

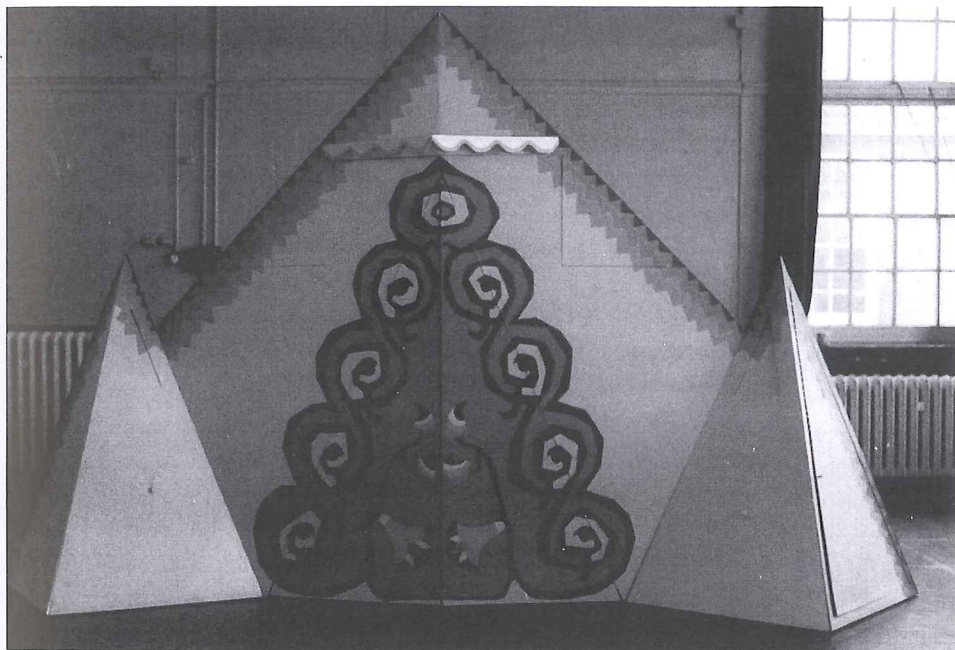
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THEATRE SPACE AND TYPES

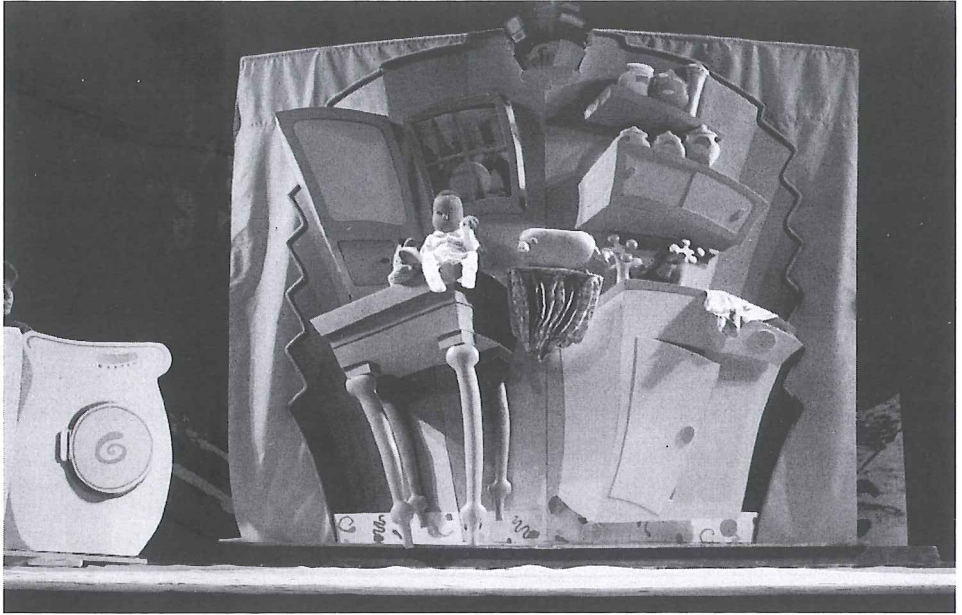
Small-scale touring set in a school gymnasium. Strong design to draw the eye to the centre, where double doors open out to reveal another location. Three constructed doorways and four trap windows. Director: James Tillett. JCT Productions.

