

## Notes on the Construction of the CQS Space

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Architect Andrew Todd recounts the process of transforming the Old Vic Theatre into the CQS space for the 2008-2009 season.

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I have a message for Arts Council funding committees, Olympic Aquatic Centre cost-slashers, value-engineering task force tsars, quangos, fandangos and bean-counters in general: London has a brand new 850-seat theatre in the round which cost about as much as a one-bedroom flat in Waterloo (at last week's prices).

The current season at the Old Vic will be performed in a radically reconfigured version of their auditorium, the CQS Space. Starting with Alan Ayckbourn's time-bending trilogy *The Norman Conquests*, audiences will experience the space more like an anatomy theatre than a music-hall, something which we hope will be appropriate to Ayckbourn's dissection of Middle England mores.

The bracingly cheap and quick process underlying this transformation has been possible because of the decisiveness and pragmatism of the Old Vic Theatre Company and the project sponsors, CQS and the Hintze Family Foundation. Kevin Spacey and his team have acted more like generals planning a battle than navel-gazing thespians. They have accepted a high degree of risk in a process that has resembled white-water rafting more than the cross-checking, expert-infested plod of conventional construction. There have been no oversight committees, no third-party cost-benefit assessments, and the nerve centre of the operation has not been a sparkling project manager's boardroom, but a jumbled technical office tucked just behind the theatre's orchestra pit.

Another thing: luvviedom is rarely associated with tree-huggery, but this new venue will have a carbon footprint of about size 8. Nothing was demolished, no forests cut down, just a few bits of steel and plywood transported from Norfolk to London. It is the exact opposite of the gleaming, vote-garnering palace of culture fisted upon us by so many municipalities and governments: its credo is renew, adapt, recycle, re-use. And *experiment*: we can adapt the space in real time during the season, and then restore the original form of the theatre in a matter of days. We can allow theatre artists to tune it, to find the right pitch, and even if it is not wholly successful, we can learn from the experience, and nothing will have been damaged irreparably. The CQS Space can also be mothballed and put back in the future.

We have actually been thinking about this project for some time. Kevin Spacey asked me back in 2003 to consider new ways of using the auditorium. We prepared a giant model of the theatre built on stilts with a cutaway portion of the auditorium -like a slice

of cake- to allow the eye to check out the view from row 3 of the Baylis Circle, and a head-shaped hole cut in the stage with a seat underneath so that Kevin could see the auditorium from his own perspective as an actor. We looked at several possibilities: a ballroom, just a flat floor allowing promenade shows and such like, a Globe-like standing stalls with a raised stage and a tightly-focussed thrust stage with a new wall in front of the proscenium. After spending a few happy hours shuffling model actors and furniture around, playing with fibre optic lighting and scenery, I asked Kevin if he wanted to know about the projected costs. 'Shut up,' he said, 'I'm like a kid in a candy store.'

He was right to want to savour the moment: we just couldn't fit enough seats in to make it economically viable in the subsidy-free context of the Old Vic Company's work. The model was consigned to a barn in Essex for four years, and we all forgot about it as we got on with other work.

The project was resurrected at the initiative of Norman Conquests director Matthew Warchus, who intuited that this delicate play would appear brash and one-dimensional on a traditional stage, but powerfully tragicomic if the audience is more implicated in the space. Ayckbourn works in the Steven Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, which is one of the few in-the-round theatres in Britain (others include the Royal Exchange in Manchester and the Young Vic, about which more later). In-the-round performance gives little opportunity for spectacle (scenery would only hide the action), and places the accent on the actor to conjure up an imaginary world purely with his or her own presence. It also leaves the audience feeling drawn into the action, being its own backdrop, as it were. Another important quality of in-the-round is that you get more seats, which is ultimately what allowed the Old Vic to be transformed in this way.

