

Conference 10 Report  
**Designing School Theatres**  
26 & 27 April 2010

The  
Theatres  
Trust



Protecting theatres for everyone

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# Conference 10

## Designing School Theatres

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**Pamela Lea** NVB Architects Ltd

**Rosellen Mates** Development Director, Frensham Heights

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**Peter Rabbett** Education Consultant

**Sid Higgins** Executive Director, National Youth Theatre of Great Britain

**Alistair Boag** Theatre Director Stahl Theatre, Oundle School

**Anthony Ruck** Arts and Cultural Adviser, BSF West Midlands, MADE

**Mark Foley** Principal, Burrell Foley Fischer LLP

**Geoff Halliwell** Director, Bond Bryan Architects

**Margaret Rudland** Former Headmistress, Godolphin and Latymer School

**Steve Roberts** Consultant, AMPC

**Nicoline Harrington** Assistant Headteacher and Director of Specialism, Rodillian School

**Oliver Haden** Vice Principal, The Langley Academy

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# Mhora Samuel

Director, The Theatres Trust



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School theatres touch all our lives. They are the foundation stones in building a love for theatre, dance, music and the performing arts, they are the places where young people's talents are moulded and shaped and where they learn how to channel their self-confidence. In these spaces young people physically connect with what it means to perform at their best and feel the adrenaline and excitement associated with the achievement of putting on a show.

For young people, learning to communicate with an audience, as new audiences understanding the special quality of live shared experiences, or as students perfecting professional performance skills, the school theatre should be a space that is inspiring, accessible, well equipped and well designed.

This year's conference, Designing School Theatres gave the Trust a chance to focus on this area, one which is dear to my heart. It is my belief that every child in this country should be able to access the best theatres and performing arts facilities in their schools and in their communities. This shows that we take seriously the importance of investing in young people and nurturing their abilities.

On the 26th and 27th April 2010 we all gathered in Leeds to look at how to improve the design of school theatres and focused on drawing together a number of design principles that could assist in

planning new facilities. One week later a general election changed the face of Government and set in motion a programme of major public funding cuts. We now know that Building Schools for the Future, hotly debated during our conference, has been significantly cut back. Many schools remain in the programme however and other schools will continue to need capital investment and await refurbishment.

Whether built through BSF or through other routes, we must ensure that schools have good quality facilities to deliver the performing arts curriculum, and that as community hubs they are well designed to accommodate public use. I hope that the review of the BSF programme will provide an opportunity to create procurement processes that take on board our main conclusion – that there needs to be much more thought put into delivering dedicated, fit-for-purpose spaces that provide high quality theatre and performing arts facilities for young people and for local communities.

This conference gave The Theatres Trust clear guidance on the way forward and I'd like to thank all the session chairs, contributors, delegates, sponsors and the staff who ensured we raised the issues and debated them so passionately. I would also like to say a special thank you to Susan Elkin for producing this excellent report and to our Chair, Maev Kennedy who kept us thinking and focused throughout the event.

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# Maev Kennedy

Conference 10 Chair



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Over two days in Leeds The Theatres Trust conference let loose a high kicking chorus line of questions, not least how the provision of new school theatres, and indeed the schools building programme, would survive in what has proved a dramatically changed political landscape.

But it answered one question unequivocally: this conference was necessary.

Speaker after speaker, from the platform and the floor and in passionate discussions afterwards, every apparent solution from multi use spaces to disabled access, threw up new problems. It was hard for those contemplating a new theatre to work out what questions they should be asking, even if they could secure any meaningful consultation with the funders, designers, technicians, or builders.

It became dispiritingly clear that it is dramatically easier for those in the private education sector to embed themselves in the design and procurement process. In state schools, both traditional and the new academies, the crucial decisions are often taken far above the heads of the people who will be using the new spaces - sometimes with near comically disastrous results.

Our brilliant guest speaker Imelda Staunton pleaded not just for practicality but for glamour: she likes a nice set of curtains, preferably in crimson velvet, and she is convinced most children do too. Instead the conference heard of theatres completed with no curtains, no curtain tracks, no means of attaching curtain tracks, or in the case of one multi-million pound brand new academy, a baffling and entirely useless circular curtain track.

It would have been insane optimism to expect to resolve such tangles in two days, but a consensus on the way forward emerged surprisingly quickly, in the wealth of expertise available and the goodwill towards sharing it.

For me the high point was not the wonderful Staunton scorning the lectern and stalking around the auditorium with the roving microphone, but the students from Rodillian School explaining what their new, if far from ideal, drama and dance spaces meant to them.

What they said was very interesting: their assurance in addressing an audience of total strangers was fascinating. They were living testimony to the confidence and skills their performing arts training has given them, and to the immense value and importance of the subject of the conference.

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# Introduction

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It was an exciting moment when, under Maev Kennedy's guiding hand, teachers, headteachers, educationists, architects, theatre consultants and theatre installers assembled at Leeds College of Music for a day of in-depth talking about Designing School Theatres.

Then, for the first time at The Theatres Trust's annual conference, the discussion continued into a second day with a lively debate in the Bury Theatre at The Armouries in Leeds within the buzz of PLASA Focus. The two-day format enabled the important subject of the design of school theatres to be aired in the detail it deserves.

After an inspirational launch from actress Imelda Staunton, four central, roughly sequential themes: imagining, designing, realising and valuing your school theatre, were planned for day one.

