

the Fun Back into Functionalism and Restoring Humanity to Design for the Performing Arts", prompted a warning from acoustician and vital theatre consultant Peter George (also British born) to the architects of America that this sort of thing could damage your health. But by 1987 one could look at the work of many North American architects — Joel Barrett in Calgary<sup>(1)</sup>, Ron Thom in Toronto<sup>(2)</sup>, Ben Thompson in St Paul, Hugh Hardy almost everywhere, and, most recently, Barton Myers in Portland to see that there is a movement to reintroduce a festive three dimensional quality to theatre architecture. Add the work of Levitt Bernstein at Manchester and at Bracknell<sup>(3)</sup> in England and of Michael Reardon at Stratford<sup>(4)</sup> (The Swan, 1986) and one realises that almost all the major architects and their theatre design consultants have abandoned the cinema like geometry of the single tier, with its concomitant underpopulated sidewalls.

On the other side the commissioning committees, who are rarely fools however foolish they may seem 25 years later, do now listen, do now visit other theatres, both old and new, and do respond to empirical and aesthetic as opposed to functionalist theorising. All have learnt from the experience of restoring old theatres. Even the stage designers no longer ask for everything within twenty feet of their sets to be painted black, a 60s fashion which usually had the opposite effect from that intended, distancing rather than connecting. Technicians are less prone to fight the last war and now open their eyes to new opportunities rather than mentally re-equipping their old theatres when asked to advise on the equipment for a new one.

So far so good and yet we've got one hell of a long way to go to re-engage the support of those actors and directors who will lie down in front of a demolition bulldozer but would probably aim the thing at the offices of most architects. Nearly half a century of selling the actor short needs a lot of repair. My favourite actor's quote on a committee designed theatre is that by actor manager Balliol Holloway on the Memorial Theatre Stratford, now the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, shortly after its opening in 1932 and before it was put right in 1951: "What we eventually got when the architects, pressure groups, quacks and empirics had finished with us was the theatre, of all theatres in England in which it is hardest to make an audience laugh or cry." After acting on the stage he added: "You can just about see the boiled shirts in the front row: it is like acting to Calais from the cliffs of Dover." Later he defined more precisely the problem of "the acreage of blank walls between the proscenium arch and the ends of the circle which completely destroy all contact between actors and audience. It is doubly hard on the actor that the audience does not realise this and is aware only of the actors' comparative ineffectiveness". It is not difficult to see why actors often hate the very theatres which delight architects, technicians and acousticians.

(1) CUE 40 (2) CUE 23 (3) CUE 31 (4) CUE 41

But there are hopeful signs that performers are beginning to trust us all again. Inevitably one quotes from one's own experience. At the St Lawrence Centre, Toronto the 'modern' Greco-football stadium of 1971 was replaced, in 1983, with a 'traditional' orchestra + balcony + three boxes each side, to the general delight of the actors of this major resident company though not to the surprise of the design team which had reduced the volume of the auditorium by nearly 50% while increasing the seating capacity. At Calgary the theatres are actor friendly and the paradox that good theatres have some seats with bad sightlines while theatres with perfect sightlines are usually bad theatres has been learnt the hard way. At the Martha Cohen in Calgary director Michael Dobbin was asked earlier this year whether he would change anything in his two and a half year old theatre: he answered 'Nothing'.

Yet none of this is a cause for complacency. The new problem is rising costs. Now we must strip theatres of their inessentials and get down to the basic job of helping the actor and the audience.

### A rescue plan

I believe that Michael Elliott had the key to this: we must stop building for posterity. How do we do this?

First we must give some power back to the Director who as user is just as important as the owner committee. He or she must in return spend much more time on planning the new theatre than he does on his latest production. The Director might then take the trouble to educate himself in theatre architecture. The whole building process should also be speeded up, which it could be if the building is going to be cheaper. This means cutting down on all those endless corridors of offices for the marketing department, leaving them in another part of the town to be housed in a later addition to the main building if things go well. This means an easing up on expensive finishes, on soporific comfort in the auditorium seating, on VIP suites, etc. etc. In short it means accepting the standards of the Fringe or of off-off-Broadway rather than those of the airport hotel.

Most significantly it means a re-shaping of attitudes to flexibility in auditorium and stage design. The boast that "our" auditorium can do anything acoustically or theatrically should be examined rigorously. What is needed are more marginally adaptable theatres excellent for a few things rather than acceptable for all things. This means stopping adding flytowers to courtyards or complex forestages to proscenium theatres. It also means getting into new buildings the feeling of improvisation learnt through the conversion of 'found space'. The result should be a good theatre which can be altered substantially without resorting to dynamite when fashion changes in 10 to 15 years' time.

Easy to say? A recipe for anarchy? Maybe. But I believe that a 'loose fit' approach can be made to work providing the new buildings in which the theatrical experience is to be erected are themselves harmonious spaces. We need to re-examine those harmonies which were familiar to architects from Vitruvius to Jefferson. We need to look again at the magic of 'ad quadratum', the mysteries of sacred geometry, power of square root of 2 and square root of 3 as design tools, the purity of the double cube, etc. etc. In a space that has been designed to be elegant and harmonious in the purity of its form, theatre folk can erect their scaffolds in whatever form they choose, not insanelly inflexible in the German mechanical pushbutton sense but adaptable or even disposable after a dozen or more seasons. The freedom of theatre director and designer would lie in how they took advantage of the opportunities afforded by pure space.

The architect and his design committee of consultants should perhaps no longer try to stick their work together into a whole which gains cohesiveness at the expense of character. Rather should the architect or design consultant of the space and the stage designers of the theatre event give each other room to manoeuvre and be serviced by technical consultants who, trained to distinguish between the ephemeral and the semipermanent, ask for the minimum to be 'hard wired' or 'cast in concrete'. The commissioning committee, on the other hand, will play only if such resulting structures are substantially cheaper and vastly more exciting than those recent stone and marble monuments for posterity.

The concept of 'loose fit' architecture will only work if all of us, owners, architects and theatre people alike, reassess the mystery of the audience and actor relationship.

I've ended previous articles with a quotation from Peter Brook's "Empty Space" of 1958 and I make no apologies for using it again. It is only sad that he articulated his warning before so many bland over-finished over-mechanical theatres opened their dull doors to disenchanted audiences in the 60s and 70s. "It is not a question of good buildings and bad: a beautiful place may never bring an explosion of life, while a haphazard hall may be a tremendous meeting place. This is the mystery of theater, but in the understanding of this mystery lies the only science. . . It is not a matter of saying analytically what are the requirements, how best they could be organised — this will usually bring into existence a tame, conventional, often cold hall. The science of theatre-building must come from studying what it is that brings about the most vivid relationships between people." At last people are reacting to those words of this wisest of gurus. To judge by the 'cunningness' of his team's recent adaptation of the 1904 Majestic in Brooklyn for 'The Mahabharata', Brook has lost none of his skills at reinvigorating the twin arts of theatremaking and of theatregoing.