Once we had determined that the project was viable we recovered the model from its barn and immediately started playing with it again. We cut out circles of varying diameters, built tiny sofas, suspended balconies on the stage, and, after a great deal of trial and error, arrived at a form which just seemed to fall into place by itself. Back in 2004 we had built platforms in the auditorium so that Kevin could see for himself where the new stage level and front would be. If cats always manage to find the sunniest spot for a nap on a window-sill, actors are similarly magnetically tuned to find the sweet spot where they draw maximum energy and attention from the audience. This spot, found empirically by Kevin, ended up as centre stage in our new design.

Then we came to the question of the existing building fabric. The Old Vic is quite narrow, constrained by the streets running just either side of the auditorium walls. The theatre's previous owners, the Mervish brothers, carried out a historicist renovation in the 1980s, further squeezing the vital space in front of the stage with reconfigured, richly decorated box-fronts (previously this space had been up for grabs for set designers, often being incorporated into a forestage space). When I hear the words 'saved from the ravages of time,' or 'lovingly restored to its original glory' in association with a theatre, I reach for my sledgehammer. Theatres exist in an accelerated, slippery time-frame; they are reborn every night. Any attempt to fix them in the aspic of a particular period is doomed to failure, because they have to retain a certain temporal elasticity, a chameleon character, to nurture the work that is

their *raison d'être*. This is not a question of doctrine or style, but of fitness to task. There are no 'original' forms to a theatre: they are highly mutable buildings. Historical time moves on outside, the meanings of plays change as society mutates, and the spaces become the repository for after-images of past work, a house of ghosts.

So we decided to rip off the balcony fronts of the boxes. (Before you harrumph: saving them for future re-use of course.) We had no idea what we would find, we just sensed that we needed to be able to requalify these vital areas, bring them into the new circle of energy we wanted to create.

But what about those ghosts? What would they think? And what ghosts, past and present! Lilian Baylis, who expressly threatened to haunt the theatre after her demise if it was messed with; Olivier swishing in chain mail as Henry V, Gielgud and Guinness as betighted Hamlets, O'Toole both tottering and triumphant, Tyrone Guthrie (who went on to become the protagonist of intimate, three-sided theatre in North America), and the giant golden phallus wheeled on at the end of Peter Brook's production of Seneca's Oedipus, to be cavorted around to the strains of 'Yes, We Have No Bananas.' (Interestingly, Brook's production prefigured our work to a certain extent in that he used the whole auditorium, positioning the chorus amongst the audience).

My personal wager is that, whilst ghosts might enjoy veneration for a time, they also like a bit of sport. Olivier himself implicitly recognised the limitations of the Old Vic when he was directing the fledgling National Theatre there. Mindful that his young actors were getting bored because he took all the best roles himself, he identified a bombsite just down the street (the Old Vic had received munitions through the roof the same evening in 1941, but survived intact), and created on it the makeshift Young Vic Theatre as a playground for his company. The Young Vic remains rough and ready to this day (although we tried to make it slightly *readier* when we redeveloped it two years ago with Haworth Tompkins) but its genetic connection to the Old Vic seems to have weakened.

But how would our modifications change this parental relationship? Would it be like a mid-life crisis dad getting his hair dyed? Would it be an Alzheimer's loss of moorings? It's been very strange, actually. Just as babies can seem old at times, the Old Vic has undergone many changes of age during its transformation. At the beginning, for a while, it was mysteriously ancient. The chandelier and other baubles were stripped off, the box-fronts removed leaving scars on the structure. In this destabilized state it looked like a kind of primal theatre, just the bare essentials of form. As we have fitted it out it has been getting younger, a bit gawky at times (until the colour balance was right). Now, strangely, it's as if the space itself has taken over the process, it is telling us what to do. It seems self-confident, ready to explore. With a certain trepidation I showed it to David Lan, the Young Vic's Artistic Director and most devoted disciple. 'Aah,' he said, 'Well, we can't really talk about Old and Young any more, can we. So what will it be? The Two Vics?'

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