THEATRE SPACE AND STYLE

Theatres vary in architecture type, technical facility and character. School auditoriums offer different limitations as do



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Small-scale touring Spilt Milk sitting on a theatre main stage, with the evening show set up behind. Director: Michael Dalton. Pop-Up Theatre.

art centres, pub theatres and the village hall stage. Productions that tour will need to consider the technical capabilities and constraints of each theatre, so as to meet their demands. Most theatres offer technical information and drawings, detailing the dimensions and particulars of their facilities. When using an alternative space such as a disused station or warehouse, not originally designed for staging plays, the designer will find on-site research and documentation more complex. This may involve considerable time on location. Familiarizing yourself with a proposed performance space is essential work.

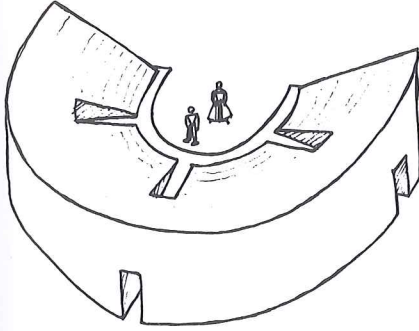
Types of Theatre Space

Arena stage and Amphitheatre; Thrust stage; Proscenium stage; Studio Theatre; Traverse stage; Theatre-in-the-round; Open Air Theatre; the Alternative space.

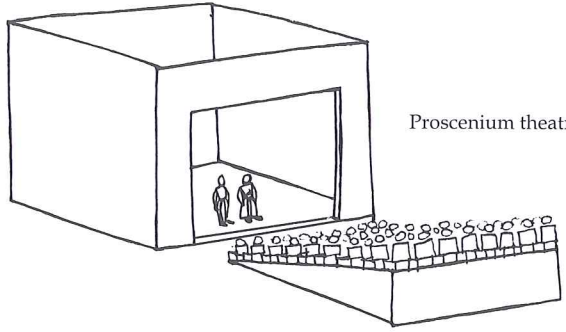
The Arena and Amphitheatre

The arena is of classical Greek origin. It is an open stage with the audience seated in a fan shape round the performance area. The steep raked seating, once stone steps excavated out of a hillside, stretches about two-thirds of the way round forming a circular area. The steep tiered seating creates an intimacy with good

