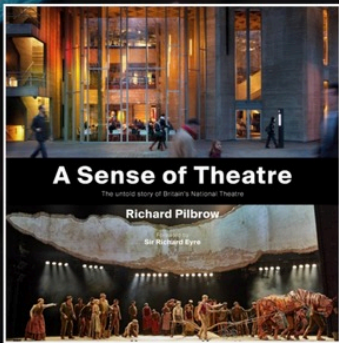




Failure to Ignite

In *A Sense of Theatre*, Richard Pilbrow untangles the history of Britain's National Theatre in London

BY ARNOLD ARONSON



The cover for Pilbrow's final book, *A Sense of Theatre*. | Image courtesy of Unicorn Publishing Group.

Richard Pilbrow at the 2014 USITT Conference & Stage Expo in Fort Worth, Texas. | USITT/ Richard Finkelstein.

If you—as a theatre practitioner or spectator—have ever been to London, you have almost certainly been to the National Theatre (NT) and most likely have a strong opinion about the building on the South Bank and the three theatres contained within it. Richard Pilbrow's final work, *A Sense of Theatre: The Untold Story of Britain's National Theatre* (Unicorn Publishing Group, 2024), is a monumental book (quite literally, weighing just over five pounds) about this iconic theatre and theatre institution. Many books and articles have been written about the history of the company and the architecture of the building, much of the latter quite critical. But this book—in its breadth and depth; in its hundreds of photos of

the theatre, its personnel, and its productions (including a full-color gallery of selected productions from the theatre's opening until the pandemic shutdown); in its architectural drawings, plans, and sections; in its interviews with and reminiscences by dozens of directors, actors, designers, playwrights, technicians, backstage and front-of-house personnel, and critics; in its history of English theatre and theatre architecture; in its archival content; in its comparative study of other contemporary theatres; and in its thoughtful investigation of what makes a theatre work—subsumes and surpasses all that came before it. Even if you have little knowledge of the NT, and perhaps little interest in that specific institution, much in this book will engage you, surprise you, amuse you, and most importantly, will make you think about crucial questions about the interconnection of actor and audience, stage and auditorium, theatre buildings and their surroundings.

Idea, Company, Structure

The author—one might even say architect—of this magnificent treasure trove is the late Richard Pilbrow, himself a towering figure of modern theatre, who died at the age of 90 a few months after the book was published. The consummate insider, Pilbrow is uniquely qualified to guide us through this epic endeavor. Beginning as a stage manager in 1955, he became a pioneer of British lighting design, largely responsible for creating the profession of lighting design in the UK. He was the first British lighting designer to design a

Broadway musical, *Zorba*, in 1968. (He had previously worked in the U.S. on shows designed by lighting pioneers Jean Rosenthal and Tharon Musser.)

As co-founder of Theatre Projects in 1957, initially a lighting and equipment rental business that transformed into Theatre Projects Consultants, he practically invented the profession of theatre consultant. His first major project was the Birmingham Repertory Company, and his company has gone on to work on more than 1,800 projects in 80 countries. Pilbrow was also one of the people behind the creation of the major British theatre design and technology organizations: the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) and the Society of British Theatre Designers (SBTD). On top of this, he was an important theatre producer, working with Harold Prince on the London premieres of Prince's iconic musical productions, as well as a producer of film and television. And Pilbrow's book on stage lighting has been a standard textbook for decades.

Pilbrow worked with the National Theatre from its inception. Alongside stage designer Sean Kenny and sound designer David Collison, he oversaw the renovation of the venerable Old Vic Theatre that served as the initial home of the newly founded National Theatre in 1962. Sir Laurence Olivier, the NT's founding artistic director, tapped him to be the company's first lighting designer. Pilbrow also served on the building committee for the creation of the new building on the South Bank that would ultimately house the company. He was there from the start; he knew everyone who created and ran the company; and he was there in the thick of things to the finish. While the book, through Pilbrow's words and the words of many others, is at times critical of the process and the results, it's also generous in giving credit to the strengths and successes of the NT as well.

