

Sightline

Journal of Theatre Technology and Design

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Chichester Festival Theatre

The Atkinson, Southport

Pop-Up Theatre in Southampton

The Continuing Case Against Raked Stages

Made in Glasgow

Stop Talking B*!!@*&s



Editorial

I should begin by declaring an interest in one of the venue's featured in this issue of *Sightline*. Having moved from my hometown 15 miles up the north west coast to Southport in the early 1980s quickly discovered the delights of the Southport Arts Centre. I didn't know anybody in the town but within months I was a regular in the Arts Centre bar; had become a member of the local film society, which met there every second Tuesday; and began seeing touring theatre productions. It was here also that I attended my first jazz concert, when a new young sax player, a certain Courtney Pine, played a date on what was probably his first ever tour.

It's more than 20 years since I was last in the Arts Centre and I was rather shocked therefore, when doing the picture research for the article in this issue by David Cusworth, to be reminded just how shabby auditorium was in the eighties, and as David points out, how dark and unwelcoming the lobby spaces were. It is a particular pleasure therefore to see the result of the £18 million redevelopment project. I still have a connection with the town and look forward to returning to my old stomping ground again soon.

All the refurbishment money seems to have gone on the admin offices and dressing rooms, so we have to use this old wardrobe as a crew room!



Surprising perhaps, I've never been to Chichester Festival Theatre (CFT) – in fact I've never visited the town – but having read much about the recent RENEW project and Richard York's excellent overview of the refurbishment programme here, I must plan a trip.

Although I've not been to the theatre, I am very familiar with the special history of CFT and its link to the development of the Guthrie Thrust Stage. Indeed I collaborated with two of our other contributors – Peter Ruthven Hall and Iain Mackintosh – on *The Guthrie Thrust Stage*, the publication that was published to coincide with the ABTT-backed UK entry at the Prague Quadrennial in 2011. Following a research project for his MA in Theatre Consultancy, Peter Hall in this issue makes the continuing case against the raked stage, and Iain Mackintosh, in what I hope will be a series of occasional pieces, tells the interesting tale of the Scottish contribution to the construction of a number of Brazilian theatres.

After a recent review with publisher, Entertainment Technology Press, it has been agreed to bring publication dates forward. In the future we will publish in mid-March, June, July and December and you should therefore expect to receive the winter issue before the Christmas break. We are also hoping to expand the magazine, and on the assumption that we can attract a small number of additional advertisers, the aim is to increase the number of editorial pages.

I'm grateful to those of you who have come forward with suggestions for feature articles and offers of future contributions and these will begin to filter through in forthcoming issues. But with an expanded *Sightline* there is much more opportunity for further editorial development. Do feel free to offer your thoughts.

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Chichester Festival Theatre

In 1959, Leslie Evershed-Martin, an ophthalmic surgeon and distinguished citizen of Chichester, West Sussex, watched a television programme featuring the director Tyrone Guthrie and his new open stage theatre in Stratford Ontario and said to his family, "If they can do that in Canada, why can't we do it here in Chichester?" Three years later, after discussions with Guthrie, the appointment of Powell and Moya as architects and the raising of £110,000 from the community the Chichester Festival Theatre (CFT) opened in a public park just on the edge of the city centre. Mr Evershed-Martin's chutzpa was not confined to theatre building – he recruited Laurence Olivier as the theatre's first director, thus ensuring an immediate distinction to the enterprise. It also gave Sir Laurence a test bed for his National Theatre Company, which opened at the Old Vic in the autumn of the following year.

There can be no doubt that CFT was a spectacular achievement. By 1959, theatre in the UK was generally improving. The resurgence of drama under the Angry Young Men (and women); signs of theatre building in cities such as Coventry and Nottingham; serious discussions, at last, about a National Theatre; and the move to found the ABTT all promised a new vitality. Even so, theatres were still being demolished, succumbing to old age, the loss of audiences to television, and the greed for prime town centre sites. If the decision to build a 1,400 seat theatre in a country district, whose population was about 70,000 was a bold one, then the decision to build an uncompromising thrust-stage in a hexagonal auditorium on two levels was extreme.