The idea was to think about how a school without a theatre might begin to envisage what it could offer - as a hub for other schools, as a home to youth arts organisations and as a public venue; to take a look at the important design features in a school theatre; to consider how schools achieved the designs they wanted as a capital project progressed; and finally to look at how to articulate the relationship between the value of a well designed set of performing arts facilities and delivering educational outcomes.

As the day progressed these neat divisions seemed increasingly blurred, although they did provide starting points.

The 2004 announcement of the £45 billion Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Government programme to rebuild every secondary school meant that the inclusion of a school theatre became a reality for almost any school which wanted one. Other new secondary

schools have been built or rebuilt – often including theatres – in recent years through the Private Finance Initiative, the Academies programme, and through more traditional routes.

Speakers ranged from architects, designers and consultants to teachers, technicians and other users who were pleased with their theatres and others whose theatres have serious design faults. We also heard from two students who talked on the second day about the ways in which their theatre at Rodillian School in Leeds has had an impact on their learning.

A pattern soon began to emerge. There is, the conference learned, an alarming difference between school theatres in independent and maintained sector schools. The former usually end up with a theatre which is fit for purpose where the school, as the client, has a more direct relationship with the architect and the project, while the latter can easily end up with one which is flawed. Some felt the cause of this was the procurement process related to BSF/PFI delivery which gives teaching staff too little voice. It also became clear that the lack of available design guidance on performing arts spaces in schools results in poorly thought-through facilities.

One of the aims of the conference was to consider design principles for school theatres and as it progressed these were developed. But it was also evident that the mood of the conference was concern about the process and that this needs rethinking.

This report summarises the speakers' contributions and main conclusions reached by the Designing School Theatres conference. In the final section the main issues which emerged from the conference are summarised for future action along with key design principles.

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# Opening Address

Before introducing Imelda Staunton, Maev Kennedy welcomed delegates and set the scene for the conference by observing that, at last, school theatres - which have the potential to affect children for life - are a potential reality for all.

Through BSF, PFI and the Academies programmes 'We now have,' Kennedy said, 'some fantastic performance spaces in schools and some, worryingly, which are 'brand new and useless'.

The purpose of the conference, in Kennedy's view, was to provide 'connective tissue.' She intended to ensure that even if delegates left with questions still unanswered they should at least now know... 'a man who knows'.

Actress Imelda Staunton, (Miss Pole in Cranford, the eponymous Vera Drake, Miss Adelaide in National Theatre's Guys and Dolls and Dolores Umbridge in the Harry Potter films) told the conference how her love of theatre began at school when, aged 11, she took part in Benjamin Britten's *The Little Sweep* staged in the all-purpose school hall at her all-girls North London convent.

She was pushed to apply for drama school by Jackie Stoker, her elocution teacher (cue for impersonation of her clipped tones). Staunton vividly remembered that the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), which accepted her, felt like a homecoming because the auditions were held in a proper theatre - unlike Staunton's clinical, and unsuccessful, experiences at Central School of Speech and Drama and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Theatres and theatre spaces should, Staunton said, have character and magic. They needed to be special places that help to create the focus on the performers. She talked about the importance of the 'intensity of the space'.



She advised designers and teachers to 'give kids a backstage' with wings, curtains and dressing rooms, which they love, and to make the performance space as flexible as possible so that it can be configured in different ways for different shows, not just end-on. A flexible space was also better if the school wanted to use it for filming.

It is vital too, Staunton continued, that children be seen by the audience. So, even if you have to use a multi-purpose space such as the school hall or gym without raked seating, put the performers on rostra. And if it's a musical, position the musicians where the audience can see them rather than hiding them behind a curtain or in a pit.

She advised teachers and others in the audience to keep theatre space for children small, and not to ask or expect children, who have difficulty speaking out and up, to perform on a wide, difficult playing area and asked everyone to remember that acoustics were really important.

Teachers should, she suggested, invite architects, designers and theatre directors into their schools and tap them for advice. 'They won't charge you anything and you can quote me on that' she said, adding cheerily to the audience, 'Let the experts come up with the ideas and you can take the credit'.

**Chair, Maev Kennedy**

**Peter Rabbett**

Education Consultant

**Sid Higgins**

Executive Director, National Youth Theatre of Great Britain

**Alistair Boag**

Theatre Director, Stahl Theatre, Oundle School



## Imagining your school theatre

Asking whether schools should be looking for a glorified scout hut or a scaled down La Scala, and should school theatres include a bar for parents, Maev Kennedy introduced the three speakers for the first main session of the morning.

Hampshire-based BSF consultant Peter Rabbett told delegates that the key to building successful school theatres is to look first at the requirement for arts, culture and cultural learning. He favoured schools sharing performance space as much as possible.

*“It’s vital that you get the right kinds of programmes that young people can engage with and give them routes to the expertise of professionals. Access and maximum participation, especially for young people, is the priority.”*

**Peter Rabbett**

At Park Community School in Havant 70% of 11-13 year olds take part in extra-curricular drama, dance, sport or music despite their ‘dreadful building’ having a ‘terminal case of concrete rot.’ 93% of Park pupils achieve 5 GCSEs at A\*-C, 45% have English and Maths at these levels and the school has a very high value-added rating which shows that the school develops individuals way beyond expectations. ‘If Park can do it in an area with such high levels of deprivation as Havant, any school can’ said Rabbett who connects the school’s commitment to performing arts with its high levels of achievement.