The book, which is divided into seven sections, begins with a history of British theatre and the quest for a national theatre. Part two primarily documents the process of arriving at a plan and the hiring of an architect. Part three covers the construction of the theatre (with significant excerpts from Sir Peter Hall's published diaries). Part four takes us through the initial years after the opening of the new theatre with interviews with the



Richard Pilbrow and Henry Tharpe at the 2014 USITT Conference & Stage Expo in Fort Worth, Texas. | USITT/ Richard Finkelstein.

subsequent artistic directors, documentation of significant productions under their leadership, and interviews with designers and directors who worked at the theatre, always with commentary and additional notes by Pilbrow. Part five looks at the design of the three theatres inside the NT, and puts them in conversation with other contemporary theatres around the world. (See *Modern Theatres 1950-2020*, edited by David Staples, Routledge, 2021, for a comprehensive look at contemporary theatres.) Part six examines the technical, acoustic, and architectural changes that have transpired over a period of 50 years. Pilbrow notes that aside from Olivier himself, the Building Committee included no actors, the people who actually stand on the stages. So, this section is composed of interviews with actors Mark Rylance, Simon Russell Beale, Michael Grandage, and Dame Judi Dench. Part seven is a four-page conclusion by Pilbrow.

This book is, in part, a tribute to Olivier, the great actor and the first director of the NT. Pilbrow not only tells the story of Olivier's role in the creation of the theatre—both company and building—but also provides an extended and admiring portrait of someone who was beloved by everyone in the company, from the directors and star actors to the theatre personnel. Anecdotes abound: Olivier ate in the canteen with the staff (sometimes unrecognized) and he knew the birthdays of the backstage crew members. Harry Henderson, the housekeeper at the Old Vic, declared, "He was the sort of bloke that if another war started, you would willingly say: 'That's it. I'll go anywhere

with him.' You'd be safe with him. He was a gentleman and an ordinary chap." And the anecdotes contain delightful examples of many instances of Olivier's salty language.

The National Theatre of Great Britain is an idea, a theatre company, and an architectural structure, and Pilbrow examines all these aspects in minute detail not only from his own perspective, but through the eyes of an incredible array of participants and observers of the creation of the theatre, from founding director Laurence Olivier to the stage door keeper. Two interrelated themes pervade this book. One is the complex philosophical question: What, exactly, *is* a national theatre? How is a nation represented onstage, and who decides? Who is such a theatre intended for—who is the audience? Where does the financial and material support come from? What is the role of the state in such an enterprise? Who and what characteristics determine the repertory? The second theme is more practical and immediate: what is the size and shape of the theatre or theatres—and their support spaces—and what (and again, who) determines the answer? This latter question is what takes up the bulk of Pilbrow's story.

Design by Committee

France has had the Comédie Française since 1680; Austria, Sweden, and Denmark have had national theatres for a few hundred years. The closest the United States ever came to such an entity was the sadly short-lived Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s under the leadership

of Hallie Flanagan. But that enterprise possessed neither a central theatre building, nor a permanent acting company, nor a classical dramatic canon; it presented a vast array of productions from all performance genres in venues all across the country. And given the size and diversity of the U.S., the philosophical questions were, and still are, too complex to yield a simple or even functional answer. But for over 400 years Great Britain has had, if not a national theatre, a national playwright: Shakespeare. The tricentenary of Shakespeare's birth in 1864 led to the first iteration of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, which was erected in Stratford-on-Avon in 1879—an important home of British culture, if not quite a national theatre. Pilbrow provides a history and overview of the various transformations of this theatre right up to the present, with special focus on the rebuilding after the fire of 1926 that destroyed all but the shell of the building. The architect chosen for the project was, remarkably, a young woman, Elisabeth Scott, trained in Modernist design. The result was spare; the horseshoe balconies were replaced by barren side walls, “something like a cinema” in Pilbrow's words. Although praised by the architectural community for its good sightlines, at least from the stalls, it was hated by the actors. Pilbrow notes that the proscenium was too small, there was a disconnect between the forestage and the “elaborate stage behind” and “the gap between stage and the front row was too wide.” One performer, bemoaning this distance, said it was like “acting to Calais from the cliffs of Dover.” These sorts of problems were top of mind for the theatre artists advising the architects on the creation of the NT.

