

between the lines

James Simpson presents a heartfelt review of *A Sense of Theatre*, by Richard Pilbrow . . .



For Christmas in 1997, when I was 11 years old, my parents gifted me Richard Pilbrow's book, *Stage Lighting Design - 2nd Edition*. On the inside of the cover, my dad had written a note saying that Pilbrow's first book had inspired him to go into lighting design when he was my age, and he hoped that it could do the same for me. And, well, it did!

Having a son of 11 myself now, I often think about how that book influenced me and that, during his life, Pilbrow managed to complete three books that touched three generations and inspired their future in the lighting design industry (or so we shall see in my son's case).

But how do you review a book written by someone who had such a huge influence on you? Not least because the final publication of the book in question happened without him, as he passed in 2023, shortly before it was released.

Writing this review is both a privilege and a burden as Pilbrow is such an icon for me. After many screwed up pieces of paper and hours wondering what to write, I turned to a person who I knew had been influenced by Pilbrow's books the same way I had - my dad. We sat in a coffee shop and essentially held our own 'book club', discussing what *A Sense of Theatre* is, why Pilbrow wrote it, and what it means for his legacy. Finally, I knew what needed to be said about it . . .

TELLING A STORY

A Sense of Theatre tells the story of the creation of the National Theatre (NT). If it had been written by anyone else, were they still alive, it would have been focused on the architecture, the performer or the audience - and many such books exist. This book tells the story of *theatre*, and the challenges and compromises that had to be made to design a space for the evolving repertoire of theatrical practices that had emerged over the previous century.

It couldn't have been easy for Pilbrow to write a book that tells the story of the birth of a national icon. Not least because he is quoting verbatim the words of theatre giants such as Laurence Olivier, Peter Brook, Peter Hall and Denys Lasdun. As these people are no longer with us, he was also responsible for preserving their legacy. Of course, in telling the story of the NT, Pilbrow downplays his own role, just telling it as it is, but the book does reveal what many of us saw him as - a quiet genius who was both a gifted LD and a positive influence on pretty much anything he was involved in.

We know this book is truthful because Pilbrow includes actual meeting minutes from the theatre's conception, capturing every discussion, back-and-forth, and the tensions that had to be navigated. It's a hefty book - literally - but these passages make it easy to dip in and out, following threads across chapters without needing to read every word if you don't want to.

These passages reveal the tension within the theatre's design team and the unique challenge Pilbrow was uniquely placed to solve. In "Meeting 17", the committee debates the Olivier Theatre's stage with architect Denys Lasdun, questioning whether a fly tower could fit alongside the desired audience-

actor relationship. For Lasdun, the physical constraints didn't work on paper - until George Devine points out: "No one has yet defined for Lasdun what the flies mean to us." Lasdun replies: "Softley (Peter Softley) has called the flies 'a filing system'." Can you imagine the frustration of the dramaturgs in the room at having an architect design a theatre space without a full appreciation of the nature of the space, let alone the technical requirements?

Similarly, imagine being a celebrated and gifted architect such as Lasdun and having to sit in a meeting where Olivier and Brook are discussing the framing of the stage space for different types of drama. William Gaskill is recorded saying: "Isn't it easier to do naturalistic plays in a picture frame?" To which Olivier responds: "I don't know [how] to suggest a claustrophobic room on an open stage . . ." and Michael Elliott adds: "That is not the point. The actor has different functions in the two different forms of stage".

This debate, very much at home in a theatre rehearsal room or the circle bar with a glass of wine after a show, must have sounded like madness to an architect like Lasdun. He was interested in the building, the experience for visitors and the statement the building would make on the South Bank. It's fascinating to discover how such disparate minds created the perfect theatre despite communicating in different languages.

ENTER RICHARD PILBROW

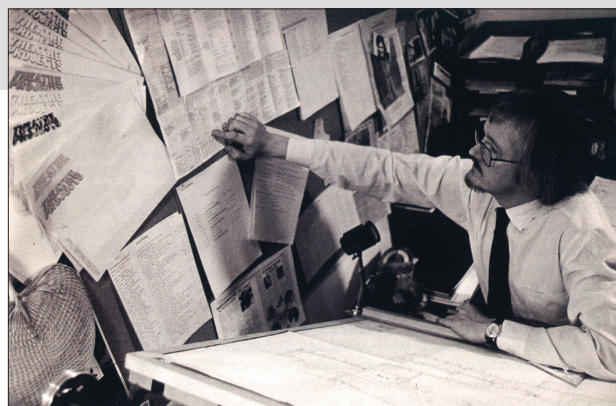
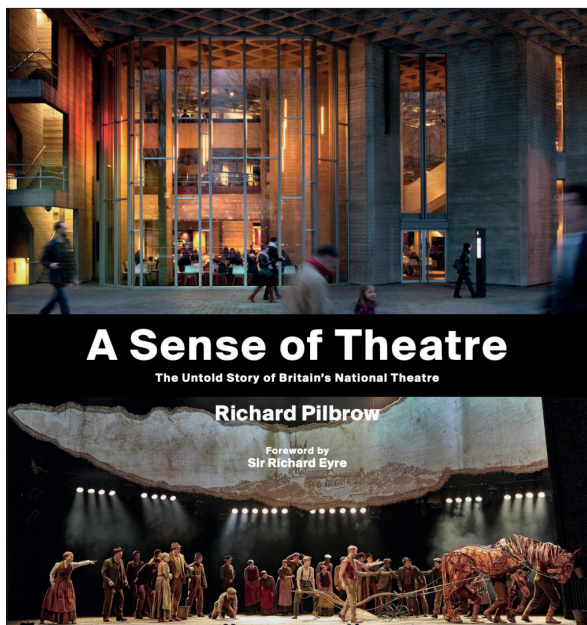
There is a gift granted to the type of person who can remain visibly calm during the panic and stress caused by the process of theatre making. Pilbrow embodied the key traits of the LD, and through his books and stewardship of the emerging lighting design industry, shared these traits with all of us. Whilst this made him a brilliant LD, it also gave him a critical role in the dynamic of the design team.