So he and his colleagues want to spread that ethos across Hampshire which has far fewer schools with dedicated theatres than the national average. In facilitating the development of the new BSF Cultural Stakeholder Group, a new requirement in the BSF process from 2009, he brought together 250 people with commitments to the performing arts. From this have sprung ‘cultural ambassadors’ and ‘cultural champions.’ Culturespace is an initiative to share detailed information about performance space in schools and in the community.

Rabbett hopes that soon every school in Hampshire will be part of a hub and that headteachers can be persuaded to part

with £1m of their BSF money to ensure that all children have access to a theatre space even if it isn’t in their own schools.

The second speaker was Sid Higgins, Executive Director of National Youth Theatre of Great Britain (NYT) who talked about the new Michael Croft Theatre at Alleyn’s School in South London and its links with the NYT.

The theatre, built in 2009, is a 300-seat signature building and represents the whole life of the co-educational independent school. Headmaster Dr Colin Diggory believes that application of the arts transforms all other subjects. ‘Find a school which values the performing arts and you will find an academic school’ Higgins quoted Diggory as saying.

He explained that NYT’s links with Alleyn’s, rekindled since 2003, go back to its founder, Michael Croft, who taught English at the school before leaving in 1956 to start NYT with a handful of his former pupils.

Higgins described a ‘stunning, meticulously planned theatre’, a box within a larger building whose corridors – acting as acoustic barriers – lead to other areas at all levels. Full attention has been given to acoustics, sightlines and comfort and it’s very well equipped with good backstage facilities. Higgins mentioned the lack of a full height fly tower but explained that suspension is still possible.

*“Plan for flexible use of the space but be careful about the floor, especially if you want to use it for dance.”*

**Alistair Boag**

The school uses the theatre for drama, music, conferences and other learning activities. NYT uses it during the holidays for about 10 weeks of courses and workshops and can use the school’s other facilities such as gyms, classrooms and playing fields too.

Within the building – which also boasts a magnificent glass atrium as a foyer – NYT has a permanent, dedicated studio space. All of this is granted to NYT free or at a minimal charge because of its charitable status.

Higgins pointed out that there are over 1,000 registered youth theatres in the UK, most of which would welcome a new home and facilities in a well equipped school. ‘It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement and it’s replicable’.



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Higgins ended by advising schools to work out very carefully what their theatre will be used for and not to go for a 'vanity project' or a building full of compromises. That means getting the right team to manage the project.

*"You have to entertain as well as educate. If you cannot build an audience for what you're doing in the theatre then there is little point in doing it."*

**Sid Higgins**

We then heard from Alistair Boag, Director of Stahl Theatre at Oundle, an independent school near Peterborough. Its 264-seat theatre is converted from a Congregational church and faces onto the street in the little town of Oundle where it doubles as its community theatre. The stage is below the apse, and gantries are mounted through the roof beams. There is a green room, offices and dressing rooms.

Boag, a teacher at the school, runs the theatre and is assisted by a small team of drama school-trained staff. The school is the theatre's main user and mounts six shows a year directed by adults and three directed by students.

There are two seasons each year during which visiting companies bring in shows. Oundle School students can take on all the backstage roles in the school's productions and the visiting ones. They can also learn a great deal by working alongside visiting professionals who also provide informal careers advice.

*"When you plan a school theatre, remember that it's also for teaching. So, for example, leave space for pupils in the lighting box."*

**Alistair Boag**

The theatre is also used by the local Gilbert and Sullivan society, the nearby primary school and the town's literature and music festival and, as the local cinema, it also screens 25 films a year.

Boag regards the situation at Oundle as 'very fortunate' and stresses that there is no single model for a successful school theatre. 'Partnership is the major way forward' he said.



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**Chair, Ric Green**

**Anthony Ruck**

Arts and Cultural Adviser to BSF West Midlands, MADE

**Mark Foley**

Principal, Burrell Foley Fischer LLP

**Geoff Halliwell**

Director, Bond Bryan Architects



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## Designing your school theatre

After being introduced by Maev Kennedy, Ric Green, Technical Director for Opera North and chair for this session, observed that there was already a common thread running through the day: building a school theatre is a shared journey which responds to what artists and young people need. And once you have your building you need the right people to run it.

Green, who has written a guidance note on school theatres, advised delegates that common sense must prevail. That involves 'knowing the unknown', working out what the core business of your theatre is, and consulting experts before you start.

Explaining that he expected the session to identify the design standards we need in school theatres, Green first introduced Anthony Ruck, Arts and Culture Adviser to BSF in the West Midlands, an Arts Council-funded post, based at The Midlands Architecture Centre (MADE).

Ruck argued that money for the rebuilding of schools is a catalyst. It is not the change itself. It is the newly located schools which must then transform: learning; the use of buildings; school organisation such as timetabling; and the use of new technologies. And every secondary school should be working towards being a local community hub.

The key to getting the design right, Ruck said, is for schools not to say 'We need a theatre' but to ask 'What would we do with a theatre?' He advised against starting with a 'shopping list' of theatre features.

*"Schools should be clear about what they want performance spaces to be used for and how they integrate with the whole curriculum."*

**Anthony Ruck**

Education is too often results-driven, Ruck opined, and argued for a move towards open learning such as that demonstrated by Lyric Theatre Hammersmith which works with the local authority and is now a hub for GCSE drama teaching in the borough.