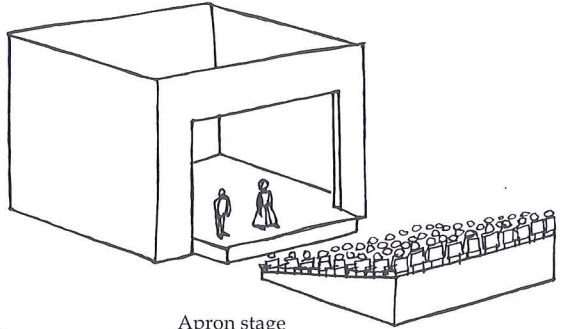
Arena theatre



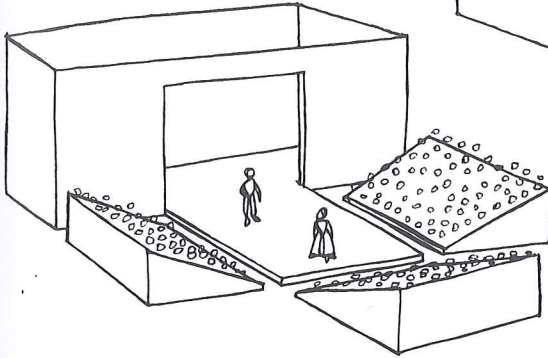
Proscenium theatre



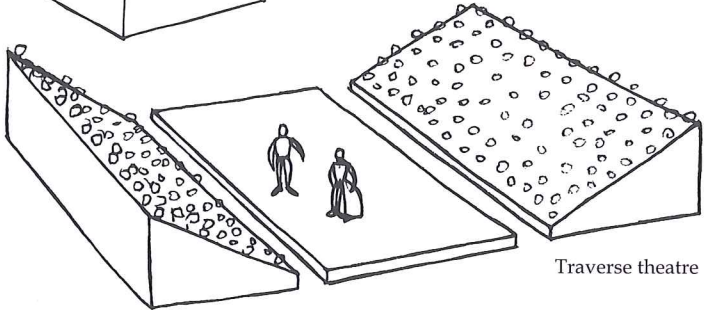
Apron stage



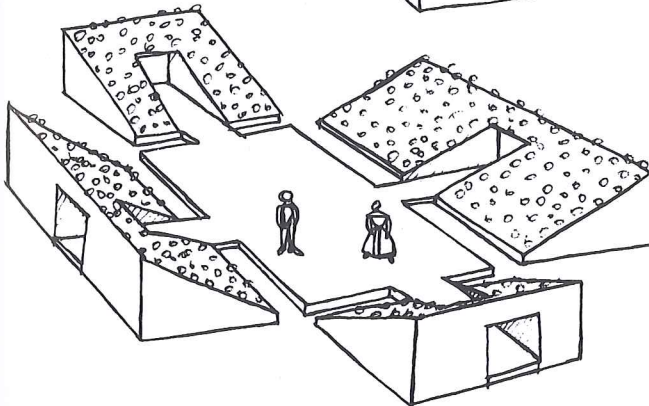
Thrust stage



Traverse theatre



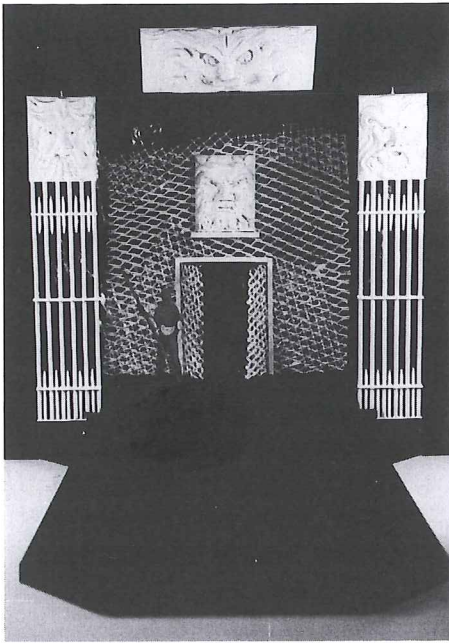
Theatre-in-the-round



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acoustics. Founded traditionally as an out-of-doors theatre, there are examples of this design as an enclosed theatre.

The open-air arena stage requires minimal scenery. Costume design, with properties and furniture feature as essential production elements. The use of variable height platforms may add to the dynamics. The arena may invite imaginative and bold strokes in design. Productions may commence in the evening and feature natural sunset as well as theatre lighting. It is not unusual to see some spectacle in the arena,



Thrust stage with sketch model. The design offers a proscenium, main show drop with door, grotesque and steel mesh wall.
Zastrozzi. Alberta Theatre Projects.

such as horses, stage coaches, herds of sheep and elephants, along with monumental scale backdrops.

Theatrical gesture for the actor needs to be of a bold nature. Rapid movements and small gestures with normal conversational dialogue would become lost. Historically this stage circumstance developed a theatrical style which we call 'classic'.