Despite the architectural issues with the theatre at Stratford, it was the artistic home for productions of Shakespeare and ultimately led to the creation of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1961 under the direction of Peter Hall, at roughly the same time that plans for the National Theatre company under Laurence Olivier were coming to fruition in London. Discussions about the possibility of somehow merging the two companies occurred, but questions of leadership, funding, purpose, and perhaps egos, thwarted any possible success.

The idea for a National Theatre in Great Britain was first broached in 1848,

and over the next century, numerous theatre luminaries kept this dream alive. Pilbrow turns the story of proposals, endless fits and starts, clashes of egos, and a recalcitrant government into a compelling and sometimes amusing narrative. Finally, in 1949, Parliament passed the National Theatre Act to authorize such a company. It then took another 13 years, after financial crises, artistic and personal battles, and a seemingly ever-changing cast of characters, for Laurence Olivier to be announced as the director of the National Theatre. The NT would occupy the historic Old Vic theatre—which itself had functioned somewhat as de facto national theatre—until the opening of the new building in 1976. Ideas and plans for the new building were floated and abandoned from 1949 until Olivier assembled the Theatre Building Committee in 1962, which included 15 distinguished individuals, mostly directors and designers, including Peter Brook, Michel Saint-Denis, and Sean Kenny. But others were also involved: various political and administrative persons and ultimately architects.

This committee was tasked with selecting the architect and determining the number of theatre spaces, as well as their size and shape. This, of course, meant grappling once again with the philosophical questions. The question of theatre shapes was a contested one since this was the period when thrust stages, theatres-in-the-round, open-space theatres, and the like were becoming more common around the world. Early plans also included a separate opera theatre to be built next to the NT building, though that was ultimately abandoned.

Part two of the book contains what is perhaps Pilbrow's greatest gift to future researchers: the publication of the minutes of the 30 meetings of the Building Committee from January 1963 to January 1969. (The minutes of a few meetings have been lost.) These are supplemented by Pilbrow's commentary along with relevant correspondence and reactions of many of those involved, as well as notes of secondary meetings and subcommittees. The problem with designing a theatre by committee was that there were multiple,



Richard Pilbrow signing a nameplate for Tammy Honesty at the 2013 book signing event. | USITT/ Barbara Lucas.

often contradictory points of view, with many different answers to all the questions above—or even worse, people agreeing on goals but expressing themselves in contradictory ways, which was at times baffling for the architects. The designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch, who devised the revolutionary stages for the Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario, Canada, and the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, was a member of the committee, but because of other commitments, she did not attend after the first meeting. One wonders what the outcome might have been had she remained an active participant—what if the Olivier Theatre turned out more like the Guthrie? The great designer Jocelyn Herbert, the only other woman on the committee, kept pointing out the problematic spatial and visual issues with the various proposals but was essentially ignored by the architects. This was no doubt exacerbated by misogyny, but the architects tended to dismiss many of the ideas proposed by anyone on the committee.

The Committee ultimately settled on three theatres: the quasi-Greek Olivier, the proscenium Lyttleton, and a studio theatre that would become the Cottesloe (now Dorfman) Theatre.

Throughout the book, Pilbrow makes numerous admiring references to Frank Matcham, an architect of the late 19th and early 20th century who was responsible for the design or redesign of some 170 theatres and music halls in Great Britain. Of course these were all proscenium-style theatres with the usual lavish interior décor. As such, they were dismissed as old fashioned with the rise of modernist architecture. But Matcham's theatres created an ideal relationship between stage and auditorium with wrap-around balconies that created a sense of unity and intimacy. Designer Rae Smith, in her interview with Pilbrow, bemoans the shortcomings of the Lyttleton Theatre, saying, "Every time I'm in there, part of my subconscious goes, Well, how can we make this into Frank Matcham?"