Often, he said, stressing the need for realism, it might be better for a school to share a theatre with another school or to share a community theatre such as Lyric Hammersmith than to build one of its own.

Next we heard from Mark Foley, Principal at Burrell Foley Fischer LLP who was responsible for the Frensham Heights School Performing Arts Centre in Surrey and the Menuhin Hall at the Yehudi Menuhin School, also in Surrey.

Foley believed firmly that the 'one size fits all' mentality cannot work for school theatres because schools and theatre spaces are complex and each is unique. It is also crucial to ensure that in schools nothing is wasted. Every space must count. Masterplanning the theatre spaces, timetabling, and ensuring the spaces were not devoid of character were all important.

If, for instance, a theatre is to be used for teaching drama lessons daily as well as for rehearsal and performance, there are issues about providing natural light, explained Foley. He counselled against simply building a very expensive classroom.

Curriculum requirements affect design. Different art forms have different requirements. At the Yehudi Menuhin School the initial plan was to share music concert and dance use of the new performance space with the Royal Ballet School but it became too costly and impracticable.

Foley also told delegates that the design should also reflect the competing demands of school and community use if the intention is to share the space with the community. He took delegates through key design points for school theatres.

*"You have to weigh up the wish for flexibility against the cost and accept that you may have to jettison some of the items on your 'wish list.'"*

**Mark Foley**

The third speaker in this session was Geoff Halliwell, Director at Bond Bryan Architects. He had recently worked on theatre spaces at York College and Archbishop Grimshaw School.

Halliwell described starting from basics at York College with the question: 'What do we need?' The answer was facilities for sixth form, further education and higher education students in one building to replace '27 scattered rooms'.

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The eventual solution was a five-storey building, at the heart of which is the 300 square metre Alan Ayckbourn Theatre with a double height performance area, three sets of rostra seating and plenty of flexibility to create proscenium arch, theatre-in-the-round and other configurations. It can be used, for instance, for fashion shows linked to hair and beauty courses as well as for drama-related performances.

Halliwell explained that the building, which is firmly rooted in curriculum needs, also has three dance studios with sprung floors and workshops all of which support both the Alan Ayckbourn Theatre and the college's curriculum.

At Archbishop Grimshaw RC School in Solihull, a space specifically for visual and performing arts was built for £1,500 per square metre. It opened in 2008. Again, Halliwell stressed how the project began from basics by setting out the 'output requirements'.

In this case the list included the inclusion of a chapel, foyers, and 50 square metres of storage space next to the theatre. Halliwell talked about how he had 'protected' the 50 square metres from the overall BB98 storage allocation. In another example he talked about how BB98 refers to 'changing facilities', and the importance of making it clear that some of this space will be needed by the theatre for dressing rooms.

*"Achieving a good school theatre in BSF is all about being rigorous with the space allocations within Building Bulletin 98."*

**Geoff Halliwell.**

'The theatre we designed is fit for the school's purpose' said Halliwell. 'It is situated at the front of the site so it is very accessible and mechanical ventilation means that external noise is not a problem. The theatre has electrically retractable seating so that it can be used for assemblies but it will not double as an exam hall.'

Ric Green then set delegates, working in small groups, a three-minute prioritisation task to identify key principles in school theatre design. There were some especially focused comments from the floor at the end of this session. Many of these are given in the later School Theatres Design Principles section.







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**Chair, Pamela Lea**

**Margaret Rudland**

Former Headmistress, The Godolphin and Latymer School,  
Hammersmith, London

**Steve Roberts**

Consultant, AMPC

**Nicoline Harrington**

Assistant Head and Director of Specialism, Rodillian School, Leeds

**Oliver Haden**

Vice Principal, Langley Academy, Slough



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## Realising your school theatre

Facilitated by Pamela Lea, Director, NVB Architects Ltd and Chairman of Rook Lane Arts Trust at Frome in Somerset, this session brought us four speakers. Stepping in at the eleventh hour for the Head of Drama, Sarah Adams, who had been trapped in Australia by Iceland's volcanic ash, Margaret Rudland the former headmistress of the Godolphin and Latymer School first told delegates about the excellent theatre created by converting a church next to her independent school. Steve Roberts, the theatre consultant who worked on the project talked about how AMPC had worked with the school. Then, in stark contrast, two maintained sector teachers described the rather unsatisfactory theatres in their recently rebuilt school buildings.

Godolphin and Latymer, an independent girls' school has 700 students and occupies a very limited site in Hammersmith. Rudland, was thrilled when in 2004 the next door church of St John became available along with its vicarage. 'I'd always dreamed of a space large enough to accommodate a whole school assembly with everyone seated. At the beginning, my vision was very limited,' she said.

The deconsecrated Grade II\* listed building by William Butterfield was leased to the school for 125 years. The converted vicarage provided extra classrooms and plans evolved to further develop drama and music facilities with the church as a performing arts space linked to an adjacent new-build music block by a covered corridor.

Rudland told delegates how architect Anne Minors (AMPC) worked closely from the outset with the Director of Music and the Head of Drama with ongoing meetings, discussions and amendments as the project unfolded. Steve Roberts, consultant with AMPC took up the story for delegates.

