

Conference 07 Report:  
**Performing Theatres?**  
12 June 2007

The  
Theatres  
Trust



Protecting theatres for everyone

# Conference 07 Report: Performing Theatres?

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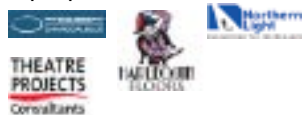
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Published October 2007  
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# Mhora Samuel

Director, The Theatres Trust



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One of The Theatres Trust aims is to enable better planning to secure, improve, and achieve sustainability for theatre buildings and protect theatre use. The Trust's first annual conference, *Performing Theatres?* at the Young Vic on 12 June 2007 was an important milestone in achieving this goal, providing an opportunity for the theatre industry to make its voice heard in the planning process. It was a huge success, bringing together over 200 delegates and contributors to consider how the design of theatres helped or hindered their performance as theatres.

It falls to me to thank the many contributors, sponsors, staff of the Trust, the Young Vic and the Jerwood Space, and the delegates for their energy, enthusiasm and commitment, which made the conference such a success. Special thanks also go to Judith Strong our Conference Reporter who has written the following report of the day's events and deftly brought out the key design principles identified during the conference.

As I write this introduction the Trust is already starting to plan Conference 08 which will take place on 10 June 2008. The clear message from '*Performing Theatres?*' was that many theatre managers have little or no experience of planning or organising major building projects and may only embark on such an event once or twice in their lives. Finding ways to share the knowledge and experience of those who had been through the process was vital.

Another key issue raised at Conference 07 was the need to consider the environmental management and carbon footprint of theatres if we are to help theatres to have a sustainable future.

For this reason the title of Conference 08 will be '*Building Sustainable Theatres?*'. As well as offering a platform to share experiences of design development, procurement, construction and handover stages of a theatre building project, it will look at ways in which the design and construction approach can create greener theatres.

I hope to see you there.

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# Ian Brown

Conference Chair



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**A**s chair of the 'Performing Theatres?' Conference I had the privilege of leading an important gathering of fellow contributors and colleagues from theatres across the UK, brought together by The Theatres Trust. During the day I offered my reflections and comments on the achievements, concerns, hopes and aspirations for theatres' design and how they could be developed to make theatres work better.

The Conference gave delegates the chance to imagine the future and pick up on big issues that make the difference between a theatre's success and failure – artistically and economically. These included the need to think more about providing facilities for staff and technicians, creating inspiring buildings and exciting places that people want to visit, and about greening our theatres: If planned badly a theatre is at greater risk of economic failure, as poor facilities increase the costs of production; unwelcoming design means audiences vote with their feet to go elsewhere; and high energy consumption means higher fuel bills.

We also focused on the importance of designing a theatre for artistic success and the primacy of good quality design. Contributors called for a greater understanding among design teams of the aesthetics that inform theatre-making and presentation of the performing arts. Our theatre spaces should enrich our lives, and just as live theatre and events make us feel human, our theatres should be places that create conviviality and energise us.

The day was also a chance for delegates from theatre organisations who had been through a building project to share their experiences, both positive and negative. But it was all too clear that there were few opportunities to bank learning and that more needed to be done to feed valuable experience into future work on theatre buildings.

Everyone at Conference 07 cared about creating good theatres. Our next steps should include finding more ways to inform design teams about our needs as the custodians and operators of theatres, and to help each other by sharing our experiences of building theatres.

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# Introduction



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'Performing Theatres?' was divided into four sessions over the course of the day. The morning sessions looked at the facilities required to meet the needs of audiences and performers, and features of auditorium design. The sessions in the afternoon addressed how theatres' design impacts on staging work and creating an inspiring theatre. The proceedings closed with a general discussion on the key principles for creating theatres that work.

The report which follows aims to give a flavour of the discussions and provide a checklist of principles which emerged as being of particular importance.

The main speakers in each of the four sessions represented those who work in theatres on a day-to-day basis, manage the buildings, put on the productions, draw in the audiences and balance the books. The theatres where they work were representative of today's buildings: Victorian and Edwardian lyric theatres ornately decorated and almost invariably listed as 'buildings of historic interest'; post-WW2 civic theatres created both as monuments of civic pride and for the more idealistic motive of offering culture to a wider audience; the more recently built Lottery funded theatres and theatre refurbishments; as well as the more diverse selection of spaces which theatre has found and colonised over the years. Speakers and delegates came from across the UK and included managers, directors, producers and production managers, architects and consultants. Their experience covered every type and scale of theatre from the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, to Shunt, based underneath the railway arches at London Bridge Station.

The Conference acknowledged that designing a theatre is a complex process, involving a team of design and construction professionals as well as additional specialist theatre expertise. It is a process which few people know much about before they are confronted with the job of overseeing the building or refurbishment of a theatre.

Discussions during the Conference demonstrated just how complex this process is but also showed that people have emerged from it with a successful building to their credit. Delegates stressed that one of the key factors to this success was ensuring that those who have practical experience of running a theatre, and of mounting and touring productions, are closely involved in the whole process – right from the development of the initial concept through to the theatre opening and first few years of operation.

Delegates agreed that the next stage is to find ways of capturing and sharing that expertise and passing experience on to others who are currently standing on the brink of a building project.

# Facilities – adding value, not costing the earth

The Conference opened with a discussion on what the priorities are for a good working theatre and how that can be achieved. This was chaired by Genista McIntosh, and included presentations from three speakers:

**Jonathan Church**  
Artistic Director and Joint Chief Executive, Chichester Festival Theatre

**Duncan Hendry**  
Chief Executive, Aberdeen Performing Arts

**Judith Isherwood**  
Chief Executive, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff

## Process

Whether you are thinking about a new building or the redevelopment of an existing one, you need to be aware that you will be embarking on a major project – one which will consume enormous amounts of time, money and energy. The process is, in many ways, similar to that of putting on a production. The difference is that it will cost millions of pounds, spread over many years, involve a large team of design team professionals whose skills and language you will need to learn, and produce as an end result, a building which your organisation and the surrounding area will have to live with for a very long time. It will prove to be an enormous learning process. One of the points that was stressed during the Conference was the importance of theatre designers and theatre industry professionals sharing expertise and working closely together throughout the initial planning, briefing and design processes.

