

Beating the Drum

RICHARD PILBROW

The Building Committee of the National Theatre were charged with the task of preparing the building brief for architect Denys Lasdun. Under the chairmanship of Sir Laurence Olivier and Norman Marshall, it included such luminaries of the theatre as Peter Brook, George Devine, John Dexter, Michael Elliott, Bill Gaskill, Peter Hall, and Tanya Moiseiwitch. Upon the death of George Devine, Sir Laurence invited me to join the committee to represent the "practical" aspects of theatre.

The committee continued to meet for months. The centre of debate was the principal theatre, the Olivier. It was already decided that it should be an open stage theatre. The second stage was to be a proscenium. An open stage was thought of as one in which the audience partially surrounded the action that took place in the same 'room'.

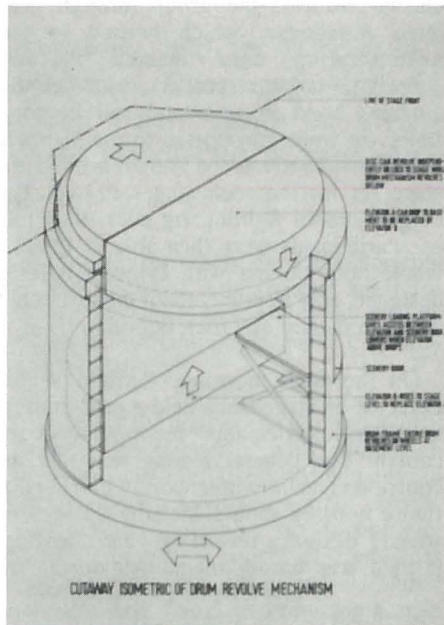
The company was then resident at Chichester, which is a poor copy of the Guthrie-inspired thrust. It is a very flat, spread out, overlarge and unfocussed space. There was a determination to avoid the most glaring faults.

Sir Laurence Olivier felt that the full 'Guthrie' thrust took the audience too far around the sides of the stage. He wished an actor at the 'point of command' (about 15-18 feet from the front row audience) to be able to see everybody within his peripheral vision (about 120 degrees). Thus the basic geometry of the room evolved. A stage set in one corner of a square.

There was intense debate about the role of scenery. Guthrie advocates argued that the open stage was for actors and text alone. At most they might be supported by costume and simple illumination. However, even in those early days of 1964, most directors working on thrust stages were striving to use effect and illusion, despite Guthrie's own antipathy.

Was the Olivier stage to be a stage 'within a room', but forever 'locked' in that room? Or should it be capable of being opened out — to 'a world beyond'. Should it be a platform for actor and the drama without the capability of visual effect? Or should it be a stage like any other that had evolved over hundreds of years; one capable of employing the scenic techniques of its time?

Lasdun's first version of the final model of the Olivier auditorium showed a concrete balcony (extending from the now familiar side boxes) running to the back of the stage, meeting in a right angle and permanently built about 14 feet above the stage. A formi-



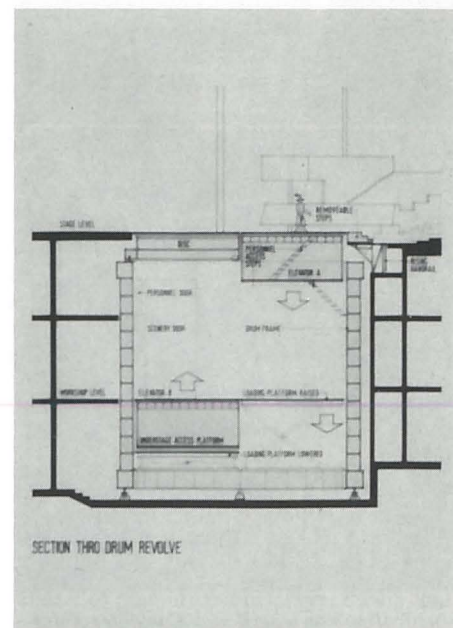
dable barrier to illusion. Half the committee praised its purity. Half expressed concern at its rigidity.

Michael Elliott spoke most clearly. "Why should our new National Theatre turn its back on centuries of evolving stagecraft? How do we know that what has been a vital part of theatre for our ancestors will not be needed again. If for a production we need a concrete balcony around the stage let us build it. But if we need the impression of infinite space, let us be able to create it". At a late night dinner in his London flat, Olivier was finally convinced. The Olivier would be a stage "within the audience" that *could* be totally confined, or one that could employ a "full scenic environment" if the play demanded it.

Some months later I was appointed the theatre consultant. The brief for the Olivier was "A modified thrust stage capable of providing a full scenic environment, **ALSO** capable of operating in repertoire with a twice daily changeover of production.

The solution took months to evolve and years to execute. It led to the world's first thrust stage with cruciform-style rear and side stages (to the limits of the constrained site), a full fly tower overhead and a most unusual understage.

At first, my partner Richard Brett and I, explored traps, modular elevators (perhaps checker-board style), bridges, revolves, and so on. With audience part surrounding the stage, a problem seemed to be that scenery, hanging or rising, **ACROSS** the stage might



not be very useful. Why would scenic elements necessarily be set at right angles to the centre line? Above the stage this led to the design of a point line flying system, that allows scenery of any shape to be hung anywhere at any angle. but below the floor, the question was more complex. Any elevator or trap system set rigidly at right angles seemed too confining.

Richard and I went to Vienna to look at the famous Drum Revolving stage at the Burgtheater. We met with Wagner-Buro, the builders of this amazing piece of theatre technology. It allows the rotation of the scenic environment. It allows a scene to be changed by lowering it into the cellar and replacing it with another from below. This seemed an interesting possibility, particularly if the audience were actually sitting around the stage. But the thrust stage we