Through flexible staging units that can be raised and lowered they created a reversible space with a drama performance area at the plainer west end of the church where the aisles provide wings. The east end is used for music. A well thought through installation means that the space can also be used in the round and configured for events such as fashion shows. Staircases to new balconies can be raised to maximise floor space.

The resulting Bishop Centre is highly flexible. It can accommodate up to 200 seats on the seating units – and Rudland got her assembly space for the whole school.

School caretakers and other staff had to be trained to operate the staging units although the need for a full-time performing arts technician was soon obvious and the school appointed one shortly after the centre opened.

*"Many girls have developed a passion for technical theatre in direct response to there being a fully equipped theatre on-site. Godolphin and Latymer's Friday afternoon 'tech club' is now more popular than acting."*

**Margaret Rudland**

The conference heard next from Nicoline Harrington, Assistant Headteacher and Director of Specialism at Rodillian School in Leeds. The school, which has specialist status in the performing arts, moved into a brand new BSF building in September 2008.

Harrington stressed that the new building is a huge improvement on the old one where rain buckets in classrooms were the norm and dance and drama teachers had to sweep up half eaten sandwiches from the space they shared with the canteen before they could start work. She lamented that the then headteacher did not value the performing arts (despite the school's specialism) and that she and her colleagues were not brought into the planning process early enough.

Now she has to work with problems such as the excellent dance studio being divided from the gym by just a fabric curtain. Balls can easily come through the netting and there are significant acoustic issues. As a speaker from the floor observed this should not have happened as schools must be capable of delivering the curriculum under Requirements E4 of the Building Regulations and Building Bulletin 93 'The Acoustic Design of Schools'.

Rodillian's 'theatre space' was built as a 'main hall' with retractable seating and inconveniently situated light and sound systems. There are no curtains or wings. The drama studio behind the hall has to double as backstage.

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Harrington made an impassioned case for continued co-operation between end-users, consultants and architects throughout the planning, design and building of spaces that will be used for the performing arts in schools.

*“We had some input on decisions about furniture once the building was complete. But we were not asked about any of it soon enough and we had no champion to represent us.”*

**Nicoline Harrington**

The session's third speaker was Oliver Haden, Vice Principal at Langley Academy in Slough and a former actor. The PFI school opened two years ago in stunning new buildings by Foster and Partners, replacing a failing school.

With ironic humour Hayden subtitled his presentation 'God bless Bertolt Brecht'. The theatre he has to work in is so unfit for purpose that productions have to be staged without props, scenery and costumes. We call them 'Brechtian,' he said sadly.

The theatre has no backstage area or wings and you cannot get to the lighting control room when the seating is retracted. It is impossible to move concealed from stage right to stage left other than by crossing the stage so all the characters remain perform on stage – 'Brechtian style'.

The main doors from the corridor open directly onto the stage rather than into the back of the auditorium which means that latecomers are, to put it mildly, a problem.

He finished by showing a slide of a recent school production. They staged it in the atrium 'because we're fed up with the theatre.'

Instead of this expensive mistake, Haden would have liked flexibility, a storage room and a dedicated space because 'multi-use encourages architectural compromise.'

*“Yes, teachers and students can and do find ways of dealing with these problems, but why should they have to?”*

**Oliver Haden**

Like Harrington, Haden wants architects to be enabled to collaborate with school drama specialists from the very beginning of every project.

From the chair Lea summed up by observing in agreement that there needed to be more work done on getting performing arts teachers and fine architects together.



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**Chair, Rosellen Mates**

**Natasha Coccia-Clark**

Head of Drama, The Bridge Academy, Hackney, London

**Andrew Perry**

Assistant Head (Arts), Townley Grammar School for Girls, Bexley



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## Valuing your school theatre

In contrast to the previous session all three speakers in this one were thrilled with their fit-for-purpose theatres.

Maev Kennedy introduced Rosellen Mates, Development Director at Frensham Heights, an independent school in Surrey, as a 'force of nature' and the chair for this session. Mates's job is to raise funds and work with the local community on behalf of the school.

As a former press officer at the Royal Opera House, Mates had long been 'in love with the arts' and firmly believed that every school should have a theatre. 'The performing arts are transformational. You find out about other cultures by studying their drama and music' she told delegates, adding that she has observed the truth of this not only in her own school but also at the nearby comprehensive school.

Before introducing the next speaker Mates advised delegates that partnerships are the key to success and you need the whole school staff in support, she said. Her school employs a theatre manager who trains staff in theatre technology and works with local schools, including primaries.

Natasha Coccia-Clark is Head of Drama at The Bridge Academy in Hackney, in the most deprived borough in the UK. It too has a fine theatre, known as the Performance Hall, in its brand new building that opened in 2008. At present the school, which is filling from the bottom, has only 11-14 year olds. Its Year 10 begins in September 2010.

*"Our theatre is beginning to have a real impact on local kids and their community. Pupils are now so keen on their school and what it is doing for them that they arrive and wait long before the doors open in the morning and are reluctant to leave at the end of the day."*

**Natasha Coccia-Clark**

Coccia-Clark showed delegates a short film in which she interviewed students and colleagues, asking them how the Performance Hall benefited their learning and teaching. The responses were very positive and enthusiastic. They have a professional environment to learn, rehearse, perform and watch

professional arts companies, and it is a tool for celebration and forging community cohesion.