Thrust Stage

England at the time of the Elizabethan period saw theatre move from the established 'inn' or 'yards' to purpose-built, enclosed structures. One Elizabethan London stage has been reconstructed – the 'Globe' Theatre. The cylindrical architecture features galleries or balconies round a platform stage. This platform is set against a back wall, or tiring house with entrances. On ground level in front is the pit.

The modern thrust stage extends itself out into the audience. The seating is positioned on at least two sides. The audience may surround a thrust on three sides. Seating is placed in sections, around the sides of the platform.

The Elizabethan performance was always in daytime. Artificial lighting was not employed. Actors carrying on lanterns, torches or other such specific properties did so to effectively illustrate location and its specified lighting state. There was little space for any scenery as we know it. The language of the playwright embellished place and time.

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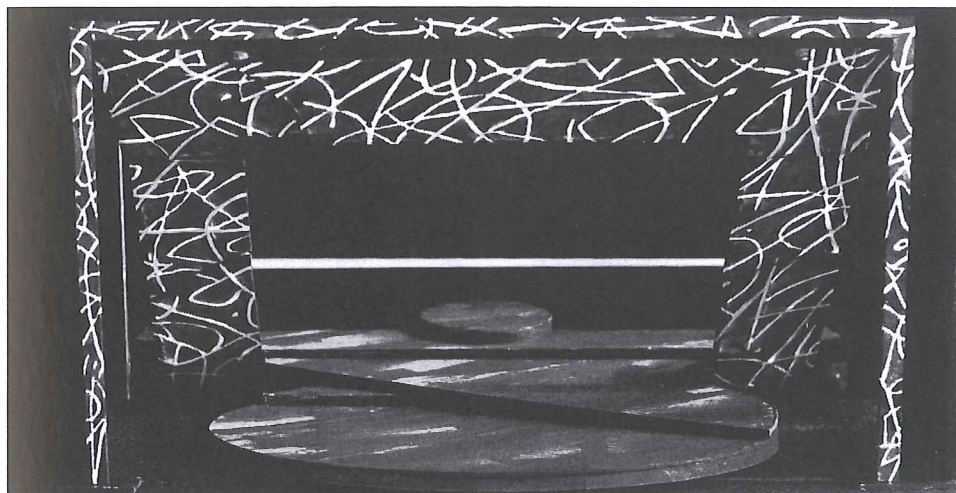
Costume design and its class detailing was highly appreciated and an expected spectacle. Properties with detailed significance heightened the imaginative settings. An increased intimacy between actor and audience comes about by the galleries being of a reduced depth. The theatrical style termed as 'romantic' is associated with the Elizabethan thrust and the 'inn' yard.

There are now many theatres that are derived from the original thrust stage. They offer modern facilities with advanced technological capabilities. These thrust stages may offer a fly tower for scenery and lighting. They may be flexibly interchangeable to a proscenium style format. These facilities offer audience intimacy, along with some technical wizardry.

The modern thrust enables design to become more involved visually. The thrust stage makes sculptural demands on design. Through sculptural intervention, design links the areas up-stage and down-stage. With an audience viewing one another through or across the acting area, there develops an unusual relationship and unique bond. This is seen with greater effect within the theatre-in-the-round.