It is hardly surprising that so radical a design as CFT met with a mixed reception. Actors, audience and staff either loved or loathed it, although familiarity caused many to change adverse views. Critics were often waspish but even some of them softened, as the challenge of the open stage was increasingly better met. In June 1963, the ABTT recorded a talk given to the members by Christopher Stevens, one of the architects, together with other, unnamed, contributors. In the discussion that followed, the disposition of the side seating blocks, the relatively low roof, and the perceived lack of intimacy all came in for negative comment, although there seemed to be a general consensus that the building of a new and adventurous theatre was a good thing. The anonymous recorder of the occasion also noted, somewhat ambiguously, that he felt the meeting was one of those all too rare occasions in the life of the ABTT when he felt

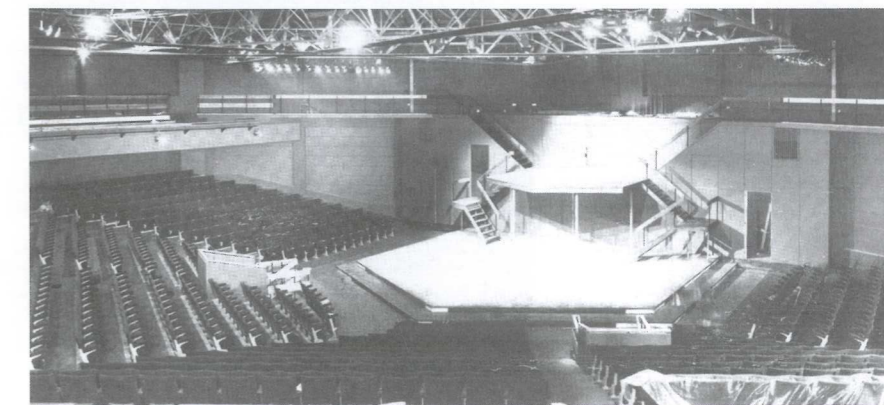
that as a result of the interchange of ideas and different points of view, a better, more efficient theatre could, and would, be built.

CFT has continued to come in for critical comment. Iain Mackintosh, *The Guthrie Thrust Stage* (published by the ABTT, 2011) noted that, "the simplistic but inexpensive hexagonal geometry of the whole building forced the audience to the front of an over wide stage and seated them on too shallow a rake". He also pointed out that, while Guthrie's thinking was influential in the design of Chichester, neither he nor his collaborator, the wonderful stage designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch, were involved in its development.

The theatre, at its opening in 1962, was essentially the core of the building that we see today. It was specified for a 14-week summer season and the expectation of about 70,000 visitors, so it was pretty primitive, not much more than a concrete tent. The foyer was basic and the audience facilities limited, catering was in a tent, dressing rooms, offices, crew facilities, scenery storage and wardrobe were all in short supply or non-existent. Air-conditioning was certainly not in the budget and audiences, cast and staff suffered from extreme temperature fluctuations.

The original intention was to hire the lighting installation from Strand Electric, but funds proved sufficient for a simple rig, which, according to Richard Pilbrow, was in the wrong place. He was summoned by Sir Laurence two days before opening but could do nothing to help since all the lighting positions were over the auditorium, so that as actors turned into the stage they went into shadow. There is some confusion here, since an article written by architect Christopher Stevens and consultant engineer Peter Jay, published in *TABS* (Vol. 20 No.1 April 1962), prior to the theatre's opening, noted that there were to be three lighting bars above the stage which were intended to be rigged for the season and re-plugged for each production. Possibly the