The 340-seat Performance Hall has retractable walls to reduce its size. It is not 'owned' by, nor is it exclusively for the use of, the drama department, although most drama lessons are taught in it. It attracts performing arts companies 'like a magnet.' Graeae, Immediate Theatre, Arcola and LSO St. Lukes have all been in to use the space and work with students.

The Academy is sited in the middle of a densely populated estate and the theatre is home to the estate-based youth theatre for under-16s in Hackney. The Performance Hall is also used by a local over-50s drama group. 'Feeder' primary schools come regularly too. And Coccia-Clark and her colleagues are working hard to reach out even more and to entice ever more parents and carers into this vibrant hub.

Coccia-Clark was followed by Andrew Perry, Assistant Head (Arts) at Townley Grammar School for Girls in Bexley. A former opera singer, Perry has never recognised a division between professional and school theatre.

Until recently Perry and his colleagues were sharing teaching space with the canteen and it was a 'terrible mess' as one of his slides illustrated. Then came the new theatre. It was traditionally funded through the local education authority, in response to overcrowding at the school.

He had, he told delegates, proper and useful meetings with the architects, Studio E, and because of his background was able to articulate what he wanted. The result, which is surrounded by wide corridors which double as gallery and occasional drama teaching space, is run by a full-time technical manager and two part-timers.

*"Since the building of the theatre at Townley student numbers involved with drama and music have doubled and the Year 7 dance club is huge. The benefits to self esteem are immeasurable".*

**Andrew Perry**

At present the theatre is used for little or no charge by community groups, but Perry thinks the new head will want to raise money from it. The space is also used for holiday courses and there are links with local colleges.



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**Nicoline Harrington**

Assistant Head and Director of Specialism, Rodillian School, Leeds

**Faye Sheldrake**

Rodillian School, Leeds

**Chris Day**

Rodillian School, Leeds

**Jen Ng**

Unit 5, Diploma in Architecture, London Metropolitan University

**Tim Fisher**

Unit 5, Diploma in Architecture, London Metropolitan University

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**School theatres imagined**

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When the second day audience was settled in the Bury theatre at Royal Armouries courtesy of Plasa Focus, Maeve Kennedy observed that the one voice missing from Day one – other than via the short film from Bridge Academy – was that of the students who use the end product of architects' and planners' deliberations. So this session offered delegates some student perspectives of school theatres.

First we heard from Faye Sheldrake and Chris Day, sixth form students at Rodillian School. Each spoke eloquently about the school theatre which Nicoline Harrington had described on day one.

Faye listed the theatre's disadvantages which include a lack of backstage, wings and a changing area so that you have to 'manoeuvre round the school' to use it. She also mentioned problems with a misplaced, inflexible lighting rig and said that you have to be 'creative with mikes' because the speakers are misplaced.

Chris's brief was to describe the theatre's positive attributes. He praised the sprung floor and the lights which confer 'professional authenticity,' adding that the space 'works brilliantly' for small scale shows. He also liked its location at the front of the school which works well.

Faye, whose main interest is dance, stressed that although their new dance studio has 'great scope' and an 'amazing sound system' she really wishes that it didn't have to be shared with the PE department.

Asked from the floor whether or not they were consulted during the planning and building process Faye and Chris said that they weren't asked until afterwards and that architects had not appreciated that the Main Hall would have to be adapted to a theatre for their performing arts specialism.

A different sort of student perspective came from Jen Ng and Tim Fisher, architecture students at London Metropolitan University, who had worked with school students at the all-girl Coloma Convent School in Croydon, and which is benefiting from the current wave of BSF funding. Coloma has a music specialism and a new performing arts venue with a double height auditorium is due to open in September 2010, funded through BSF.

Their project involved running workshops with school students and inviting ideas about ideal performing facilities such as practice space. Taking 'learning to play and playing to learn' as the theme, the girls imagined the school as a city with a new gallery entrance like a busy street with artists in residence and 'villas' along the school's perimeter wall. It was an interesting exercise in what can come from careful consultation with school students.



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**Chair, Maev Kennedy**

**Paul Durose**

Chairman, School Theatre Support Group

**Dan Aldridge**

Head of Operations, Stage Electrics

**Richard Jones**

National Specialism Coordinator Music and Performing Arts, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

**Anthony Ruck**

Arts and Cultural Adviser to BSF West Midlands, MADE

**Mhora Samuel**

Director, The Theatres Trust

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### **Debate: School theatres design principles**

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A panel comprising Anthony Ruck, Richard Jones, Mhora Samuel, Paul Durose and Dan Aldridge convened to discuss design principles, previously submitted questions, and comments from the floor. First Maev Kennedy asked the three panellists from whom the conference had not already heard to speak briefly.

Richard Jones, National Specialism Co-ordinator, Music and Performing Arts, at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, works with 660 schools. He wanted to see dedicated theatre spaces in schools and asked why thinking is so limited. There should, he said, (sometimes) be redundant space in schools. There should be no doubling up of functions.

The next speaker was Paul Durose, theatre manager at Leys School in Cambridge and founder chairman of the School Theatre Support Group. He told delegates that a number of STSG members had undergone 'new builds' and he wanted to see better advice being made available.

Head of Operations at Stage Electrics, Dan Aldridge expressed concern that the BSF procurement process was well intentioned but that it doesn't talk to the right people. 'We must challenge the conventions' he said.