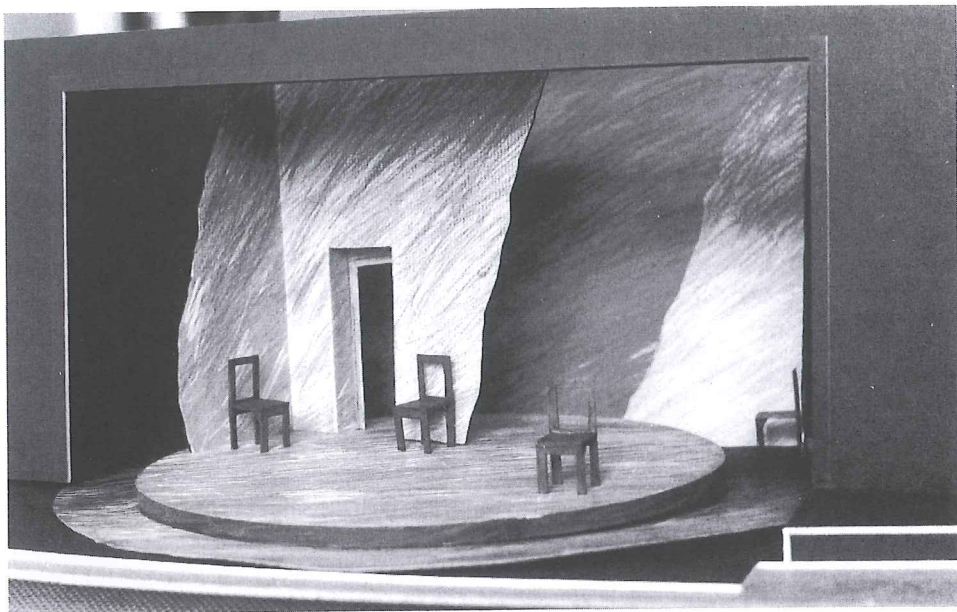
The Proscenium Stage

The proscenium divides the audience and acting space into two separate distinctive parts. This architectural format has direct links to realistic settings. It helps to create actual physical illusions of reality. It enabled theatre to take on great illusory feats.



Finished model showing a proscenium stage with 'false proscenium'. Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe. Alberta Theatre Project.

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Finished model on a proscenium stage with 'apron' extension. The cut-away walls could be reconfigured or removed for other scenes. Blood Wedding. Arts Educational Drama School.

The audience is encouraged to suspend their disbelief. The format with technical facility supports such full-hearted illusion making.

The dividing wall between audience and the acting area consists of a proscenium arch – an opening framing the view of the stage. This may be curtained off by a fabric fire-proof curtain, or house tab. This curtain conceals the stage, masking scene changes.

Constructed within the dividing wall may be the 'iron' – a fire-retardant solid curtain. The 'iron' produces a seal between the two areas. By law, it is

lowered and raised once during a performance, either pre-show or at the first interval.

The proscenium may have a stage extension or 'apron' that projects out toward the audience. The apron is at stage level. The value of the apron stage is to bring the play's drama further down-stage through the proscenium, making more intimate the experience for the audience.

Up-stage of the proscenium arch are the technical facilities for scenery, lighting and mechanics. These may be highly sophisticated. With such

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The finished model 'truck unit' for Act I of The Importance of Being Earnest. Stratford Festival, Canada.

(Right) Tower truck unit with steel deck platform attached showing swivel wheels.

capabilities there comes opportunity for complex design.

Wing space, found to the left and right of the acting area, may offer areas for storage. Off-stage areas require appropriate masking, made generally of black fabric; they are referred to as 'legs'. The legs run in sequence at intervals down-stage through to up-stage.

Scenery may be built on truck units, or set into tracks within the floor, or alternatively rigged to a fly bar and flown.



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The audience's sightlines, being front on, may restrict the production to a picture-image format. The limitations created through its distancing effects and artificial formality may not support the writer's intention to speak directly to the audience through the 'fourth wall'.

On-stage are trapdoors, with escapes to beneath the stage. The fly tower above the acting area, with its pulley and cable-suspended fly bars, is manually controlled. They lift scenery through a counterweight system. The lines are operated from a gallery above and to the side of the acting area.

The Studio Theatre

The studio theatre is a box, often called the black-box. Many main theatres have a studio theatre. Studios vary in size, with some offering substantial space for dance. The studio can support productions of differing styles since they are of a flexible nature and impose no personal decorative characteristics. Studios generally have capacity for different seating configurations. They are of a basic nature technically. The ceiling grid for lanterns is often basic scaffolding bars, suspended beneath the actual ceiling. The space above the grid could allow small scenic elements or



The Linden Tree *finished model in a small 'pub-studio theatre'*. Arts Educational Drama School Tabard Theatre.