Richard York visits the renewed CFT



Chichester Festival Theatre in 1962

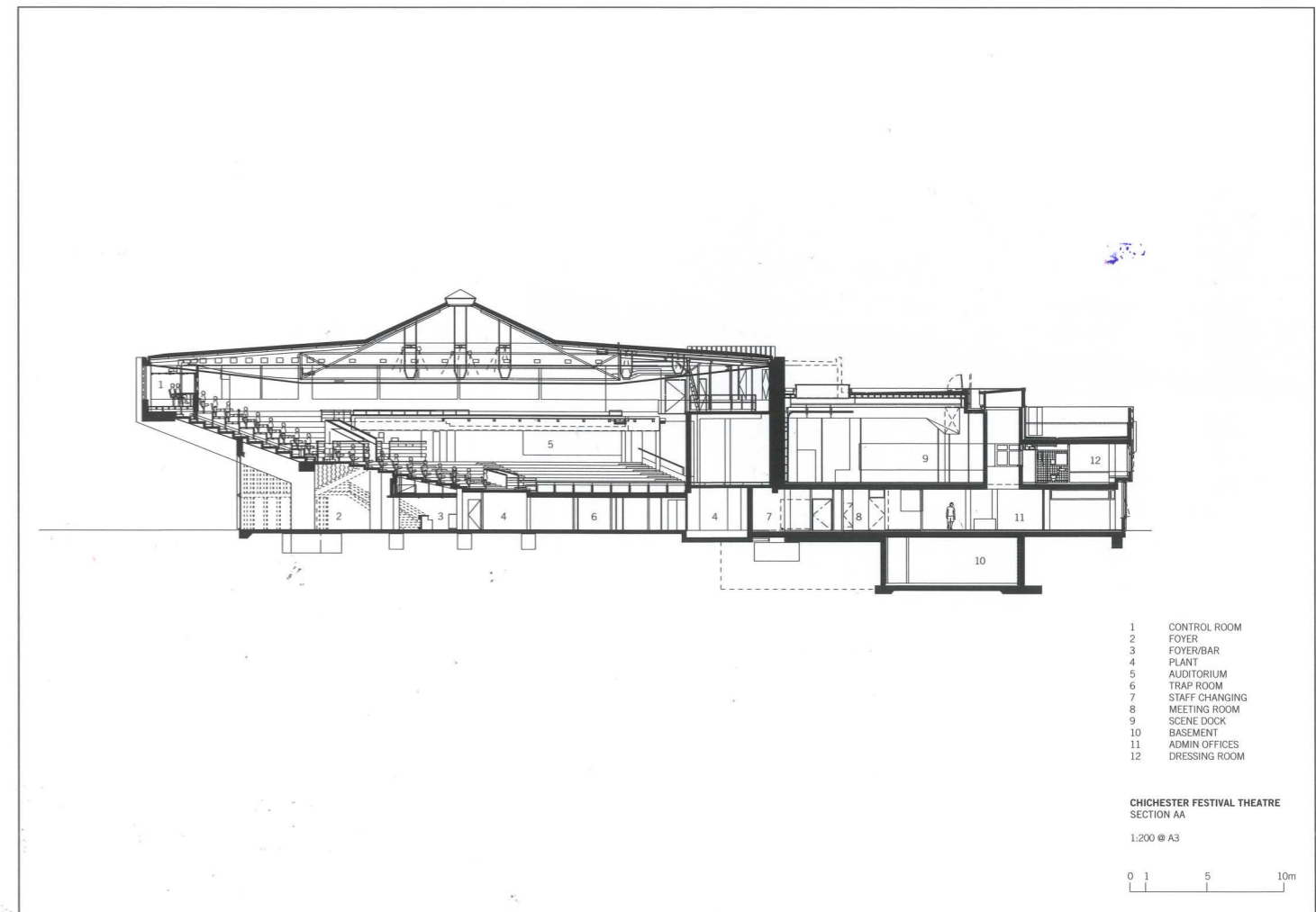
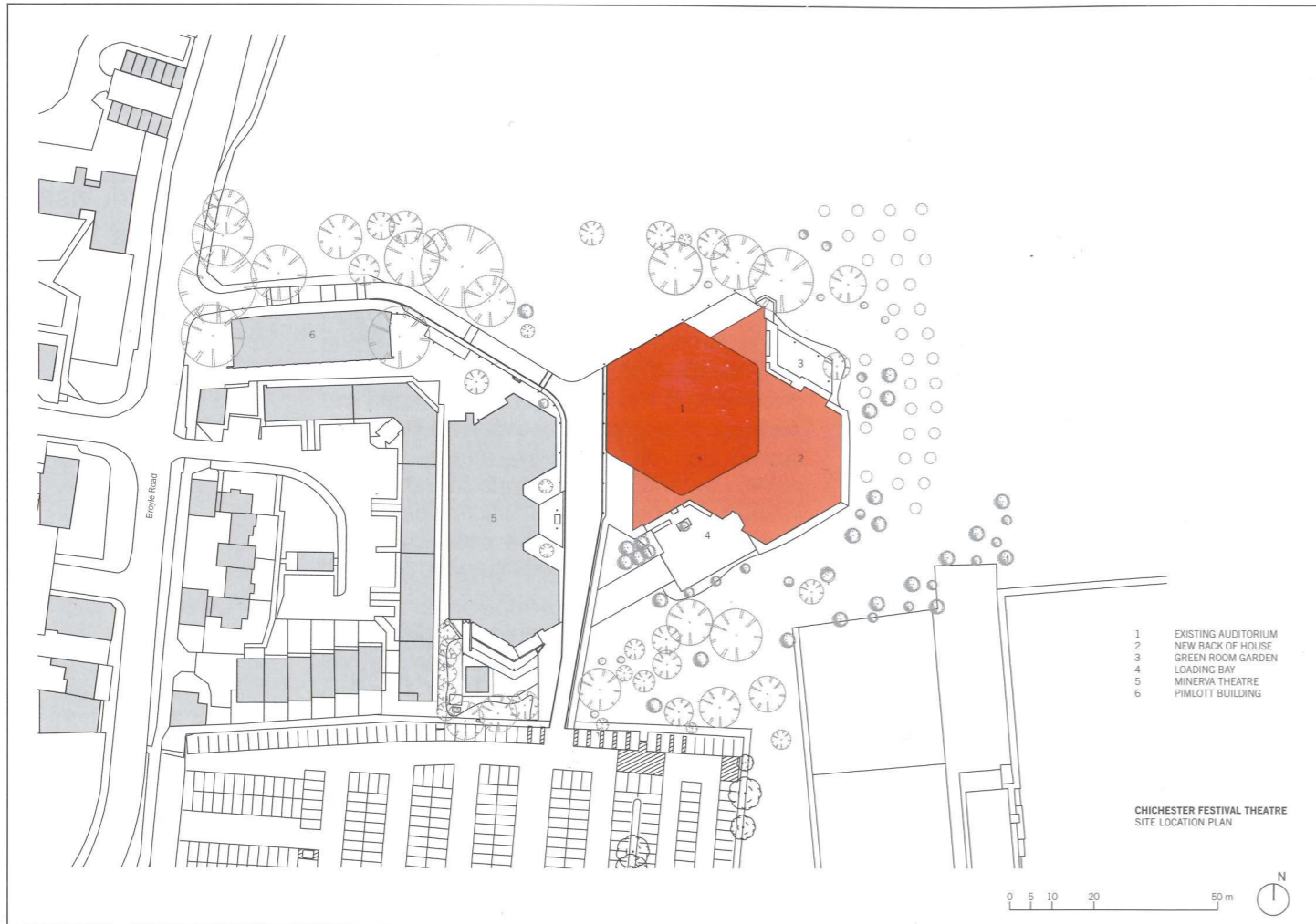