Then it was on to questions and comments. One headteacher wanted to nail down the relationship between theatre, theatres design and student learning. Anthony Ruck suggested looking at schools where drama and the performing arts have already transformed education for exemplar case studies. Mhora Samuel advised schools to think about how to link Ofsted outcomes with access to good quality theatre facilities. Richard Jones argued for the entitlement of all school students to be treated as professional artists - which involves persuading heads, governors, parents and Ofsted to stop seeing theatre as being limited to English and Drama.

Leading on from Jones's point, another questioner asked the panel how we demonstrate the value of school theatres. Richard Jones pointed out that drama teaching is a statutory requirement, but other panellists lamented that it gets marginalised and treated as a 'fluffy' extra. Nicoline Harrington commented that because drama is student-led it can have a huge impact on the rest of the curriculum as a way of teaching.

Another questioner wanted to know why, if all theatre building projects by law have to be referred to The Theatres Trust at the planning application stage, the same ruling does not apply to school theatres. Mhora Samuel answered that the Trust would see them if it were made clear that they are being built for public use. She added that the Trust is seeing an increasing number of school theatres as there is greater emphasis on extended and community use of school theatres.

Alex Wardle of Arup said BSF should not deliver substandard school theatres. Each theatre, studio theatre, concert hall or whatever should be required to satisfy an independent review by theatre specialists and demonstrate that adequate budgets for the staffing and maintenance are in place.

Further discussion revisited the issues raised on Day one revolving around what school theatres are primarily for, the process of procurement and review, the sharing of facilities with the community and how to staff school theatres to maximise their benefit.

Maev Kennedy ended the discussion by asking each panellist to identify a single priority. Dan Jones called for an independent design review group for school theatres. Paul Durose recommended as much consultation with staff as possible. For Anthony Ruck the key to it all was making the link between performing arts and education as clear as possible. Richard Jones wanted more cohesion and Mhora Samuel called for the education and theatre design sectors to come together to develop educationally informed design guidance for school theatres.

In her very perceptive summing up of what the conference had agreed, Kennedy observed that:

Students and teachers should not have to make do with something inferior when budgets are in place to get it right.

A design review of a school's performing arts spaces needs to be injected into the process before contracts are signed.

Collecting the expertise is only the beginning of the process; feeding that expertise into getting the right result is not at all easy.

Everyone involved in designing school theatres needs to focus on the outcomes in educational terms.

Designers need to understand that good theatre design helps achieve educational standards in schools.

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There was a consensus against multi-use spaces.

Funders, experts and clients (including pupils) must work together.

There won't be a 'one size fits all template' so there's a need to be able to access good and bad case studies on school theatres.

At its best a school theatre can be transformational and transformation had been at the heart of everything discussed at the conference.

Ending, Maev Kennedy said, 'Schools should be able to achieve something that is fit for purpose and, as Imelda Staunton said, couldn't school theatres have a bit of glamour, and a bit of joy, and a bit of exhilaration, and a bit of exalting the spirits?'



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# School Theatres Design Principles

## Key principles for school theatre design that emerged throughout the conference

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**A vision for your school theatre is vital.** The theatre is often at the heart of the school, providing a unique facility that builds confidence and inspires.

**Planners need to think about how the whole school will be involved** in building the vision, including programming, marketing, front of house, backstage, putting on productions and working with visiting companies.

**At the beginning of a school theatre capital project,** the school and its funding bodies need to be clear what they want the school theatre to be used for and by whom: formal timetabled lessons, extra-curricular use, informal learning and community uses?

**The design for the performing arts facilities** should be defined in the first instance by the teaching and learning outcomes of the school. Performing arts facilities will need to promote creative development and provide imaginative teaching and rehearsal spaces in addition to providing performance facilities.

**Students, as end users, should be part of the consultation process** on the performing arts spaces from the beginning. Feed-back discussions and educational projects with performing arts students could provide very helpful information.

**If community use is planned, work with the community** to build support for the school theatre. Think creatively about co-location of artists and youth arts activities.

**The site, spatial planning, and design** of the school theatre should meet the needs of all users of the theatre.

**School theatres deliver outcomes when they are properly resourced.** They will need their own operational staff and, depending on the size and scale of operation, a theatre manager. Partnerships are the key to success and the whole school, including facilities managers, need to be part of delivering a successful school theatre.

**Theatres that have community uses and are hired out need staffing.** Creative approaches to staffing can help. You may need a full time theatre technician but also use partnerships to 'borrow' staff and send students out on placements with local theatres to build skills.

**Consider carefully the number of teaching/rehearsal facilities in schools** with bigger drama studios that can accommodate larger class sizes. The minimum height of a studio space and its size (as recommended in BB98) should be revisited.

**Instead of new build, consider using a nearby existing building** for the school theatre, rather than starting from scratch. It may be cheaper, more sustainable and perhaps more community friendly. Depending on the school's location, also look at options around use of a local theatre or 'hub' theatre in another school.

**If there is to be significant external theatre use,** there will need to be additional consideration given to security, access, toilets and dressing room provision and use of specialist facilities by the public during the day as well as in the evening. This will not work if the expectations of the public are not met.

**If there will be heavy demand** on the performance spaces consider having several smaller spaces rather than trying (and failing) to make one space work for everything. Large Main Halls in multi-functional use can be highly problematic.

**To protect users from tendon and other injuries,** floors of drama studios, dance studios, main halls and theatre spaces should all be sprung.