*“One of the issues is that most theatre managers only do it once, so they are inevitably new to a capital scheme. In common with many venue managers who go through this process I had no previous experience of managing such a demanding project”* **Duncan Hendry**

*“The theatre industry is littered with CEOs who have survived development projects but don’t go on to do another one. This is potentially ten years of experience lost”* **Jonathan Church**

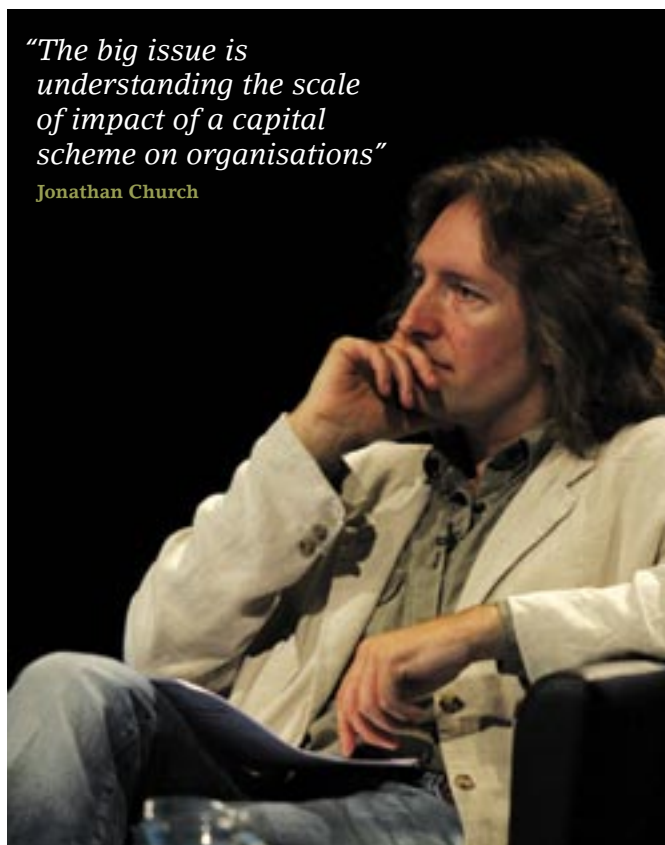
The new or refurbished building is not just a piece of architecture, a piece of sculpture writ large, it houses a living entity – a theatre. In some cases the theatre operation has to be kept going, in other cases it will need to be first envisaged and then developed. This is integral to the whole process. As soon as the building work is complete, the theatre operator has to be ready to take over and put on a show.

*“The theatre closure period was perhaps the most difficult part of the whole project. As there was a commitment to retain our highly skilled staff and to stay in touch with our audience, the best solution was to find a temporary home”*

**Duncan Hendry**

*“The big issue is understanding the scale of impact of a capital scheme on organisations”*

**Jonathan Church**



The current system involves the architect/design team ‘signing off’ the completion of a building after a period of about a year. Many consider this a too short a period to ensure that a building as complex as a theatre works properly. A continuing relationship (together with a budget) would give the design team the opportunity to fine tune their work.

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# Facilities – adding value, not costing the earth

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## Provision/facilities

Traditionally theatres only opened when the audience arrived to see the show. Most theatres (outside the West End) now aim to be active throughout the day. Increasingly they are seen as a focus for the community, a cultural destination, a creative and educational resource and a place to meet and eat. This means that they need areas where people can congregate, bars and restaurants, education spaces, and community facilities.

*“Large open concourse areas lend themselves to a myriad of uses, from performance of music and spoken word, through to functions such as dinners and business events, through to dance pieces and art installations. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of these spaces and these activities for reasons other than just income, as they do genuinely bring the building to life and give it a creative heart”* Judith Isherwood

But theatres cannot just be designed to cater for those who visit, they are also places where many people work. One of the key people in any theatre is the artistic director, with writers, designers, directors, and people working on education projects, all involved in planning and delivering the artistic ‘product’. The performers are also supported by a team – the production manager, stage management, stage crew, lighting and sound technicians, and wardrobe. Theatres also need to employ box office, administrative, finance and marketing staff, office staff, stewards, bar and catering staff and cleaners.

These people all contribute to what makes the theatre work and what keeps the audience keep coming. Many of them will spend very long hours in the building (from a morning rehearsal through to an evening production). They need good working conditions if they are going to do their job properly.

*“Facilities for actors, performers and directors have lagged behind... We need to understand the design requirements behind the delivery of artistic results, and how this relates to financial return. If there is investment in artists and how they are housed, in the long term this will result in improved work and achieve box office returns”*

Jonathan Church

Running a theatre and putting on a production is a joint enterprise. The various sections do not operate effectively in isolation (for example marketing a show which you have not heard discussed or seen being created). People need to be able to get together.

*“At the Sydney Opera House, one of the most successful aspects of the internal layout is the location of the Green Room. It is a large space incorporating both a cafeteria and a lounge and is located such that everyone inside the building must either go through it or have access to it, whether you are an office worker, a performer, a technician or a ticket seller. By placing it in a prime position, the SOH is saying that it places people at the heart of everything it does – a very powerful statement”* Judith Isherwood

# Facilities – adding value, not costing the earth



## Specifics

### Audiences

As well as comfortable seats where you can see and hear what is happening, audiences want easily accessible and plentiful toilets, efficient and well-placed bar facilities, outdoor areas for those who want a change of air or wish to smoke, and windows that provide vistas rather than blank walls. They also want easy access routes (from parking or from public transport) and good signage to help them find their way to and around the theatre.

### The theatre workforce

Those who work in the theatre need adequate office/workshop space with good communication links to colleagues; access to daylight and fresh air; somewhere to relax with others; and somewhere to prepare quietly alone (and occasionally lie down or even have a short sleep). Actors and other staff also need to be able to get a drink (including water) and a snack during rehearsals and performances without leaving the theatre (the front-of-house facilities are rarely suitable). The dressing rooms need to have sufficient space, good lighting, and a safe storage area. Toilets and showers (a necessity) need to be conveniently positioned.

## Looking ahead

Building or redeveloping a theatre is a huge investment which may well have to last for half a century before any more major work is done. Theatre is a dynamic art with directors continually pushing the boundaries – technical and physical as well as artistic. One of the questions which the Conference addressed was whether it is possible to design a theatre which can adapt to change? Can new spaces be future-proofed?

### Technical flexibility

In the early 1980s there was a movement towards using technology to create multi-purpose spaces where ceilings could be raised and lowered, and seating and staging layouts mechanically re-organised to accommodate a range of presentation styles and art forms. Few of these were regarded as sufficiently successful to provide models for the future (partly because of the work involved in the reconfiguration, but also because general wear and tear caused the systems to degenerate). Current thinking veers towards identifying a few complementary uses and building in just enough flexibility to meet the need.