Photo: Philip Vile

bars fell victim to budget constraints. Certainly Richard Pilbrow reports a conversation with the Chief Electrician of the day and quotes him as saying that there was nothing to hang lanterns on above the stage.

Incidentally, the first lighting control was a Strand 72-way type LC, of which 26 ways were fitted with 2kW reactors and the balance with 1kW reactors. The 2014 board (already in place before the project) is an ETC Eos with an ETC RPU backup and an ETC Ion for playback controlling 378 x 3kW dimmers, 18 x 5kW dimmers, 20 x 3kW non-dims and 18 5kW non-dimmers.

Gradually over the years prudent financial management and the ambitions of successive management teams allowed the building to be developed, which not only improved it for actors, designers, technicians and audience alike, but also enabled it to be used outside the festival months without everyone having to keep their coats on. The Architects' Journal (George Finch, Building Revisited, 19 March 1975) noted that the theatre had already acquired a middle-aged spread.

The spacious ground level foyer Photo: Philip Vile



Additions continued to be made without the obvious benefit of a master plan into the 21st century, by which time it was evident that the building needed to be consolidated and re-fitted and given a new lease of life. The RENEW project was conceived and by 2012 plans and the funding were in place. The theatre closed at the end of its 50th year and the demolition squad moved in.

Chichester Festival Theatre sits on one side of a handsome, newly paved piazza, facing the Minerva Theatre (its smaller sibling, opened in 1989), and two restaurants. Its concrete shell has been cleaned, repaired and newly lettered, and the white timber cladding on the flanks of the building has been replaced. Two single storey wings have been added to the foyer to provide respectively, a café and a bar. A completely new backstage has been plugged into the back of the building. It is clad in Corten louvres, which provide a sharp contrast to the other materials as well affording shade and privacy to the rooms behind. Alongside this extension is a parking bay, discretely behind decorative timber gates and fence, which gives room for two trucks and access to the loading bay and stage door. Hard and soft landscaping mediates the junction between the cluster of buildings and the rolling park to the north.