**Consider if the spaces will be used to teach technical theatre production.** Site lighting bridges and galleries so that students can work without ladders, and provide facilities for disabled students to access all areas. Ensure that the lighting control box is centred onto the stage and that it is big enough to teach in.

**Provide sufficient workshop and storage space** for set building and storage of equipment and an accessible get-in onto the stage.

**If the school is having only a Main Hall** and performing arts are on the curriculum, it must be usable as a performance space. An optimum size of 350 seats is suggested. Many will have a single bank of retractable seating, but flexibility to perform in the round, end on, promenade and in other configurations is important for educational and community needs.

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## Key Issues

### Recommendations for further action identified during the conference

Explore beyond the design limitations associated with 'Main Halls', and be more rigorous with BB98 to provide the accommodation needed for school theatres.

Ensure you can fully black out the theatre space for performances with properly installed shutters, blinds or curtains, and have access to natural light for teaching.

Make sure all performance spaces are sufficiently high to properly hang and focus lights. There needs to be a proper rear-stage cross over, good access to dressing rooms, storage space, stage and auditoria curtain tracks and wing space.

Entry doors to the theatre/hall should not be located directly onto the performing area or be designed with glass panels. Sound lobbies and acoustic considerations are vital.

Consider the use of theatre consultants in design teams to liaise between, and work with, teaching staff and contractors. Performing arts teachers, who do not necessarily know the technical details of a theatre space, must be supported.

School facilities staff, technicians and teaching staff need to be trained in how to make the best use of performing arts facilities and equipment.

Make a very clear case for the value of the performing arts in schools in order to demonstrate the return on investment of public funding into better school theatres and performing arts facilities.

Persuade headteachers, governors, parents and Ofsted to widen their understanding of theatre and the use of theatre facilities beyond English and Drama. Embedding the importance of high quality theatre and performing arts facilities into a school's Ofsted self evaluation framework is key.

School theatres should be exhilarating and inspiring. They should help to create focus, have character and feel magical. Such performing arts spaces enable arts, culture and creative learning in schools. They also contribute to a school's overall success.

Public sector procurement processes can distance performing arts teaching staff from participating in the design development of their performing arts facilities. This results in new schools not always ending up with performance spaces appropriate to their needs.

The development of design briefs for performing arts spaces and the process of procurement need to accommodate specialist performing arts and theatre uses.

Each school theatre is unique and should be treated as such. At present The Theatres Trust reviews the designs only of some school theatre projects. It was recommended that the Trust should lobby for an expanded remit so that it sees all school theatre projects as part of its statutory consultee role in the planning system.

More resources are needed to inform schools about their design and funding options in developing school theatres. It was suggested that The Theatres Trust should develop case studies, offer links to other school theatres, provide and offer specialist advice for the development and design of school theatres and work in partnership with others to develop these resources.

There is little research into formal and informal teaching and learning outcomes from different theatre and drama spaces in primary and secondary education facilities. There was a call for a project to provide more evidence of the benefits.

Existing Building Bulletins including BB98 (Secondary Schools Projects), BB93 (Acoustics), and BB90 (Lighting) do not provide sufficient detail for performance spaces. There was a call for supplementary advice for BB93 and BB90 and a dedicated Building Bulletin for Performing Arts Spaces.

The Theatres Trust to work with Government departments and their public bodies and the ABTT and the Society for Theatre Consultants to develop specific advice for performing arts facilities, including Building Bulletins and Area Data Sheets.

# Attendees

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John Allen Northern Light  
Peter Angier Carr&Angier Theatre Consultants  
Tim Atkinson The Theatres Trust  
Chris Baldwin ACT Consultant Services  
Polly Bansal LCE Andrzej Blonski Architects  
Grant Barden Welsh National Opera  
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Davie Bell Stage Electrics  
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Liz Bury Anne Minors Performance Consultants  
Kate Carmichael The Theatres Trust  
David Charlton The Royal Hospital School  
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Natasha Coccia-Clark The Bridge Academy, Hackney  
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Russ Coppin Beckfoot School  
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Michael Holden Society of Theatre Consultants  
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Adrian James Adrian James Acoustics  
Nick Johnson Freelance  
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Mark Londesborough National Theatre  
Guy Lovegrove The BRIT School  
Richard Lumb Highfield Studio Services  
Graham Lyon Abraham Darby Academy  
Fiona Macmillan Children and Young People Services  
John Marsh MEB Design Ltd  
Jim Marshall Marshall Sound & Light  
Andrew Martland TMC LTD  
Rosellen Mates Frensham Heights  
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Keith McLaren Carr&Angier Theatre Consultants  
Julian Middleton Arts Team Architects  
Alan Miller Lawray Architects  
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Paul Mott Northern Light  
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Debbie Stapleton Wakefield MDC  
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Jon Stevens Charcoalblue  
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Sarah Taylor  
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John Topping Bispham High School  
Robin Townley Theatreplan  
Patrick Trower Oakham School  
David Turnbull TMC LTD  
Tim Turner Girls' Day School Trust  
Peter Waddicor Carriageworks Theatre  
Luke Wallace Manor College Of Technology  
Nicola Walls Page \ Park  
Alex Wardle Arup  
Peter Warne The Royal Grammar School  
Mick Way Theatretech  
Mark White ETC Limited  
Ben Whitmore LJMU  
Graham Widger Willowfield Humanities College  
David Wilkins Northern Light  
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