

A LIVELY THEATRE

There's a revolution afoot in theatre design, believes architectural consultant RICHARD PILBROW, that takes its cue from the three-dimensional spaces of centuries past

The 20th century has not been a good time for theatre architecture.

In the years from the 1920s to the 1970s, the world became littered with overlarge, often fan-shaped auditoriums that are barren in feeling and lacking in intimacy—places that are seldom conducive to that interplay between actor and audience that lies at the heart of the theatre experience. Why do theatres of the 19th century feel so much more “theatrical”? And why do so many actors and audiences prefer the old to the new?

More generally, does theatre architecture really matter? There are some that believe that as soon as the house lights dim, the audience only needs to see and hear what happens on the stage. Perhaps audiences don't hiss, boo and shout during a performance any more, but most actors and directors know that an audience's reaction critically affects the performance. The nature of the theatre space, the configuration of the audience and the intimacy engendered by the form of the auditorium can powerfully assist in the formation of that reaction. A theatre auditorium may be a dead space or a lively one. Theatres designed like cinemas or lecture halls can lay a dead hand on the theatre experience.

Happily, the past 20 years have seen a revolution in attitude to theatre design. No longer is a theatre only a place for listening or viewing. There's a new recognition that theatre is also a place of feeling, emotion and participation and that the architecture must play a critical role—in a way that our ancestors took for granted.

TWO NEW/OLD THEATRES FOR DRAMA

Two new drama theatres have opened this year in New York and London. They are both restorations. In July the Selwyn, built in 1918, took off as the American Airlines Theatre, home to Manhattan's Roundabout Theatre Company. Last February, London's Royal Court Theatre, housed in a space that dates back to 1888 and home to such trailblazing English drama as *Look Back in Anger*, re-opened. Both represent high points of American and British theatre design.

And they exemplify some key differences between playhouses on the two sides of the Atlantic. Many theatres in London's West End (where my career began as a stage manager), despite their limited stages, have auditoriums that are miracles of compacted humanity. On my first visit to New York in the early '60s, I was amazed by how even more intimate the smaller Broadway theatres appeared. The English playhouse is comparatively narrow with a proscenium that rarely exceeds 30 feet in width. The auditorium is usually a deep horseshoe with overhanging balconies. Its American counterpart is much wider (perhaps a product of the land-plot ratios of New York City) with a wider proscenium opening, a shallower stage and auditorium, and a balcony very close to the stage. To the sides, angled, step-down boxes are a ubiquitous feature of an American theatre, as opposed to the horizontal boxes of the West End.

The reborn Selwyn is a fine example of its period. A proscenium theatre with a single balcony, it brings its audience into very close proximity to the stage. In 1918 the action of a play presented at the Selwyn would have been all behind the “picture frame,” a confinement that is unacceptable today; so the renovation has had to improve the sightlines to a new forestage, with an increase of rake in the balcony seating. The side boxes on both orchestra and mezzanine levels that had been removed in years past have been restored and the orchestra rake improved.

The new Royal Court is a tiny gem. Its proscenium opening is only 21 feet wide. The auditorium is very vertical, tightly wrapped with two balconies. The refurbishment has stripped away the old plasterwork and exposed the Victorian cast iron structure of the balconies and bare brick walls. This rough-hewn feeling, contrasted with luxurious new leather bench seating, creates both a feeling of a found “rough” space and enormous theatrical dynamism.

Their differences notwithstanding, these two theatres perfectly exemplify the intimacy and subtlety of design that has become typical of the finest theatres at the dawn of the 21st century.

SIR LAURENCE & THE '60S

In the 1960s there were plans to gut the interior of the Royal Court. All the balconies were to be replaced with a single rake of seating. George Devine, founder of the English Stage Company, believed—as we all did at that time—that balconies were a bad thing. Postwar British society believed in social equality, so “good” theatres had to have seating all on one level. Balconies only represented an outdated class system. Boxes with their bad sight lines were supposedly only for upper-class ladies to display their charms!

This was the atmosphere that surrounded the three great drama theatre projects of the 20th century, the National Theatre of Great Britain, the Barbican Theatre for the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Vivian Beaumont Theater at New York’s Lincoln Center.

The National had been a dream since the time of George Bernard Shaw. Sir Laurence Olivier was appointed the company’s first artistic director and design on the new building began. An architect, Denys Lasdun, was selected based on a distinguished record of modern architecture and a professed innocence concerning theatre. At his interview he confessed himself eager to be educated by the building committee. And what a committee! Sir Laurence himself, Norman Marshall, the two Peters (Hall and Brook), George Devine, Michael Elliot, John Dexter, William Gaskill, Tanya Moiseiwitsch, Roger Furse—a pantheon of the great and good in British theatre. All were determined to create a new theatre for drama that would be unsurpassed.