The ground level foyer, which serves the whole audience, wraps around four sides of the auditorium. It has been restored to the single space of 1962, which was spoiled in 1999 when a fire officer, in response to changes in the auditorium, required a screen to be built on the centre line, thus creating two fire cells. The foyer had accumulated many accretions: sales points, satellite catering units, display cases, and stands and storage tucked under the stairs. Now, as a result of directing the escape routes from the auditorium away from the foyer, the screen has gone and the single volume is restored. The accretions have been stripped out, the glazing expanded, the number of views of the park and the city increased, and the very elegant original concrete given pride of place. At mid-afternoon the whole foyer is flooded with light and after dark the foyer lighting is gentle, variable and energy conscious. To add further interest, the upper areas of the foyer walls and ceilings are decorated in reflective patterns, created by the artist, Antoni Malinowski.

The void under the auditorium rake has housed audience facilities from the beginning; these have been reorganised. The box office and the principal bar meeting at the centre line, and in each direction round the hexagon there is a stalls entrance, cloakroom/shop and

ladies' WC. The gents' WCs, together with lifts, are tucked away at the sides behind the catering facilities in the new wings.

The dark blue carpet with its distinctive small red pattern (hard to describe but pleasing to the eye) extends from the foyer to the auditorium. The access remains unchanged with two vomitories rising from the ground floor foyer to stage level, now through lobbies, in the interests of sound and light separation. The original double staircase to the mid-level cross aisle of the auditorium and the galleries remains and gives further views over the park as it rises. Blue glass has been installed where the glazing meets the light lobbies to the galleries.

In the auditorium a number of changes have taken place although, unsurprisingly, the original hexagonal geometry and comparatively low roof remain. Notably, the seating behind the cross aisle has been raised and brought forward thus improving the sightlines and giving proper access between the back row and the back wall. The original auditorium had seven aisles. Two aisles rising from stage level to the cross aisle have been closed and replaced by half-length aisles serving the last three rows of the front stalls, and tucked behind the vomitories. This has quite an impact, particularly from the stage, since it makes the auditorium look much less fragmented. I had not realised that the same reorganisation that caused the foyer to be divided also caused the two side galleries at the upper level to be closed since the seats were deemed to be too far from the nearest exit. These seats have now been reinstated as a consequence of the reorganisation of the escape routes, bringing the capacity to 1,316.

Apparently, the redundant galleries were known as 'the ashtrays' since the technical department used them as a dumping ground for out-of-use equipment! The rear wall of the auditorium has been clad in blue-black slatted timber to improve both acoustics and appearance. The whole house has been re-seated and the dark blue upholstery is pleasing and contrasts well with the back wall and the red painted lobbies behind the ends of the back rows. The architectural and house lighting is particularly sympathetic and, as one enters, full of promise.

Conditioned air is fed into the auditorium from beneath the seats and extracted at high level. A mixture of open and closed ground loops fed by 16 bore holes provide basic heat and cooled air, topped up as necessary by boilers and refrigeration units. The insulation



has been greatly improved, which was quite a challenge as far as the roof is concerned since its capacity to carry a heavier load was negligible. The challenge was met by stripping old fashioned felt insulation and replacing it with a lightweight foam sandwich, which includes a soft rubber layer to absorb the noise of heavy rain and hail, a characteristic of CFT since it opened.

Another challenge for the team was how best to increase the loading capacity above the stage given that the roof structure was already carrying its maximum weight. The original concrete balcony across the back of the stage

Artist Antoni Malinowski at work in the theatre Photo: Freya Scott

The Stage Door Photo: Philip Vile



(much used as a floating orchestra pit) has been demolished, providing the equivalent of an upstage proscenium arch. A rugby goalpost-like steel structure has been set on the stage with its feet at the extremes of the arch. The external walls of the theatre are hexagonal on plan and one of the junctions is behind the stage on the centre line. A massive concrete ring beam tops the wall. A series of nine metre-long beams, running up and down stage, are tied to the ring beam and cantilevered over the cross bar of the goalpost and out over the stage. The hexagonal walls determine that the end of the centre beam sits over the centre of the stage with the other beams extending further downstage. The beams together provide six tonnes capacity to carry walkways, suspensions, lighting and sound and, at the time of writing, a demountable floor (behind the cross-bar) for the orchestra for *Guys and Dolls* in the traditional Chichester place above the rear stage. The previously primitive means of access to the grid and its equipment has been replaced by proper ladders and bridges, making life safer, more efficient, and easier for the technicians.

