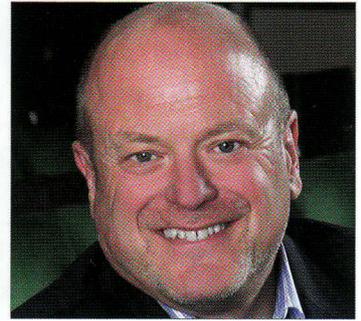


KEEPING HISTORIC THEATRES UP-TO-DATE

David Blyth, property director at the Ambassador Theatre Group, describes the challenges of keeping historic theatres fit-for-purpose. Interview by Jo Caird.



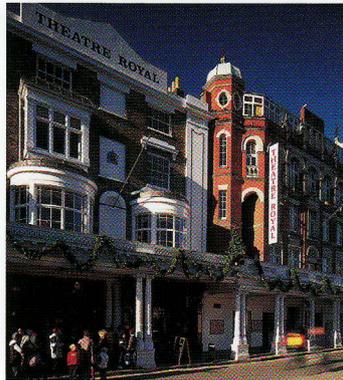
ATG has 14 theatres that are over 100 years old. Our oldest, and one of the oldest in the country, is the Theatre Royal Brighton, which is 206. The most important thing when it comes to looking after older buildings is that you understand the buildings themselves, how they were constructed and what they were constructed from. That way if there are issues you can follow them through.

Here are some of the things I've learned about looking after historic theatres:

1. It's all about the upkeep: Our first concern is that they're watertight and structurally sound because unless your buildings are watertight, anything else you do inside gets damaged with water ingress. That's a key part of what we do. ATG spends several million each year on upkeep and improvement. Primarily that's aimed at the older buildings. I've got two people that work for me whose job is working with the general managers at each theatre, looking at the buildings and working out what we're going to do over the next period.

Eighty per cent of our buildings are listed, so we have to work very closely with English Heritage, local authorities, planners and the Theatres Trust. We've got

good working relationships. What you need when you've got buildings of this age is contractors and experts who understand that type of building. We very much look at contractors who work with historic buildings because they are a different animal to anything else.



2. Keep the audiences happy: As far as your audience is concerned, with the exception of the product that actually goes onto the stage, the most important things are that they've got a comfortable seat, they can get to the bar, and they can get to the toilet. I've never seen a theatre yet where ladies don't have to queue for the loo. The buildings were well designed originally – every little space was used. So trying to find that extra little space where you can put some toilets is always the challenge. But if you can

look at a ladies' area and gut it and refurbish and get one more cubicle in, you've helped. In some instances there's a huge gents and quite a small ladies, so we swap them round. More female toilets is always our aim.

3. Have the action plan ready: In London theatres most of the bulk of the building is underground, so they're hit by the water table. Two or three of our theatres have London rivers running underneath them. Most of them have sump pumps to keep the water down when it's very heavy rain, but we have come into the Harold Pinter (years ago, when it was still the Comedy Theatre) to find the sump pumps have failed and the stalls filled with water. What do you do? You get pumping.

4. Work with what you've got: If you look at some of the West End theatres, the access space for scenery is incredibly limited because originally they would have rolled up the cloths and slotted them through. At Brighton the entrance for the backstage is through two fishermen's cottages, but the technicians know exactly how to get over all the obstacles, through that little hole and onto the stage. Very rarely is there anything that they've decided they couldn't get in.