*“My plea would be to keep it simple – the more you are reliant on technology, generally the more restricted you are”* Judith Isherwood

### Designing in adaptability

Adaptability lies as much in design detail as in technological innovation. The positioning of circulation routes, entrances, lighting grids and controls, get-in facilities, storage facilities and plant can all help or hinder adaptability. Space (including ceiling height) is also important – many older theatres are restricted because there is insufficient space (either within the building or on site) to extend existing provision or add new facilities.



# Auditoria – seats or senses?

The auditorium is the core of the theatre. It is where the all important 'actor-audience relationship' is established. Get it right and you will have a great theatre. This was explored in debate form in the second session of the Conference. Genista McIntosh chaired the motion: 'The Actor-Audience Relationship should be the starting point for auditorium design'. The speakers were:

**Gregory Nash**  
Director, The Point, Eastleigh

**Cindy Oswin**  
Writer, Performer, Director

**Michael Lynas**  
Executive Director,  
Ambassador Theatre Group

**Peter Wilson**  
Chief Executive,  
Norwich Theatre Royal

## The nature of 'The Audience'

People come to the theatre as individuals and in small groups – some enthusiastic to see a particular play or actor, some just looking for a pleasant night out, others brought along as companions not knowing what to expect. This disparate selection of people makes up the audience. How this conglomerate, 'the audience', reacts will change from night to night and will affect the performers and the performance.

*"The audience is a collective, a conductor and absorber of theatrical energy and it gives actors back the energy it receives – as a collective. The best space is where that energy is marshalled. Conviviality of spaces makes performances kick off. Architects need to design and search for conviviality to help amplify the qualities of the production"* Stephen Tomkins

## The ideal auditorium – does it exist?

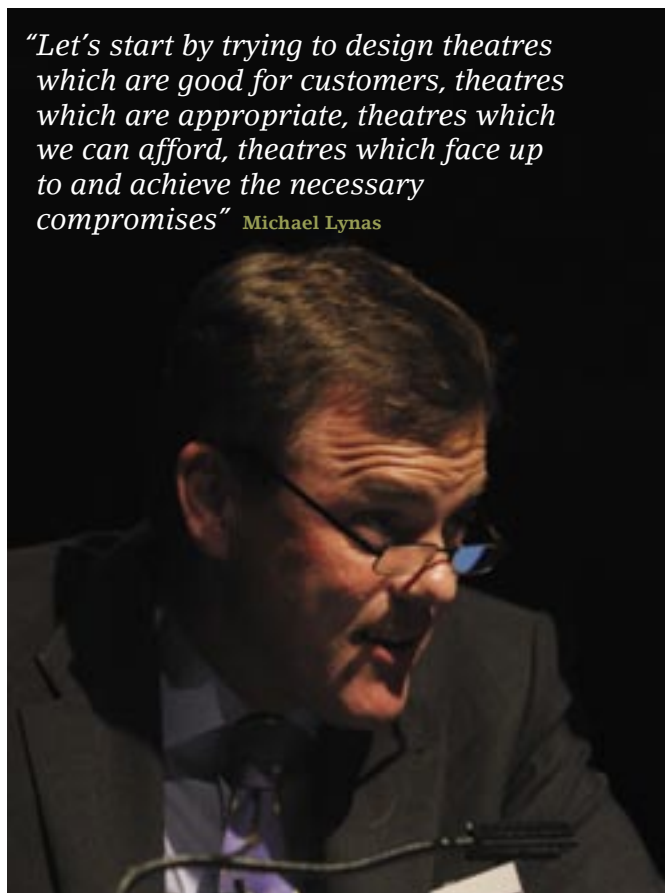
Every actor, director, designer or theatre enthusiast can give a list of the auditoria which excite or inspire – spaces which, for them, have a particular quality that makes the experience special. One thing that every list has in common is that the spaces people cite as having that particular 'magic' quality are all very different. From a Greek amphitheatre to a room over a pub, from an ornate Victorian gem to a huge modern arena, they differ in size, style and format. Some wrap the audience around the actor, others stretch them out across rows and tiers. Some provide a relaxing and comfortable environment, others invite the audience to into an edgy and disturbing setting. While something can be learnt from each of these 'special' places, the overall message is that there is no single ideal space to provide a model for future success. For every general recommendation that is made, (including those listed at the end of this report) somewhere there will be a theatre that contravenes it and yet still manages to be a memorable space for a particular production.

## Spaces that work

While there is no blueprint for success, there are a number of guidelines which, if followed, make it more likely that the auditorium will be fit for purpose.

Theatres come in all shapes and sizes and no one theatre can be expected to encompass the whole range. One of the first priorities for anyone designing a theatre is to establish what sort of theatre they want. That will depend on what they plan to do in the space. The location, the site or building, and amount of money available (both for building work and for running the theatre once it is open) will all influence the decision.

*"Let's start by trying to design theatres which are good for customers, theatres which are appropriate, theatres which we can afford, theatres which face up to and achieve the necessary compromises"* Michael Lynas



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# Auditoria – seats or senses?

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## Cost considerations

There is an inescapable link between the size of the auditorium and what can be presented in it. Both have cost implications. For example, a large space can stage musicals, dance, opera and popular touring theatre and will be able to generate much of the income needed to cover its running costs, provided the seats can be filled on a regular basis. A theatre of this type will, however, be costly to build and maintain. A medium-sized theatre could prove more financially viable in capital terms but will need to have a different set of ambitions about what it will house and how the running costs will be met. A studio theatre can show innovative and experimental work but, with a small seating capacity, may well need some form of revenue subsidy to ensure its viability. There is no set formula for what will work where. It is a case of considering the options and of examining the feasibility before writing the brief for the theatre design.

*“Take an auditorium commissioned by a local authority - the very first thing that consultants will want to know is how much is that local authority going to want the theatre to be able to wash its face? The answer to that question will begin to dictate the number of seats, shape and stimmung of the auditorium”* Peter Wilson

*“This is so blindingly obvious that I am not sure even why it has to be said. But there is no point in designing a marvellous auditorium if you can't afford to pay for its construction or fund its running”* Michael Lynas

## Space considerations

It is important that a building fits on the available site. What is not so obvious right at the outset is that a theatre is very much larger than its auditorium. The stage (the bit you see and the areas that surround it); the backstage areas (which vary according to how the theatre is used); the front of house facilities with increasingly generous bars, restaurants and foyers; offices for increasingly larger numbers of staff; education and rehearsal spaces – all add to the size of the building, as do circulation routes, access requirements, storage space (vital and often underestimated), and services and plant (which require far more space than is normally envisaged). The larger the auditorium, the larger the support spaces will need to be.

