

Are we Finding the Right Solutions to our Touring Needs?

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Touring productions and their receiving theatres are increasingly beset with all manner of problems — financial, technical and artistic. In the first of a two-part series on the subject we look at how this state of affairs evolved, and at the issues involved.

Touring has always been a difficult problem, even a vexed question, for both the independent and the subsidised sectors. Before the 1939-45 war there was really no subsidised sector as we know it now. A few theatres in the regions (then the provinces) were supported by civic authorities but the whole touring circuit was dominated by the Moss Empire, Stoll Theatres and Howard & Wyndham managements. All the major tours were undertaken by the London producers opening shows on pre-London tours (no previews then) or touring tried London successes. If one excludes the acts touring to the variety houses, it was perfectly possible to see every London success (plays and musicals) if one lived in a town housing "No.1 tours" — Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Oxford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Newcastle, Leeds and Sheffield.

Even after the initial black-out of theatres in 1939, when touring resumed I was able to see at the Opera House and Palace Theatre in Manchester every major London success and I certainly did not feel I was deprived living in the provinces. My programmes from those days indicate that by going to the theatre once, or twice a week I could later look down the London theatre classified and mark off having seen every show (except the Windmill!).

With the demise of so many touring theatres the ancillary industries also disappeared

What need did we have even to visit London when in Manchester we had Emlyn Williams in "Night Must Fall", C.B. Cochran's "Big Top" with Beatrice Lillie, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine in "There Shall Be No Night", "Arsenic & Old Lace", John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft in "Hamlet", Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier in "Arms & the Man", Ivor Novello in "The Dancing Years", Robert Morley in "The First Gentlemen", Laurence Olivier in "Richard III", Ralph Richardson in "Peer Gynt", Robert Donat in "The Cure for Love", Noel Coward's

"Sigh No More", John Clements and Kay Hammond in "The Kingmaker", Edith Evans, John Gielgud and Peter Ustinov in "Crime & Punishment", Vivien Leigh in "The Skin of Our Teeth", "Oklahoma!" and "Annie Get Your Gun".

With the end of the war came the slow climb in touring expenses. The Arts Council had grown out of C.E.M.A. and encouraged the housing or re-housing of the large regional repertory companies. Certainly there was comparatively little money made available for touring and these small amounts were given to subsidise touring companies such as Prospect Productions. Throughout the 1950's, the 1960's and the early 1970's no central or local government funds were made available to stop the wholesale closure of the large regional touring theatres. Instead, Jennie Lee, the first Minister for the Arts, responded to the Housing the Arts Reports with financial assistance towards the building of repertory theatres in such towns as Coventry, Birmingham, Guildford, Bromley,

Farnham, Leatherhead, Bolton, Chester, Colchester, Derby, Exeter, Ipswich, Leeds, Leicester and Nottingham.

Indeed, it was only when the Arts Council recognised that there would suddenly be no theatres to which they could tour the Royal Ballet, the English National Opera, the Royal Opera, the Festival Ballet and other major opera and dance companies that they responded to the demand to save the few remaining large theatres that could house these companies. Further, the Arts Council was made to realise that opera and dance could only occupy these theatres for a comparatively few weeks each year and that something should be done to encourage product to fill the other weeks. Indeed, even today, there is only a small amount of subsidy available to encourage large-scale drama to tour. And today, of course, the cost of touring has made such ventures almost prohibitive for commercial managers (who now like to be known as "independent"), that is if you can persuade artists to tour at all with the possible conse-

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