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properties to be flown through a pulley and cable. Scene or set change may be restricted to intervals, with the audience being ushered out. Transitions between scenes requiring change need to be incorporated into the show's style or to be carried out in a state of black-out. Studio doorways affect the scale of the scenery and need to be carefully measured before designing. How actors move about unseen within the space is determined by the designed passage-ways, known as a cross-over. Access to the dressing-rooms throughout the performance may be restricted. Extraordinary ingenuity and inventiveness in design can be seen in the studio theatre.

The Traverse Stage

With the traverse, the audience is divided into two opposing groups that face one another. The performance space passes through the centre. The end walls may provide little space for designed scenery. This format is most like theatre-in-the-round. The floor is of significant focus for the designer. The audience is very much part of the performance and design needs to respect and complement this unifying nature. Sightlines across the stage are of considerable concern. Design is very much an installation of design elements. Costumes and props feature as on the thrust stage. Technically theatres may well be equipped with excellent lighting and sound capabilities.

The stage may be platforms, and exits to off-stage may be through or around the audience sections. With height to the grid, great feats of design may involve a sailor's crow's nest with rope ladders from the deck area, along with drop banners or flags and suspended sail cloths.

Theatre-in-the-Round

The format for theatre-in-the-round places the actor in the centre of a surrounding audience. The entrance for the actor passes through the seating sections. The exit may take the actor to beneath, around and under the stage, to other entrances. The design emphasis is towards the stage floor, costumes, properties and lighting. There may be facilities for small items to fly in from a suspended position. The floor may provide traps for entrance and exit. Tracking units built into the floor may provide facility for easy movement of furniture, or small scenic elements on and off-stage through the actor entrances. Design details are well scrutinized by its audience, such is the intimacy of performing in the round. Design solutions lie in not hampering action and in giving actors the ability to turn and face all members of the audience at any one time.

Since the first rows of audience are generally low, no furniture should restrict the view of action going on beyond. Atmosphere is created in the

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first instance through the actor and the floor, by dramatic lighting and the addition of environmental soundscapes.

Open Air Theatre

The open air theatre has the stage and audience exposed to the natural elements. Some offer possible canopy protection for the acting area or seating area. Seating is generally unique to the site, and may even involve sitting on the ground. Many open air theatres are incorporated in, around, or in front of an architectural building that acts as a backdrop. The building's architecture may impose a style or character. The play's setting may require this architecture to be incorporated into the design. Some sites accept that what is permanent could be used as a support from which to build. An open air theatre with a more natural environmental backdrop encourages exciting atmospheric design. As with the arena stage there may be potential for the use of animals. Such spaces are often generously linked to the local community that may prove surprisingly resourceful.

The Alternative Space

With imagination and clever application of energy and resources, any space – public or private – has theatrical potential. It takes a team with vision to successfully create theatre in disused or derelict buildings, in quarries, on lakes, in piazzas and on rooftops. Designing

for the alternative space is like all theatre work, both extremely creative and risk-taking.

Although the professional theatre may offer good technical facility, there are good reasons and exciting opportunities in favour of using space other than the professional stage. All stage types, including the Alternative, demand skilful handling by the designer. Professional theatres require trained and skilled personnel to manage and run a production. The professional stage is technically sophisticated and can pose considerable danger to its users. It is therefore essential to adhere to strict rules or codes of practice.

Having a safety officer and fire inspector involved in any production is essential practice and law-abiding. Without a good understanding of stagecraft and its practice, both on- and off-stage, the risks of injury or damage are greater. Stagecraft needs to be learned, practised under supervision and developed as a skill.