The Building Committee's short list of candidates for architect included some, like Peter Moro, with experience designing theatres, but the final choice was Denys Lasdun, a successful and influential architect. He readily admitted that he had no experience or knowledge of theatre architecture, but with the committee he was charming and persuasive



Richard Pilbrow in 2013. | USITT/ Mark Putman.

and convinced them that he would listen and learn. Perhaps because he tried to accommodate the multiple and sometimes contradictory wishes of the Building Committee, perhaps because of the inevitable financial strictures and the pressure to complete the job quickly, perhaps because of a degree of hubris in which his architectural vision shunted aside the concerns of the theatre people who actually understood the physical relationship of performer and audience and the unique demands this made on the architecture, and perhaps, simply, because of differing aesthetic sensibilities, the result had serious flaws and has faced a barrage of criticism since it opened in 1976—a few years later and significantly more expensive than planned, though in that regard it was hardly unique.

Confusion Over Direction

Pilbrow takes the reader on the journey through the entire process to opening and beyond, constantly drawing upon interviews, archival sources, and documentary material from myriad sources. While critical, Pilbrow is also careful to credit the things that work. In his words, "I have sought to elucidate the mystery of the relationship between building and art, between theatre and architecture." But Pilbrow did not see the opening of the theatre as the end of the story. One purpose of the book, he notes, is to show how the National Theatre "has evolved over time, and to chart how subsequent generations of artists have engaged with the building's flaws and successes to create great art."

The most notable aspect of the National Theatre building, whether viewed from outside or experienced from within, is that it is made entirely of concrete, although public interior spaces were somewhat softened by wood-grain textured concrete. One's response to the Brutalist design, of course, depends on aesthetic sensibilities. Prince Charles likened it to a nuclear power station. At first glance, it may appear as a somewhat haphazard collection of geometric forms, but it was a carefully and very intentionally designed arrangement that reflected the shapes and functions of the interior spaces. Lasdun saw the building as actively engaging with the city, and the exterior terraces were situated to optimize views across the river. The interior spaces were essentially a collection of rectangles. But Lasdun rotated the Olivier theatre so that it sat at a 45-degree angle to the Lyttleton, thus creating axes in tension with each other, which had implications for the entire structure. The complex provided large open shops, technical facilities far beyond any existing in UK theatres at the time, comfortable dressing rooms, and a generous assortment of other necessary support spaces. The one space within the building to receive nearly universal acclaim was the front of house—a large, open, airy, multi-leveled space with several restaurants and bars and with nooks and crannies that allowed for small gatherings, meetings, and casual conversation. And in a brilliant move by the theatre management, the foyer was open all day so that people came to enjoy it even if they

were not attending the theatre. Lasdun referred to it as the building's fourth theatre. One has to remember that there had never been anything like that in the British theatre. West End houses, like Broadway, had small, cramped lobbies, because the main concern of managers was getting as many spectators as possible into the constricted space of the theatres.

But it was the theatres themselves that were often deemed problematic. To begin with, the concrete created acoustic complications and did not lend itself easily to alteration (even if Lasdun would have allowed it). Richard Eyre, the third NT artistic director, recalled a conversation with the actor Albert Finney: "I tell Albert that Peter Brook says that a theatre should be like a violin: its tone comes from its period and age, and tone is its most important quality. 'Yes,' says Albert, 'and who'd build a violin out of fucking concrete?'"