When CFT was built, the limited budget precluded excavation, so the stage and the front of the auditorium are on the first floor with all the backstage accommodation (such as it was) underneath. The get-in was if not impossible, certainly very difficult, the backstage space limited and the dressing room accommodation cramped and dark. All has now been swept away and a three-storey block constructed. The top floor provides a seriously large rear stage and backstage (served by a proper scenery lift big enough for

half a truckload of scenery), dressing rooms, wardrobe, wig room and a green room with a private garden. Crew rooms, administrative offices, and dock door are at ground level, and a basement provides plant rooms including dimmer room, maintenance workshop and storage for equipment and print store.

The excavation also provided a big pit, the size of the top level of the stage in 'wedding cake' mode, for a demountable stage incorporating five lifts to be deployed as needed. This will open up huge possibilities for Chichester, which has been constrained for 50 years by a fixed flat stage with no more than a single lift in the middle. Apart from scenic possibilities it will allow the orchestra to be put in an under-stage open pit, which might be an interesting experience for the musicians and the audience alike.

So how does the theatre feel to the playgoer? The sense of welcome and the public facilities are excellent (and I won't bang on about lavatory doors that default shut with the most minimal indicators to declare "engaged" or otherwise). The daylight flooding the building and showing off the excellent quality of the original concrete is a revelation, as is the lighting at night. The auditorium is, by contrast, dark and theatrical and feels rather less of a barn than the previous incarnation (it has some of the welcome abstract qualities of the tent devised for CFT's 2013 season). Since the auditorium conforms to the same essential dimensions and geometry as the original, some negative views are likely to persist. But it is warm and welcoming, and it feels rather less spiky, perhaps as a result of the



The audience anticipates the opening production
Photo: Philip Vile



Curtain call at the first preview of Amadeus
Photo: Philip Vile

loss of the two aisles from the centre of the auditorium – more seats, longer rows, fewer steps, and fewer obvious angles. It is certainly a comfortable theatre for the audience, which is well rewarded for the substantial part it has played in raising the £22 million cost of the RENEWAL project. The Arts Council Lottery Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the local authorities have also contributed substantially, as have many charitable and corporate donors.

The renewal of Chichester Festival Theatre is an excellent and immediate example of how good the theatre and construction industries and professions have become in successfully delivering complex and substantial building projects in very tight time scales, particularly as the challenge here was sharpened by the overlapping project of The Theatre in the Park, the big tent which housed the 2013 Festival.

The shambles that characterised major projects in the 1970s during their construction phases is part of another age. I have long held the view that Glyndebourne, built twenty years ago, set the pace for this standard of delivery to the benefit of the many building and major refurbishment projects which were unleashed immediately after by the advent of the National Lottery. It now occurs to me that the original CFT might have a claim to have set the standard if not the trend in 1962, since it was delivered with almost indecent speed, on time and within sight of its budget and provided, from the beginning, a challenging but workable house, with a powerful personality, for drama and music theatre. It has also proved more than capable, over half a century (subject to some duff patches), of drawing an audience disproportionate to the size of its local community. It is now well set for its next 50 years and, were the founding father

to return, he would surely recognise that his chutzpa is still abroad in West Sussex and this time no one can quarrel with the stage lighting positions!

The author thanks Dan Watkins, RENEW Project Director, Debbie Plentie, Press and PR Manager, Diane Goodman, Project Administrator and Sam Garner Gibbons, Technical Coordinator all at Chichester Festival Theatre, for their help. Thanks too, to Shadia Fakhoudry, Administrator and Alyse Dan, Office Intern, both at the ABTT, for help with the archive. Finally, congratulations to all concerned with Amadeus and Guys and Dolls for two great nights in the theatre.

Architect:	Haworth Tompkins – Steve Tompkins, Toby Johnson, Roger Watts, Lucy Picardo and Andreia Guilherme
Contractor:	Osborne
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Theatre Consultant:	Charcoalblue
Structural Engineer:	Price & Myers
BREEAM Assessors:	Price & Myers
Service Engineer:	Skelly & Couch
Acoustic Engineer:	Gillieron Scott Acoustic Design
Landscape Architect:	Camlin Lonsdale Landscape Architects
CDM Coordinator:	Gardiner & Theobald
Quantity Surveyor:	Gardiner & Theobald
Collaborating Artist:	Antoni Malinowski
Transport Consultant:	Mayer Brown
Access Consultant:	Babel
Fire Consultant:	Trenton Fire
Approved Inspector Services:	Building Control
Project Director CFT:	Dan Watkins