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## General principles

### Responding to the locality

Successful spaces grow out of and respond to the areas in which they are located. The type of theatres which attract good audiences in city centres are often very different from those which do well in smaller towns or rural areas. Consulting the people who will use the theatre is a vital part of the pre-design process.

*“The venue grew out of strong partnerships and local demand. It's an enormously flexible space, but one which also creates a sense of intimacy between performers, actors and audiences. Seating can be in the round or in traverse, we've even had a living room built on stage. The flexibility and intimacy of the space services its users and its audiences alike. It's this that makes the space successful”* Gregory Nash

### A place in time

Auditoria, and the theatres which house them, inevitably reflect the time in which they are conceived and built. The one thing that is certain about the future is that it will contain surprises. Experience suggests that an auditorium that is well-designed for contemporary use will stand the test of time rather better than one which tries to be over flexible, incorporating too much 'state-of-the-art' technology (soon out-dated) or is constrained to the point of blandness.

*“Theatre design should be about simplicity, integrity and functionality – very much about communication and totally of its time”* Cindy Oswin

### Be brave

Theatre is not about 'playing safe' – at its best it is entertaining, stimulating, disturbing, inspiring, demanding, exciting and fun. Theatre buildings need to recognise the nature of the art they are built to house.

*“The world's greatest theatres, be they large, small, new or old, create an experience that stays in the memory. They inspire artist and audiences alike, they are special places, they are uniquely and wonderfully exciting in themselves. Design something remarkable”* Michael Lynas

# Staging the work

In the third session of the day, Venu Dhupa, then Director of Creative Innovation, Southbank Centre, now Director of Arts for the British Council asked a panel of theatre practitioners to talk about the the production side of theatre and how theatre designers could best facilitate their work.

**Kully Thiarai**  
Former Artistic Director,  
Leicester Theatre Trust

**William Dudley**  
Stage Designer and  
3D Animator

**Stewart Crosbie**  
Production Manager

## Consultation

Putting on a production is a collaborative process drawing on the skills of a wide range of different people. While the audience focuses on the performers, what the audience experiences is created by a much larger unseen cast – designers (sets and costume, lighting and sound) and technicians and stage crew – co-ordinated by the production manager and stage manager.

Their concerns lie with the layout of the stage and wing space; parking provision and the route from the parking area to the stage; lighting positions; control positions; the power supplies; headroom; and storage space. In some productions most of the effects will be achieved by lighting, while in the most complex a whole 'box of tricks' will be employed. The level of complexity does not necessarily relate to the size of the theatre.

When planning a new theatre or changing an existing one, it is important to talk to the people who actually do the job as they know what problems they encounter and the results of getting it wrong. Relating his experience of a theatre, where the main consultation was with a rather autocratic artistic director, William Dudley recalls, "...they discouraged people like me and as a result the designs consigned the stage crew to misery. They deliberately made the scene dock small – and four flights up. In Victorian theatres they had flat scenery and rolled cloths, but today it's a different story. It's not only a time issue; a good get-in also stops the set from being trashed."

## Hosting touring companies and productions

The majority of new and refurbished theatres are 'receiving houses' (for all or part of the programme) which depend on bringing in touring companies or productions created for other venues.

The message which comes across here is that while theatre producers have learnt to be very adaptable at fitting plays into a variety of different spaces, the process can prove costly when conditions are challenging.

*"Practically, if there is enough flying space, if there is a flexible proscenium, it's about what the designer puts in the space. It can be soul destroying when money has to go into structural work when it should be going into the production"* Stewart Crosbie

Many of the problems occur in older theatres, designed for very different styles of production. In quite a number of Victorian and Edwardian theatres, virtually everything behind the proscenium arch has had to be replaced to accommodate current touring requirements. Though most of these buildings are listed, the quality of the backstage areas rarely matches that of the façade and auditorium, and heritage interests have accepted the need for theatres to function adequately if they are to survive.

Later theatres (such as those built in the post-war years) also experience production problems when they are expected to work in ways for which they were never designed (for example, in some there was a move away from sets and flying, associated with a previous era). Switching from one style of theatre to another can prove difficult.

*"I worked at Chichester on 'The Last Confession'. The stage has no wings or backstage, now it's coming into a proscenium theatre in the West End. There are limitations of taking work from a rake to a flat stage. You can't use the same revolves, so you are even more constrained. There is also a trend for tilted stages. The National Theatre spent £35k on scaffolding to create a rake"* William Dudley

*"Drury Lane does have a good big stage but it is listed and has created big issues for 'The Lord of the Rings'. Drilling a hole anywhere was hard. Luckily we found some old ones"* Stuart Crosbie

One solution being utilised is to design a set which is independent of the infrastructure within any particular theatre. Such sets tend to be in large sections which need to be assembled in-situ. A good get-in, mechanisms to cope with changes in level, good and well-sited storage and some on-site workshop facilities will all be of benefit.

# Staging the work



## Current trends

Problems arise when taking a production created in a well-resourced theatre into one which lacks a comparable level of provision. This has been exacerbated recently by the addition of a number of new and radically improved spaces funded by the National Lottery joining the touring circuit.

Apart from revolves and tilting stages, technology associated with computer imaging is beginning to be a standard part of the producer's toolkit. A theatre today has to have lighting, sound and video capacity.

*"This is a generation which is inspired by visual stimuli. I think young people want eye candy — they want visual splendour. So we should have virtual reality in theatres. It's not just about running library footage onto a screen, it's about creating navigable 3D space on moving backgrounds. You can apply this to any space, walls become active, video projected doors onto real doors. There is a big growth potential for this"* William Dudley

Big visuals and big sound consume power – often more than is available (c.f. the stadia/arena based pop concerts). This means that generators have to be brought in to cope with increased demands (cheaper and quicker than getting the supplier to increase provision but still requiring complicated negotiations for siting if land is not available).

