire in the Lyttleton Theatre, with Robert Stephens as Oberon.

Many productions have warranted greater seat count than the Cottesloe allows, but these particular plays moved easily because they had been prepared for the end stage option, and this required virtually no alteration for the larger stages; their design did not rely particularly on a significant contribution from the architectural nature of the Cottesloe's galleried atmosphere. London's medium sized West End playhouses dating from the 1880's, offer perhaps, better physical alternatives for showing the Cottesloe's end stage work with their proscenium openings of 26 to 30 feet – (Cottesloe stage width 32 feet 6 inches) than the Lyttleton's 39 feet, and the Olivier's daunting 49 feet across the thrust stage.

A large proportion of the productions have been on the end stage layout: at the time of opening, a central pit section with eleven rows of seats surrounded by free standing metal framed seat units mimicking the appearance of the two fixed galleries above. The pit seating was arranged in blocks of three or four seats, attached by thumb screws to simple timber block rostra, rising by the row from below stage level, in four inch rises, to reach the stage level, by the back row.

This arrangement was used for the opening performances of ILLUMINATUS! Ken Campbell and Chris Langham's 8-hour adaptation of the science fiction novel by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, and the National's own first production in the Cottesloe: Stephen Poliakoff's STRAWBERRY FIELDS (Director Michael Apted, Designer Di Seymour). Neither of these productions had particularly challenged the space (simply, in the case of ILLUMI-