

Balancing act

London's West End theatres

London has one of the richest collections of theatres in the world. Over 50 are contained within a two-mile radius of the West End, and over a 100 in the metropolis altogether, including the remains of one of the oldest, the Rose (1587), where Shakespeare learned his craft, and the Globe, a reconstruction of an Elizabethan theatre built only 10 years ago. Live theatre is one of the chief reasons that people from all over the world visit London. They come to see Shakespeare performed, modern experimental theatre, elaborate 'block-busting' musicals and to enjoy the ambience of the architectural surroundings. But above all, they come to have a great evening out. Expectations of comfort and accessibility are high. Theatre owners are keen to meet these requirements and maximise profits to recoup the costs of mounting lavish productions. English Heritage and other interested parties are facing pressure from owners to alter the 33 listed theatres in the West End, while seeking to retain the historic and architectural character of these gems.

The issues

The West End group includes some of the best work of renowned theatre architects Frank Matcham (1854–1920), WG R Sprague (1865–1933) and C J Phipps (1835–97), as well as the elegant art deco-inspired decoration of Serge Chermayeff (1900–96), at the Cambridge Theatre. It includes good early-19th-century survivals: the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, with its coffered double-height hall by Benjamin Dean Wyatt (1775–1850), and the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, with a portico by John Nash (1752–1835). Outstanding wooden and iron stage machinery can be found at the Palace Theatre (1891), at Her Majesty's in the Haymarket (1897) and the London Palladium (1910). Many of the West End's listed theatres, built around the turn of the 20th century, were constructed on tight urban sites that have precluded expansion over subsequent years. Often they are seen as relics of the past and inadequate for today's needs. Several aspects of the buildings are of concern to theatre owners, such as Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber of Really Useful Theatres, who manage a large number of West End theatres.

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Sub-stage at the London Palladium Theatre, a view of the hydraulic ram used to raise the safety curtain; above, the frills and furbelows of theatrical costume from the production of *The King and I*

Increasing capacity

Alterations in seating capacity have been made over the years and not many Victorian or Edwardian theatres have their original chairs, but recently radical proposals such as the extended projection of balconies have been put forward. For those with disabilities, access is being dealt with *ad hoc*: some theatres use the former Royal rooms with direct access onto the street to provide for wheelchair-bound visitors, but other slot them in where they can in an unsatisfactorily makeshift way. This is an issue that will have further impact when regulations on access under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 come into force in 2004. Access corridors and circulation spaces are often cramped and constricting, with fire-safety implications, as well as increasing the uncomfortable crush for the bars at the intervals. Many theatre-goers today like to wander freely about the auditorium and not be confined to one level. Above all, sight-lines must be unobstructed; nobody wants to sit behind a column, even if it is an early use of cast iron in a theatre building!

English Heritage is carrying out a photographic survey of London's West End theatres. The images will be accessible through the National Monuments Record and will inform the conservation management of this glorious collection of buildings, ranging from the early 19th to the 20th century



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The opulent interior, auditorium ceiling and gallery fronts in the Garrick Theatre, 1889, by Walter Emden with C J Phipps (Grade II*).

The auditorium has three U-shaped balconies stacked vertically one above the other, each with a different plaster ornamented front. One common problem is to fix the lighting tracks without damaging the artistic plasterwork

Behind the scenes there are often operational problems: ageing wooden stage machinery, antiquated lighting, heating and ventilation systems. Dressing rooms are often tiny and minimal in comfort and located underground. A big show requires more dressing room space: the Shaftesbury Theatre recently provided accommodation in the form of 'portakabins' on top of the building. Basements can be subjected to flooding with the rising water table in London: one theatre has a stream flowing underneath the stage. Located in the heavily polluted atmosphere of the West End, theatre buildings need constant maintenance, but while some are simply dirty,

others, such as the Shaftesbury Theatre, have terracotta blocks in poor condition on the exterior. Care of the fabric of the buildings varies greatly from owner to owner and depends on the funds available.

English Heritage can play a positive role in working with owners and local authorities to keep theatres in use, with certain parts of the building adapted or upgraded for the comfort of users and audiences. London Region has been involved in a number of major schemes that have been approved and implemented, for example, at the Lyceum, The Savoy Theatre and The Royal Opera House. The key is to identify the areas of special interest: the architecture and original decoration of the auditoria and other public spaces; the quality of the exterior design, construction and materials; the survival of early or rare stage machinery or special dedicated spaces, such as the scenery docks and painting room at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Spaces of lesser historic or architectural interest may then be more flexible in terms of alteration. It is also important that the owners have a sense of responsibility and 'duty of care' towards historic theatres and maintain them properly to secure a long-term future. Each building should be seen on its own merits and its particular problems addressed with informed willingness and flexibility on all sides. □

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Further reading:

- *Theatres: A Guide to Theatres Conservation*, English Heritage, January 1995
- *The Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatre 1750–1950: A Gazetteer*, edited by John Earl and Michael Sell, The Theatres Trust 2000
- *Easy Access to Historic Properties*, English Heritage, October 1995

The West End Theatres Survey

In addition to tackling the problems faced by theatres and encouraging imaginative solutions, English Heritage has decided to celebrate and document this extraordinary group of buildings by making a photographic record of every West End theatre during 2001.

The primary purpose of the project is to create a timely record for posterity. The images will illuminate how these complex and, in some respects, unknown buildings function. The images will also capture something of the

overlapping worlds that coexist within each theatre, from the public spaces (entrance foyer, bars and auditorium) to the equally fascinating backstage areas inhabited by the actors and theatre technicians.

English Heritage has consulted the Theatres Trust and The Society of London Theatre about the type of photographic record most useful to them. In turn, these organisations have supplied us with information about ownership and highlighted the areas of concern within the buildings. One of the most vulnerable aspects is the stage machinery, some of it original or early in date, but now out of use or in need of replacement. To prevent these serendipitous survivals of a different theatrical era disappearing unrecorded, English Heritage has sought the advice of the Association of British Theatre Technicians, who are currently undertaking a survey to establish exactly what survives.

The recording began in February and will continue throughout the year, with photography by Derek Kendall who was responsible for the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England's comparable survey of the City of London's Churches in 1995. The resulting images will be accessible through the National Monuments Record and, it is hoped, in an exhibition in 2002. □

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In London, English Heritage must be consulted by local planning authorities on applications for listed building consent or development affecting listed theatres and their settings. In all cases involving works to listed theatres, early consultation with English Heritage staff and the Theatres Trust is strongly advised.

The fly floor with ship-like hemp lines at the Garrick Theatre. A surprising number of the West End theatres retain their original scenery-moving apparatus, but pressure is increasing to replace it with an infrastructure that is lighter and easier to operate