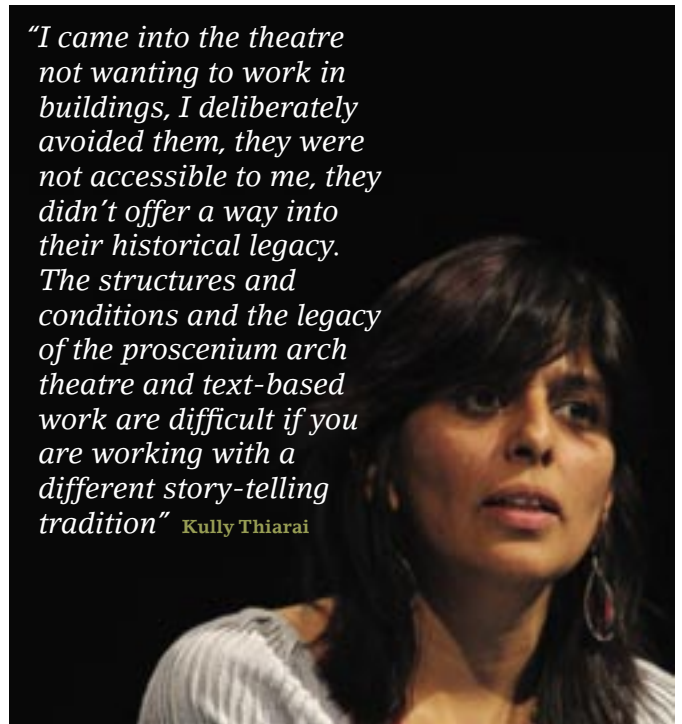
In the United States the emphasis is on audience capacity. Pushed by the box office, work is being presented in auditoria seating several thousand people. This inevitably leads to an increased reliance on technology. Traditionally theatres worked to an optimum distance between the performer and the audience.

*"Beyond this something goes, you end up with a dark cavernous spaces which even amplification and video screens cannot really reach"*

William Dudley

If this development were to gain pace in the UK, it is likely that groups would react against the trend by placing the focus on the actor's voice speaking directly to the audience (the essence of story-telling.)

*"I came into the theatre not wanting to work in buildings, I deliberately avoided them, they were not accessible to me, they didn't offer a way into their historical legacy. The structures and conditions and the legacy of the proscenium arch theatre and text-based work are difficult if you are working with a different story-telling tradition"* Kully Thiarai



## Welcoming diversity

The design of theatre buildings has an effect on the way theatre is perceived, particularly amongst groups who do not regularly take part in cultural activities. The idea that theatre is 'not for us' can be re-enforced by the historic values implicit in our older theatres and by the 'iconic' qualities of some of the newer ones.

Can theatres be made to be more open, reaching out to people from different traditions, age groups and backgrounds? It is as much about attitudes as design.

*"...they need to know that their views are listened to, that they are recognised and taken on board, even where challenged. There needs to be an implicit level of trust. There will be complex conversations, but as theatre makers this is what we're good at. Artists and theatre people are good at solving problems, so I say — architects and theatre consultants engage with us!"*

Kully Thiarai

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# Inspiring designs

In the final session, Venu Dhupa invited four speakers to reflect on theatre and on the buildings which house it, to share their visions and to talk about the power of the art of theatre.

**Garfield Allen**  
Artistic Director and Chief Executive, greenroom, Manchester

**Kate Cross**  
Director, the egg at Theatre Royal Bath

**David Rosenberg**  
Shunt Collective, London

**David Lan**  
Artistic Director, Young Vic, London

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## Places that work for us

Every one of the four speakers works in a space which they helped to form and which is designed to a particular philosophy. The venues are varied and have their roots in very different types of buildings: two have moved into disused space under railway arches (the greenroom and Shunt); one took over a redundant cinema (the egg), and the fourth, newly built, but retaining parts of its original building – a butcher's shop (The Young Vic).

What they share is a common starting point – to create work for audiences other than those which fit the current profile for the average theatre-goer. These are spaces designed for children and younger generations - mainly urban and drawn from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. Each theatre director spoke enthusiastically about their own space but expressed concern about some of the more formal structures that had been built over the years to house what they see as the most human and interactive of the arts.

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## Does theatre need a building?

The building and the activity it houses share the common term 'theatre' but the preconception that the one automatically encloses the other needs to be questioned. Two factors tend to determine the way theatre is presented in our culture. One is the climate – we need to protect people from the weather for much of the year; the other is finance – where theatre is funded by ticket sales there has to be a means of allowing in only those who have paid. Can theatre be produced without it being enclosed in a building?

*"A lot of theatre companies start making work outside the theatre space. Then as they develop they seek bigger audiences and have more ambition for their work. They talk to directors to help them develop their work, but these directors are usually working in traditional spaces and they then have to conform and adapt to the constraints of these spaces"* David Rosenberg

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## Is the division between performer and audience a valid one?

The earlier sessions in the Conference focused largely on theatres which were (and still are) traditional in the sense that the actors present a production (on stage) to an audience (seated within the auditorium). This is a format which is now being challenged. Directors and performers working with younger groups and with people where the Western/European model does not readily accommodate their 'story-telling' are exploring different ways of working. Actors and audience change places; actors become part of the crowd; encounters are created; situations are discovered; the building becomes a theatre; theatre takes over the building.

*"There are many different ways of telling stories. With the limitations of space we are turning the whole space into artistic usable space. So work doesn't just take place in the black box but also in the foyer, the office, the lift shaft and the bar on an equal basis. We encourage artists to make and present work in all spaces in the building and engage in different interventionist activities. The performances are blurring the boundaries between audience and performance"* Garfield Allen

*"It's important that artists inhabit the same space as audiences. This makes the event live – theatre shouldn't be about competing with TV. Theatre facilitates a multi-sensory experience; you walk through the wardrobe yourself"* David Rosenberg

# Inspiring designs

## Can we create theatres for other ways of working?

The UK both gains and suffers from its heritage of historic theatres. Some people are excited by ornate grandeur with glistening chandeliers and plush seating and regard this as intrinsic to the experience of a good night out at the theatre. Others see these buildings dictating form, stifling creativity and preventing change. More disturbingly to some, they are perceived as perpetuating divisions within society, whereby those who pay less are relegated out of sight to the upper levels.

The civic theatres of the post-WW2 years aimed to reach out to a wider audience and offer a more equitable experience, but are regarded by some as essentially 'civic monuments' fixing creativity inside an inflexible concrete shell.

If theatre is being constrained by the buildings created to house it, is it possible to design spaces which enable more diverse forms to mature and flourish? Traditionally, younger, more experimental groups work in 'found space' taking over buildings which provide little more than enclosure. Building a new structure which still retains a sense of spontaneity and mutability has proved difficult. The Young Vic could well demonstrate one way in which it can be done.