At first the theatre was to be adaptable from proscenium to thrust; then that compromise was dropped, and two theatres were decided upon—a flexible proscenium theatre and a new form of “modified open thrust stage.” Meetings went on for many months. Unfortunately, few members of the committee often agreed with each other, and a view expressed one week was only rarely held the subsequent one. It was very confusing to an “innocent” architect.

I was Sir Laurence’s lighting designer at the time, but upon George Devine’s unexpected death was co-opted onto the committee, apparently to provide a more “practical” viewpoint. We visited several West End theatres (like the Royal Court) with Sir Laurence and a group of actors. Sir Laurence and the rest of us ran up and down with tape measures and tried to work out how far away one could be from the stage and still experience great theatre. Sir Laurence formed the opinion that he couldn’t act to anyone seated more than 65 feet away. This dimension drove the design of both the Olivier and the Lyttelton Theatres. Never once did we think anything else about West End theatres other than: “Weren’t they shabby, restrictive to designers and unpleasant for audiences!” The new theatres eventually emerged. Their large stages and sophisticated equipment have allowed many spectacular productions since, but they are far from being intimate theatres, and small-scale drama is completely overwhelmed.

Both theatres were built to rigid geometric principles and a conviction that a limited dimension to the furthest seat was all-important. Yet those old theatres that we visited to establish this one measurement were complex and curvaceous. Most important, their design was focused less upon the distance to the furthest seat and more upon how much of the audience could be placed how close to the stage. Intimacy—both physical and emotional—was their predominant characteristic.

The Barbican was almost an improvement. It was designed, not by a camel-like committee, but by the then-director of the RSC, Sir Peter Hall, and his longtime scene designer John Bury. They completed a model that was given to the architect to faithfully realize. They were aware of the need for intimacy and used three balconies with side “ski-slope” seating, raised one above the other, each stepping forward toward the stage—theoretically good, but in practice disappointing. An audience seated in the balconies feels disquietingly suspended in space and isolated from the remainder of the audience. Even worse, to bring everybody as close as possible, the auditorium is very wide, far wider than is comfortable for anything other than spectacular productions.

By coincidence, across the Atlantic in New York a similar story was unfolding. Lincoln Center was determined to build a “state-of-the-art” theatre for drama, and the great designer Jo Mielziner led the development of its design. He argued against an adaptable thrust/proscenium compromise, but was overruled. The wonderfully intimate drama theatres of Broadway were ignored. The resultant Vivian Beaumont shares many of the problems of the Olivier. It’s too large for anything other than spectacular theatre (indeed, its principal successes seem to have been with musicals); its adaptability allows a reasonable semi-thrust; but the proscenium is very poor. The single balcony around the perimeter of the room (like that of the Olivier) feels far from the stage and disconnected from the action.

So what went wrong? Why did the greatest theatre minds of the age fail? What occurred that such brave—and important—attempts could be so flawed?

A SKIRMISH THROUGH HISTORY

A quick skirmish through theatre history might be instructive.

Conventional theatre history begins with the Greeks. Theatre then was a ritual event in which the whole of free society participated. Theatres grew in size to accommodate vast crowds. In later Rome, a debased literary form was overtaken by spectacle, and again performances took place before vast crowds.

Of course these huge buildings are the ones that have survived. Storytelling, drama, dance and music must have always taken place on a smaller and more intimate scale, in palace, clearing, village square or home.

How, in fact, does an audience gather if there is no building at all? The first spectator stands in front. Then, as more assemble, they gradually surround the performer, first in a semi-circle, then a full circle. Children will crawl through and sit on the ground at the front. As the crowd grows denser, those at the perimeter might climb into a neighboring tree or onto a balcony. What they will not do is stand in straight parallel lines, stretching away from the performer into the distance.

The theatre that spawned the greatest flourishing of drama the world has ever seen was the Elizabethan. The recent rebuilding of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London has been a triumph. The astonishing feature is the active role played by the audience, particularly the standing audience in the pit surrounded by encircling galleries packed with humanity.

Elizabethan theatres were created to nurture the plays of Shakespeare, but also those of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd and many others—perhaps the most glorious period of playwriting ever known. And this theatre form was not unique to Britain. The same period saw similar style “courtyard” theatres in Spain, France and Germany, as Lope de Vega, Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Molière created their timeless drama. Even further afield, China, Japan, Persia and India all experienced periods of great creative energy in theatres where the stage was set in a courtyard surrounded by tiered audiences. Societies around the world adopted these three-dimensional spaces, “clustering” their audiences around the performer. And great playwriting was always the outcome.