The Olivier, the largest theatre, is an open-space theatre inspired by the ancient Greek theatres. But it was designed as a modified thrust placed in a corner of the enormous rectangular space of the theatre. This meant, among other things, that the walls of the theatre were at right angles so that sound was reflected back in wrong directions. The book provides plans, sections, and dimensions along with discussions of technical and acoustic equipment and responses to the space from dozens of artists who have worked in there. Suffice it to say that the volume of the space is immense and the spectators in the circle (the rear section of seats) can feel so distant from the stage as to be in a separate space. Even the stalls, which are spacious and comfortable, can contribute to a sense of distance from the stage. Playwright Alan Ayckbourn, when he first encountered the empty shell of the incomplete theatre, commented sardonically, "It seemed similar in scale to the Houston Astrodome, though admittedly lacking some of that vast indoor arena's acoustic intimacy." In the Olivier, there is essentially one point on the stage from where an actor can project adequately to the entire house. The remit for the theatre was that it have "full scenic possibility" and the result was an open stage that sometimes had to accommodate proscenium-style plays, necessitating rapid and efficient scene changes. The theatre was on the second level and thus required a means of transporting scenery up to the stage.

There was a fly tower with state-of-the-art machinery, but there were no wings. The solution was a massive drum revolve: "a 15m diameter, four-story tall revolving drum containing two semi-circular elevators and a semi-circular disk that rotated independently on top of the drum." Because of technical difficulties, the drum was not used in a production until 1988, 12 years after the theatre opened.

Sir Laurence Olivier had stepped down as NT director in 1973, and sadly, because of illness, Olivier himself never performed on the stage of the theatre named for him, except to make a speech on the official opening night when the queen was in attendance. Olivier rehearsed his speech on the stage several times so that he could find the elusive "point of command."

The Lyttleton Theatre had two levels of seating—the stalls and the balcony—facing a well-equipped traditional proscenium stage. But the theatre had no sense of unity. The lack of boxes or side balconies to "hug" the stalls, combined with the spare concrete side walls (albeit with raised diagonal striations as décor) created a sense of two separate audiences isolated from the stage. As described by Rae Smith, "It's like a television box . . . all the seats have a different perspective . . . the stalls and the balcony are completely different experiences. Acoustically, it's a challenge . . ."

From a purely theatrical standpoint, the one truly successful theatre was the relatively intimate studio space, the Cottesloe/Dorfman Theatre that, because lack of funds, remained an empty shell for a year after the two other theatres had opened. Also, the Building Committee and Lasdun were so focused on the Olivier and Lyttleton that they essentially ignored it. Peter Hall insisted on its completion as a condition for his becoming artistic director. It was designed by Iain Mackintosh of Theatre Projects as a courtyard theatre with seating on scaffolding on three sides, but it was a totally flexible space that could be transformed into any configuration.

Although there are directors, designers, and actors who figured out how to use the Olivier and the Lyttleton with great success, no one would claim those are perfect or ideal theatres. Lasdun can be seen as the villain in this story, but Pilbrow provides him redemption. About

five years after the opening, Lasdun was about to enter the architectural competition to build a new opera house in Genoa, Italy. The experience with the National had taught him the necessity of collaborating with theatre artists on such a structure and, surprisingly, he asked Pilbrow to work with him on the design. They came up with a superb plan that was favored by the opera company, but because of political pressures the project was awarded to Aldo Rossi. The result was a vast, movie-theatre-like auditorium that is a terrible place for opera.

Near the end of the book, Pilbrow offers "A Personal Conclusion" in which he states his own opinions, separate from those of the myriad people he talked to. His primary conclusion is simple, almost obvious, but perhaps profound: "For theatre architecture to ignite, the physical relationship that binds every audience member into a collective, and that collective to the performer is pivotal." For Pilbrow, as for so many others, that "ignition" never happened with the two large theatres of the NT. His assessment, devastating in its understatement, declared that, "a National Theatre for drama, in which the unamplified voice cannot be heard, and in which emotion is hard to evoke, has problems." At the same time, he lays some of the blame on the Building Committee, wondering why it was "so hard to give our talented, but inexperienced, architect adequate guidance?" The committee, he admits, "contributed confusion rather than clear direction." He concludes with the hope that someday the two large houses might somehow be transformed so that they, like the Dorfman, can be places of "vibrant, lively, intimate, action."



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