## Possibilities

The suggestions which came out of the discussion involved the creation of spaces in which uses were less defined, spaces less designated, and which enabled a variety of activity to flow around the building. People were looking for spaces:

- which allow for the interaction of artists and art forms
- where 1,000 or more can take part in activities
- with seats that can be moved easily and reconfigured without large numbers of staff or complex and expensive technology
- where there is the potential for lighting and sound installations to be positioned across the whole of the performance area to enable it to be used in many different ways
- where this possibility is extended further so that the whole building can become part of the production
- where theatrical encounters can be created for people who find the auditorium encounter either boring or irrelevant.
- making the theatre see-through, transparent
- making the production side open to the audience rather than hiding a 'box of tricks' producing special effects
- where change is accepted as both necessary and inevitable.

## The essence of theatre

In the closing presentation, David Lan set out to present a sense of the conversations that had led to the design of the new theatre for the Young Vic. Entitled 'Bakers Dozen' he put forward the proposition that theatre must always aim to give just a little bit more.

A building that can encapsulate these qualities is likely to be a memorable one.

*"Theatre is an act of exchange — open handed, open hearted. How does a building contain that, express that, help to cause that powerful sort of relationship to come into being? Or make it more likely that it will come? It must create an unequal exchange. Through wonder, through surprise, through intensity of feeling, through amiability, through warmth, through conviviality an exchange is created"*

David Lan



# Performing principles

Conference Chair, Ian Brown, summarised the key issues raised during the day. The following list draws on his summary and incorporates comments raised by contributors and delegates.



## Process

**Remember** that what you are seeking to do is to create a building in order to run a successful theatre operation. Working out what sort of theatre you want and how it will function in the long term is a vital part of the pre-design process.

**Talk** to the people who actually work in theatres when planning a new theatre or changing an existing one. They know what problems they encounter and the results of getting it wrong.

**Make sure** the potential site or building is capable of accommodating all the spaces you will need. A fully functioning theatre is much larger than the auditorium which forms the core.

**Talk** to the people who will run the theatre and those who will use it (theatre professionals and audiences). For a new facility, it may well prove advantageous to appoint the artistic director early in the development process.

**Visit** other theatres, look for elements that fit your vision and ask how they were done.

**Look** for possible models and take examples from what already exists, but then develop what is right for your particular situation.

**Aim** to create something which is individual, appropriate and responds to identified needs.

**Be realistic** about costs. It is better to have a good simple building than a more ambitious one which has been compromised by cuts being made late in the design and construction process.

**Plan ahead** and plan carefully. The scale of the impact which a building project has on an existing organisation is often underestimated. Talk to people who have gone down the route before you, familiarise yourself with the process, and identify potential pitfalls.

**Allow** time for your organisation to settle in. During the first two years or so you will be testing how well the building operates so include a sum in your building budget for adaptations to be made after you have moved in when you may need to make small changes.

**Look ahead** and plan for the future. However well-designed they are, new theatres will only have low maintenance costs for a limited period. Very soon, different elements within the building need to be renewed or replaced. Where possible (and where the funding bodies rules allow) money should be allocated towards maintenance right from the outset so that a fund is gradually built up.

## Facilities

**Make sure** that the theatre facilities are adequate for the size of the auditorium and are appropriate for the way the theatre is to operate. Don't make cuts in one area without considering its impact on the building as a whole. This applies equally to front-of-house and back-stage areas.

**Remember** that a theatre is also a workplace – those who deliver the product and keep the place running need good working conditions if they are to function effectively and consistently deliver a quality product. Each group within the theatre operation (i.e. the artistic direction, performance, production, technical and support teams) has its own specific set of requirements.

**Positioning** of spaces is important. Make sure that the different groups are able to communicate effectively. For example, the growing practice of creating an office block away from the theatre can prove detrimental to the artistic ethos.

**Running** a theatre and putting on productions are team efforts – space/s need to be provided where people will meet informally, exchange ideas and discuss problems. Look for examples where this has been achieved – for example by treating the Green Room as a communal facility and placing it in a central position.

**Think** about a theatre's wider role and make provision for additional activities, which will generate income and/or attract investment. Theatres no longer open only in the evenings. Stakeholders and funding bodies expect them to play a more developmental role within the local community and the local economy. These expectations have an impact on staffing levels and on space requirements but additional facilities (such as education areas, meeting rooms, bars and cafes) serve to both generate income and strengthen support.

**Think** about the external facilities which the theatre will need. Good signage, clear points of entry, safe drop-off points (particularly for people with disabilities), and spaces to gather before and after the performance are all important. Provision also needs to be made for vehicles (often large pantechinons) to park and for goods to be loaded and unloaded – close to the get-in so that scenery and sets can be delivered safely and easily without obstructing others.

**Plan** to accommodate change. Theatre practice and production styles will change as will the demands made on theatres as organisations and buildings. Just how this will happen cannot be predicted but too tight a fit and too prescriptive a specification will make it more difficult to make changes when they become necessary.

# Performing principles



## Auditorium design

**Make provision** for the audience's rising expectations in terms of comfort. Whatever the style and format, most audiences now expect comfortable seats, reasonable leg-room, good sight-lines, and good sound quality (especially where money has been raised for improvements). They also want to be neither too hot nor too cold. Acoustics and ventilation (air conditioning or air handling) are complex issues which require specialised theatre expertise to get right.

**Be aware** of how people move around the building. Circulation routes and the size and position of the areas in which people congregate are an important consideration when large numbers need to move around in a short space of time (i.e. interval drinks and toilet breaks.) In terms of income generation, the aim is to enable people to spend time in the bar (rather than queuing to get out of the auditorium or into the toilets).

**Define** your aims and plan uses which will be complementary and compatible. There is no example of a performance space which works for every type of use. Selectivity and compromise have to be practiced. That said, producers and directors are increasingly looking for flexibility – formats which can be changed without a big staff input or complex mechanisms. Changes in format have an effect on seating capacity (and income), access, lighting positions, sound, projection etc.

**Provide** sufficient storage space. The more flexible a theatre is the more moveable equipment it needs – and this equipment has to be stored when not in use. Storage needs to be fit-for-purpose, properly positioned and accessible so that the equipment does not have to be continually taken from one place to another (and possibly damaged in the process).