These courtyard theatres seem to represent the essence of lively theatre, bringing together actor and audience. Theatre, after all, is a place not for just looking and listening, but for participation, for joining in the creative process, for meeting. In live performance, the audience plays a vital role that we often overlook with our view of the stage from production desk or wings. An actor, singer, dancer or musician will always respond to his or her audience. Only when the audience is in the house can one have any real idea of a play's impact. As a stage manager, I vividly remember standing in the prompt corner as an actor would exit. The response would either be: "Where did you get that lousy crowd out there!" or, "Wow! We're flying tonight!" No two live performances are ever the same, and it is the audience's reaction that is often the principal difference.

For 400 years theatres gradually evolved. They moved indoors. Commercial pressures demanded more seats; even in the popular world of Italian opera, theatres grew to 2,000 seats or more—but always with multiple tiers clustered around a central courtyard with singers and actors on a forestage at one end that jutted into the auditorium. The principal action took place within the audience space.

SPECTACLE & THE PICTURE FRAME

Theatre has also always been a battleground between the demands of the word, the performer and spectacle. Generally speaking, as theatres grew larger, driven by the ever-proliferating urban audience, the demand for realistic spectacle also grew. As stages grew bigger, and with the demand for more seats, the forestage diminished, thus pushing the actor—unwillingly—behind the proscenium. For the first time, this created a theatre of two worlds, that of the audience and that of the encapsulated performer.

Only in the latter decades of the 19th century, with the development of the cast-iron cantilever, was it possible to bring balconies closer to the stage than in the traditional horseshoe-shaped opera house. The diminished forestage and advancing balconies (with the constant imperative of bringing the audience as close to the performer as possible) led to the development of the West End theatres of the late Victorian age and their early-20th-century Broadway equivalents.

But let's take one step back—and to the side—to Germany to look at a concurrent development: Just as theatre was reaching its zenith of popularity as a universal entertainment form, Richard Wagner came on the scene. Wagner was a revolutionary in politics as well as in music. He saw his mission as the artistic merging of music and drama. He seized the opportunity to build a theatre for the performance of this merger, or Gesamtkunstwerk, in Bayreuth. He wished his orchestra to be invisible, so it was lowered and placed partly below the stage. But those in the boxes could see down into this pit, so he decreed the boxes' removal, an action that also satisfied his social objective of eliminating class snobbery and visual distractions. Finally, in order that the spectator's concentration be complete, Wagner decreed that all seats must face the stage in a single level of stadium-type seating without aisles—the world's first "continental" seating format.

In Britain and the U.S. toward the end of the 19th century, serious devotees of theatre were growing frustrated with "popular" theatre, symbolized by ever-more-realistic scenery (Herbert Beerbohm Tree even opted for real rabbits in his *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Her Majesty's Theatre, London) and multi-level balconies and boxes. This dissatisfaction, coupled with the emergence of the director's coherent control of production, led to the desire for a new playhouse. Some sought a return to a simple, Shakespearean open platform; others were fascinated with the purity of Wagner's vision.

In *The Theatre of Today* by Hiram Kelly Moderwell, published in 1914, the author dismisses with "utter contempt" the ordinary "horseshoe" theatres that "make the stage partly or wholly invisible." He hails the new Wagnerian theatre, in particular the *Kunstler Theatre* in Munich, in which "there shall be no bad seats; there shall not even be any worse seats." This "amphitheatre playhouse has all its rows nearly parallel to the proscenium and its floor rising at such an

angle that every spectator can look clean over the head of his neighbor in front. A new democratic playhouse.” The Goodman Theatre in Chicago (1927) was a deliberate copy of the vaunted Kunstler. But 50 years later, enthusiasm for the frontal auditorium had waned. With hindsight, there were actually far too many bad seats—almost all those more than half way back—and the lack of encircling audience made the theatre seem more an antiseptic lecture hall than a theatre. These deficiencies will be remedied in the two new theatres for the Goodman that are about to open this fall in Chicago.

Soon the tidal wave of cinema took the revolution further. Movies captured the world’s imagination and swept all before them. In cinema design, the view to the screen has to be frontal. Intimacy is achieved with the close-up. A twinkle in the eye may be 30 feet in width, totally unlike that of the living human actor. The vestigial side boxes, still popular in the vaudeville houses that were used as early cinemas, were replaced by exuberant decoration. The triumph of movies helped the fan-shaped auditorium, with as few levels as possible (to ensure “modern” democratic seating), become ubiquitous from the late 1920s to the 1970s, completely confusing the difference between frontal cinema and three-dimensional live theatre.