On the one hand, you had Olivier talking about the tension between the audience and the proscenium arch - very esoteric and abstract - combined with Lasdun decrying the need for a greater distance between the back row of the theatre and the stage to

allow for the promised 750 seats expected of the new theatre. Pilbrow, as a skilled communicator between the esoteric and the practical, thanks to his years on the production desk as well as his naturally humble and thoughtful personality, was the critical ingredient in this team.

Having been Olivier's LD for many years at the National Theatre Company, performing at what we now know as the Old Vic Theatre, he formed Theatre Projects at a critical time to provide consultation to new theatrical constructions and renovations. He filled his team with experts and naturally fell into the consultancy role for the design of the new NT. His role there wasn't lighting, although who better to advise on this? As such, he supported the entire technical infrastructure needs. Clearly, from the evidence provided in the minutes charted in this book, he became much more of a communicator and translator for the team as they spoke their different languages, just as any LD has to do from the production desk of the theatre.

"The NT is a legacy left by a team of brilliant people, and this book shows us how each of them contributed to making it what it is with detailed evidence and insights . . ."



"A Sense of Theatre can be used as a blueprint for good theatre design..."

Reading his book, I wonder if the requirement for a lighting designer on that critical design committee was always an essential component? Pilbrow embodies the best of our profession, and there is no one better to have done the job, but is one of the legacies he has left for us the evidence that having someone on the team who is both grounded but also thoughtful, the secret sauce for any challenging new project?

THE DNA OF THEATRE-MAKING

What is apparent in *A Sense of Theatre*, is the very DNA of the NT has Pilbrow's impression on it, even though he downplays his own role and elevates the entire team, whom he clearly had a lot of respect for. The way the book is written allows us to follow this thread, seeing the discussions and the decisions that influenced how the NT was built.

There were so many influencing factors that affected the choices made by the team, such as the socio-economic situation of the time (the three-day week), the politics (conservatism) and the physical issues of the site which changed from being the space on the other side of the river, now the gardens next to the London Eye.

What's nice about the way Pilbrow has presented this book is that he lets other people tell the stories of why the project was ultimately a success, encouraging famous actors, directors and producers to share what they love about the site. Not that it needs celebrity endorsement, but hearing the views and opinions of people who really understand the nature of what makes the venue brilliant to act or direct in, allows us to learn the impact of good design and how to achieve it. *A Sense of Theatre* can be used as a blueprint for good theatre design - or any design, to be honest.

There's no shortage of books about the NT, covering everything from the architecture, the business, the performer and even the technology, but no-one had got to the bottom of why these things all work together in concert with each other. Pilbrow, as the last member of the committee still able to write the book when he did, was the only person left to tell that story.

The NT is a legacy left by a team of brilliant people, and this

book shows us how each of them contributed to making it what it is with detailed evidence and insights. But the book itself is also a legacy for Pilbrow, with the DNA of his theatre-making experience - the bible for the secret ingredients of theatre-making - distilled into this humble but insightful documentation of the process.

It allows all of us to continue their legacy in other projects, applying this successful approach to any of our future endeavours, whether that's building theatres, working at the production desk or in any other role that life might throw at you. No matter what field you work in or what aspect of theatre you enjoy, there is plenty to be learned from Pilbrow in his final book.

WHAT WOULD RICHARD DO?

For many of us, Pilbrow is an icon that pioneered the theatre lighting design role, so he really needs no greater legacy - nor would he want it. But I'm extremely proud that, as a member of his community, it was one of us who created such an impact on so many people through their enjoyment of his theatres, or through his books, as he did for myself and my dad. Like everyone, I was saddened by his passing in 2023 and knowing that he had been working on another book, I was worried it wouldn't ever be completed.

Huge credit therefore goes to Rob Halliday, along with others including Richard Pilbrow's son Fred, who stepped in to ensure that the book got to see the light of day.

One of the first things I did when I got the book was to hunt down any clue as to where Pilbrow's involvement stopped before he couldn't complete it anymore. I was really heartened by Rob's message at the end which reassures the reader that Pilbrow had sight of the almost finished version that got published, and that in their approach to finalising the publication, they regularly used the phrase: "What would Richard do?" And, to me, this legacy encapsulated in four words is the perfect question we can all ask ourselves when we need advice. What would Richard do?

A Sense of Theatre is available from the National Theatre's website, quite rightly, and from all good book retailers. 📖

➡ plasa.me/book