## Technical provision

**Plan** to ease the production process. The transporting of sets to and around a building is part of most productions. Routes need to be carefully designed and then kept clear. Backstage access doors (the get-in) need to be large enough for the scale and type of production, changes in level need to be ramped (when slight) or furnished with a lift. Workshop facilities are useful even when sets are not constructed on site (for repairs and adaptations).

**Aim** to match the facilities provided by other venues. Theatres which rely, in whole or in part, on touring product and on visiting companies need to ensure that the facilities they provide match those of similar venues as far as is practicable.

**Take account** of technical requirements. Lighting and sound installations are getting more complex in response to more ambitious production requirements. Video is becoming a standard requirement. If good provision is made, technicians will not then be tempted to hang fittings in inappropriate places (such as the ornate stucco work on a Victorian balcony). While many theatre practitioners seek greater flexibility with the positioning of lighting and sound controls, they do need to be placed so that operators have a good view of the action. This is particularly important with a fixed control room where those working in them need to be able to see the stage and hear what is being presented (both speech and sound).

**Make** a balanced decision on seating capacity. The size, scale and proportion of auditoria and the seating capacity need to be carefully considered. It is better to turn people away at peak periods than to have to run a half empty theatre for most of the year. Larger auditoria may increase capacity for some events but they will also limit the type of production which can be accommodated. Over a certain size, qualities of sound, sightlines, lighting, and 'the overall experience' are inevitably compromised.

**Theatres** are power hungry. Increasingly, they will need to take on board issues of sustainability, both to protect the environment and to contain costs. It is easier to accomplish energy savings when consideration is given to this during the design stage.



# Performing principles



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## Creating inspiring theatres

**Select someone** who has a passion for theatre to lead the project. The project director will need a wide range of skills including being able to plan, make decisions, understand financial controls, and communicate effectively. But above all they need to be inspired by theatre and excited by the prospect of creating a new theatre space.

**Going** to the theatre or working in a theatre building can be a special experience: stimulating, enjoyable, relaxing, companionable, memorable and rewarding. Work out what sort of place you want your building to be and how you want people to respond to it.

**Choose** an architect who shares your vision. There are many good theatre architects but it is important to find one whose work you like and with whom you can communicate. Before making your selection, look around, draw up a shortlist, visit architects' offices and some of their buildings, and talk about how they would approach the commission (EU procurement regulations permit this process).

**Be aware** of the impact your building has on its surroundings and the contribution it makes to the streetscape. Theatres are important buildings, particularly during the evening when they can provide a focus for the area.

**Make sure** you appoint a well-qualified design team. Theatres are demanding in design terms and need a specialist team to ensure that they function properly.

**The client** organisation (especially if not the end operator) needs to ensure that its own team includes people with relevant expertise of directing, producing work and operating theatres. The quality of the working relationship between this team and the design team is an important one which contributes significantly to the overall success of the project.

**Hold** on to your vision and enjoy what you are doing. Creating a theatre is a long process with regulations to be met and various complications to be overcome, so it's easy to lose sight of what it is you want to achieve.

**Creating** a theatre is one of the most stimulating and rewarding activities which you are likely to undertake. Commitment, enthusiasm, determination, optimism all contribute to the eventual success of the project.

# Attendees



**Jonathan Adams** Capita Percy Thomas  
**Neena Agarwal** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Belinda Aird** Royal Shakespeare Company  
**Sajad Al-Hairi** Westminster City Council  
**Gregory Allan** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Garfield Allen** greenroom, Manchester  
**Jane Anthony** Norwich Theatre Royal  
**Deborah Aydon** Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse

**Dominic Bailey** 300million  
**Ioannis Balaskas**  
**Darren Barbier** Glen Howells Architects  
**Margie Barbour** Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis  
**Jason Barnes** The Theatres Trust  
**John Baskerville** The Academy for Chief Executives & The Settlement Players  
**Ellie Beedham** Creative Foundation  
**Ken Bennett-Hunter** The Stage  
**Petrus Bertschinger** Production Manager  
**Peter Bingham** Central School of Speech & Drama  
**Fran Birch** The Theatres Trust  
**Andrzej Blonski** Andrzej Blonski Architects  
**Angela Bond** Bush Theatre, London  
**Rick Bond** The Complete Works  
**Suzie Bridges** ArtsTeam  
**Julie Brinkworth** Burrell Foley Fischer LLP  
**Ian Brown** West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds  
**John Burgess** Bucknall Austin  
**Liz Bury** AMPC Ltd

**Nuala Calvi** The Stage  
**Catherine Carey** Abbey Theatre, Dublin  
**Kate Carmichael** The Theatres Trust  
**Phil Cave** Arts Council England  
**Jonathan Church** Chichester Festival Theatre  
**Fiona Clark** Bush Theatre, London  
**John Clarke** Bucknall Austin  
**Olga Clarke** Bucknall Austin  
**Paul Connolly** The Theatres Trust  
**Catherine Cooper** Catherine Cooper Events  
**Jo Cottrell** London Calling Arts Limited  
**Paul Covell** Paul Covell Theatre & Lighting Consultant  
**Paul Crosbie** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Stewart Crosbie** Production Manager  
**Kate Cross** the egg at Bath Theatre Royal  
**Adam Crowthwaite** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Colin Cuthbert** Northern Light  
**George Cutts** Department of Culture, Media and Sport  
**Marilyn Cutts** The Theatres Trust

**Kam Dale** Westminster City Council  
**Ashley Davies** Austin Smith: Lord  
**Mark Davies** Carr and Angier  
**Paul Davies** University of Kent  
**Donna Dawson** The Point, Eastleigh  
**Vinod Desai** Art Asia  
**Venu Dhupa** The Theatres Trust  
**Anna Downing** Auditoria & Stadia  
**William Dudley** Stage Designer and 3D Animator  
**Christopher Durham** The Theatre, Chipping Norton  
**Simon Dwyer** Sydney Opera House

**Barbara Eifler** Stage Management Association

**David Farr** Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, London  
**Mark Foley** The Theatres Trust  
**Tim Foster** Tim Foster Architects  
**Roger Fox** ABTT Show  
**Paul Franklin** Carr and Angier  
**Dominic Fraser** The Old Vic Theatre, London

**Brian Gavin** Greenock Arts Guild  
**Helen Gaynor**  
**Gina Gillam** Sutton Theatres  
**Ken Golding** Delstar Engineering Ltd  
**Natasha Graham** NG Associates  
**Gavin Green** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Ric Green** Opera North Limited  
**Gemma Guy** Stage Technologies