Architects, engineers and theatre people were all consumed by the urge to build new “democratic” frontal-view, fan-shaped theatres. This came to be coupled with the then-fashionable simplicity of the modern architectural movement. The result has been many theatres that today seem quite dreadful: vast auditoriums with the majority of seats to the rear, entirely lacking in any intimacy or “theatricality,” and with poor acoustics to boot.

THE SECOND REVOLUTION-BACK TO THE FUTURE

But parallel to this deadening of theatre design into a cinema-like form with the audience confined to the passive role of spectators, a movement was afoot to break out from behind the proscenium. Beginning in the 1880s in England with William Poel, in France with Jacques Copeau and in Russia with a burgeoning avant-garde, experiments proliferated with thrust, arena and other forms of “open stages.” These were later taken up in the U.S. by Nina Vance in Houston and Zelda Fichandler in Washington, D.C., leading to the establishment of the Alley and the Arena Stage.

But it was the English director Sir Tyrone Guthrie who brought the thrust stage to greatest prominence. In 1936 after an outdoor performance at Elsinore of the Old Vic Company’s Hamlet was “rained-off” and quickly restaged in a ballroom, Guthrie began to realize that the thrust stage had a dynamic of thrilling potential. After the war, his work at the Edinburgh Festival was followed by the creation of the “Guthrie” thrust stages at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and in Sheffield, England. His influence was to be profound, although his original vision was almost inevitably modified and compromised.

Guthrie had an aversion to excessive scenic or lighting effects—he believed in text, actor and costume taking the stage. But few of his followers held such a puritanical view. And Guthrie, too, was a man of his time. He was influenced by the then-current antipathy to multiple balconies. His theatres either had a single balcony around their perimeter or (in his final return to his “ideal” form in Sheffield) no balcony at all. Years were to pass before the rediscovery of the multi-level courtyard form, in the Young Vic and the Cottesloe (the National’s third space), that proved that vertical encirclement has a powerful role to play in creating theatricality and intimacy. Recent thrust and arena stages set within a multi-level courtyard—the RSC’s Swan, Chicago’s Shakespeare Theater and Manchester’s Royal Exchange—combine an “open” stage within a three-dimensional auditorium.

It was the restoration of the Theatre Royal Nottingham that opened my eyes to an alternative to the fan-shaped auditorium. It was 1978. The National had just opened and was an immediate cause for disappointment. By chance I attended the opening night of An Evening with Ken Dodd (a popular English comedian) at the Theatre Royal, a Victorian ruin with two balconies that had undergone a major restoration. Only as I watched the play unfold did I

realize that this was a fantastic theatre! It was typical of all those West End and Broadway theatres in which I had worked as a lighting designer and producer. But we would never dream of building one like it anew. Why not? Its encircling balconies massed the audience incredibly close to the stage. The boxes were evidently conduits of energy between stage and audience, linking vertical levels together. It reeked of theatricality; it was amazingly intimate; it was a space vibrant with emotion. It was a revelation!

Well, other restorations have confirmed the power of the past. The Geary Theater in San Francisco and the New Amsterdam in New York are both supreme examples of exciting, reborn theatre spaces.

But nobody wants an antiquarian revival of the past. Of all the arts, theatre, music and dance are the ones most intimately wed to constant change and development. In the olden days, theatres were built of wood and plaster. They were frequently altered and remodeled to suit changing fashions of performance. Today's world of concrete and steel is less manipulable, but flexibility must remain a vital ingredient, particularly in that crucial zone where stage meets auditorium.

The 500-seat Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, a very intimate theatre, is a perfect example. Its form is "American-classic" (very reminiscent of the Selwyn), but as befits the gritty style of the company, it is finished in steel and raw concrete. The main acting area is the forestage within the auditorium, but the whole floor of forestage and stage is demountable to allow any shape or level of acting area to be created. Similarly, the new 500-seat, two-level San Jose Repertory Theatre has a highly flexible forestage zone where floor, overhead and side boxes may all be reconfigured.

At the end of the 20th century, theatres around the world are returning to the principle of clustering audiences as closely to the stage as possible—not as slavish imitations of the past, for sightlines must be improved to modern standards, but nevertheless bringing audiences into a vivid, lively relationship to each other and the stage. If theatre is to survive and flourish, it must offer audiences some unique quality—and it can: Liveliness, the interaction of live actors and living audience, is the one element that theatre alone possesses in the face of all its multimedia competition. While there is no ideal form of theatre, every type, from proscenium to experimental open-stage studio, will benefit from a dynamic relationship between actor and audience that fosters the work of playwright, composer and performer.

Peter Brook put the proposition clearly in his book *The Empty Space*: "The science of theatre-building must come from studying what it is that brings about the most vivid relationship between people." Our ancestors knew this to be true, and today we can once again build lively theatres for lively performance based upon their inspiration.

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