Along with the technical understanding that goes with the theatre space, the designer is required to develop an understanding and appreciation for the physical space – that being defined through its volume, its architectural character and natural atmosphere. To walk the space, as would an actor, begins to reveal spatial dynamics, its issues and potential. Experiencing it invites questions and leads to enquiry.

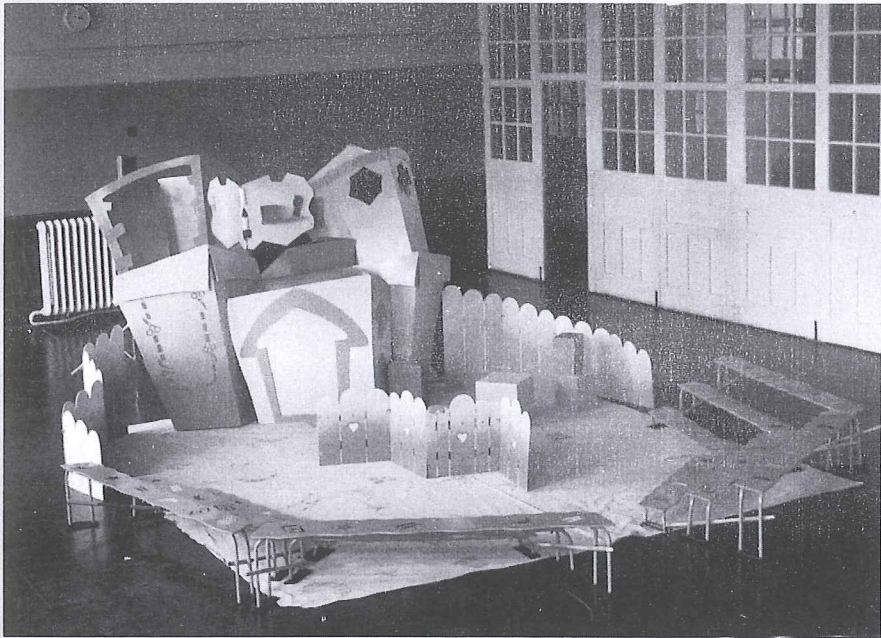
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APPROACHING A THEATRE SPACE

Research into the companies and groups that have used the space. Enquire into the type of audience the house draws in. Research the range of technical design achieved and some of its technical or engineering feats. This research may reveal what is most unsuitable for performance. Perhaps by visiting and testing it acoustically you would find it less than suitable for your performance standards or musical nature.

Build up a file of investigative research, including sketches of the space from on-site visits. Draw and photograph when visiting. All technical documentation from on-site is valuable back-up. Such a foundation supports and broadens your thought process. The ultimate aim is to fully incorporate the production within the building's architectural constraints, exploiting its capabilities and facility.

Some building constraints, such as internal walls, may not allow or support mechanical fixings being attached. A building's technical limitations could well impose on the designer the need to exhibit original thinking over problem-solving and construction techniques.



Pop in a Box: a small-scale touring set without masking. A plywood construction with portable seating and floor cloth. Director: Penny Bernand. Pop-Up Theatre.

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APPROACHING A THEATRE SPACE (*continued*)

When confronted with a venue having no established seating format, designing its layout as part of the set may prove advantageous. With a young audience, the solution may become a memorable part of the show (*see* previous set photo).

Consider the audience and theatrical performance as one. New playwriting often demands that one rethinks the format. Plays might challenge established or familiar theatrical conventions. Play publications often describe how the original production was staged. Notes detailing the stage and set style often accompany the script.

The alternative space or open space has initiated and established new and original presentational styles. These alternative venues have helped establish new writing. Often a remarkable experience in theatre performance is associated with a specific venue. They may be inseparable and inextricably linked.



New play-writing challenging design. One of four plays run in repertoire, changing daily. Tuck Tuck. Director: Bob White; Lighting: Harry Frehner. Alberta Theatre Projects. Photo: Trudie Lee.