**Mandy Hare** Hazlitt Theatre  
**Mahamdallie Hassan** Arts Council England  
**Andy Hayles** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Mark Hazell** Norwich Theatre Royal  
**Richard Heason** Aylesbury Civic Centre  
**Duncan Hendry** Aberdeen Performing Arts  
**Jessica Hepburn** Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, London  
**Evan Hercules** Victoria Theatres Trust  
**Philip Heselton** Southampton City Council  
**Theresa Heskins** The New Vic Theatre, Newcastle  
**Judith Hibberd** Arts Council England South East  
**Andy Hill** Hetherington Seelig Theatres  
**Will Hill** Norwich Theatre Royal  
**Michael Holden** Michael Holden Associates  
**Bob Holmes** Bush Theatre, London  
**Chris Honer** Library Theatre Company, Manchester

**Peter Hooper** Dartington College of the Arts  
**Simon Horner** Burrell Foley Fischer LLP  
**Martin Huber** Theatreplan LLP  
**Psyche Hudson** Oakengates Theatre @ The Place, Telford  
**Tyrone Huggins** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group

**Judith Isherwood** Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff

**Nick Jones** New Vic Theatre, Newcastle  
**Anna Joynt** Burrell Foley Fischer LLP

**Jenny Killick** Arts Council England  
**Debbie King** Oakengates Theatre @ The Place, Telford

**David Lan** Young Vic, London  
**Alison Lee** Theatre Projects Consultants Ltd  
**Richard Lee** Jerwood Space, London  
**John Levitt** Save London's Theatres Campaign  
**Graham Lister** Leicester Theatre Trust  
**Jonathan Lloyd** Polka Theatre, London  
**Sue Lloyd** The Theatres Trust  
**Peter Longman** The Theatres Trust  
**Robert Longthorne** Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse  
**Jill Low** Southampton City Council  
**Eric Lund** Hazlitt Theatre  
**Michael Lynas** Ambassador Theatre Group

**Fiach MacConghail** Abbey Theatre, Dublin  
**Katy Marks** Haworth Tompkins  
**Lee Marsden** Austin Smith: Lord  
**Brod Mason** Royal & Derngate, Northampton  
**Nathalie Maury** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Stella McCabe** Leicester Theatre Trust  
**Sue McComick** SM-Art! Projects  
**Suzanne McDougall** The Theatres Trust  
**Ciarán McGahon** Office of Public Works, Ireland  
**Genista McIntosh** The Theatres Trust  
**David McKeown** MP Theatre Consultants  
**Keith McLaren** Carr and Angier  
**Ewen B McWilliam** Acanthus Design  
**Susanna Mellowes** Victoria Palace Theatre, London  
**Josephine Melville** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group

**Will Mesher** Haworth Tompkins  
**Anne Minors** AMPC Ltd  
**Adrian Morgan** Library Theatre Company, Manchester  
**Neil Morton** Theatreplan LLP  
**Joan Moynihan** Nimax Theatres Limited  
**Donna Munday** Royal & Derngate, Northampton

**Vayu Naidu** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Gregory Nash** The Point, Eastleigh  
**Dr Sophie Nield** The Central School of Speech and Drama  
**Rikki Newman** Wyndhams Theatre, London  
**Derek Nicholls** Theatrical Management Association  
**John Nicholls** London Calling Arts Limited

**Cindy Oswin** Writer, Performer, Director

**Lesley Payne** Arts Council England  
**Paul Pomfret** Civic Hall Bedworth  
**Maurice Power** MP Theatre Consultants  
**Mark J Price** The Theatres Trust  
**Barry Pritchard** ArtsTeam  
**Richard Pulford** SOLT/TMA

**Dominic Rai** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Deborah Rees** The Rose Theatre  
**Rupert Rhymes** OBE The Theatres Trust  
**Max Riches** Figaro Systems Inc.  
**Chris Ricketts** Theatre and New Writing Company, Wales  
**Jane Rigler** Lovells  
**Sol River** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Peter Roberts** Cameron Mackintosh Limited  
**Steve Roberts** Carr and Angier  
**Leon Robinson** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Tim Ronalds** Tim Ronalds Architects  
**David Rosenberg** Shunt, London  
**Josie Rourke** Bush Theatre, London  
**Geoffrey Rowe** Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham  
**Sarah Rushton-Read** The Fifth Estate/ Lighting & Sound International

**Jeff Salmon** Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse  
**Mhora Samuel** The Theatres Trust  
**Patrick Sandford** Southampton City Council  
**Emma Savage** Carr and Angier  
**Will Schofield** Glen Howells Architects  
**Nikki Scott** Stage Technologies  
**Sharman Sharman** The Theatre, Chipping Norton  
**Kevin Shaw** The Coliseum, Oldham  
**Noriko Shimamura** Burrell Foley Fischer LLP  
**Janet Sisson** Doncaster MBC  
**John Sleath** AMPC Ltd  
**Roger Spence** Abbott Spence Associates  
**Joel Staley** ICIA, University of Bath  
**David Staples** Theatre Projects Consultants Limited  
**Janet Steel** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Judith Strong** Conference Reporter

**Flip Tanner** Royal Shakespeare Company  
**David Taylor** Arup Venue Consulting  
**Kully Thiarai** Former Artistic Director, Leicester Theatres Trust  
**Pat Thomas** OBE The Theatres Trust  
**Jack Tilbury** Charcoalblue Ltd  
**Steve Tompkins** Haworth Tompkins  
**David Tse** Chinatown Arts Space

**Richard Vaughan** The Architects' Journal  
**Nick Vincent** 300million  
**Rebecca Vincent** Theatre Projects Consultants Limited

**Tony Wakefield** Abbey Theatre, Dublin  
**Sir Stephen Waley-Cohen** Victoria Palace Theatre, London  
**Sian Walters** Hetherington Seelig Theatres  
**Dagmar Walz** The Old Vic Theatre, London  
**Sue Webster** Arts Consultant  
**Caroline Wheller** Aylesbury Vale District Council  
**John Whitaker** Theatreplan LLP  
**Mark White** ABTT  
**Deborah Williams** ACE, Whose Theatre Working Group  
**Peter Wilson** Norwich Theatre Royal  
**Sam Wise** Arup Venue Consulting  
**Ken Woodward**  
**David Wright** Arts Architecture International  
**Jih-Wen Yeh** Chinatown Arts Space

**May Yung** Chinatown Arts Space

