

ARCHITECTURE

January 2019: Theatres – The Story So Far

At this meeting we were taken through a history of theatre architecture from ancient Greek amphitheatres to modern opera houses.

Greek Amphitheatres.



The Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus in Athens is believed to be the world's earliest theatre. Dating from the 4th century BC the existing structure can seat 14,000 people. It has 55 steps and is 1,200 ft across. A key feature of amphitheatres is good acoustics which means that speech is well heard from distances of 50-60 metres away.

The Romans took to amphitheatres in a big way, some 250 being found across the breadth of the Roman Empire.

Portable Theatres.

From the middle ages and beyond, theatre companies toured with portable scenery. These included performances of drama, music, comedy and passion plays. One of the best known today is the 'Punch and Judy' show which had its origins in the 17th century. Samuel Pepys records seeing a Mr Punch marionette at a show in Covent Garden in 1662.



Photo: Jonathan Lucas (Wikipedia)

Theatre Designs

Built theatres of the 18th and 19th century mimicked some of the techniques of the Greek and Roman theatres. For example, the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford (built 1664-1669) was a Christopher Wren design. Like many theatres the sides were elongated into a 'D' to increase the seating. Another feature of theatres of the time was the building of several tiers. This led to 'boxes', mostly along the sides. Those nearest the stage were "there to be seen" not "to see".



(Photo: oxfordcity.co.uk)

Effects of Fire

With many internal furnishing and scenery of wood and flammable materials, fires were not uncommon. One of the most disastrous was that of the Ringtheater in Vienna (right). Only opened in 1874, a fire broke out the same year and 449 people were killed. This led to a new law regarding safety provisions, including a fire curtain.



In England, the original Globe Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1613, but it was not until the fire at the Royal Theatre in Exeter in 1887 that safety reached a new level. Exeter had already lost two theatres burnt down at the site and the new theatre, open for less than a year, was the third to suffer this fate with the loss of about 150 lives. As a result the chief of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade developed a report on the 'fire-readiness' of theatres and music halls. His report included some 250 recommendations, including the use of safety curtains. Safety curtains were not new, the earliest one made of iron had been installed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1794. But after the Exeter fire they became universal. They rise up vertically from the stage, so new theatre buildings had to be tall to accommodate them.



Notable Theatres

We were shown photos of several well known theatres, including:

- St Martin's Theatre, London the current home of *The Mousetrap* has been running for 66 years
- The Vienna Opera House, which seats 1,250 people and has an electric lift-operated orchestra pit
- The Slovenia National Theatre, Bratislava – an Edwardian Baroque building
- The Sydney Opera House – an iconic design as a result of an international competition.

In addition, we were encouraged to have tours behind the scenes, as the presenter had done at Vienna, and his own local theatre, the Buxton Opera House. The latter was built in 1903 but fell into disrepair in the 1970s and was then restored to its former glory.



St Martin's Theatre 2010 (Photo: Ewan Munro)



Vienna Opera House (Photo: Wikipedia)



Slovenia National Theatre (Photo: Albertus Teolog)



Buxton Opera House (Photo: Rob Bendall)