

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Liverpool Unity building, a modern structure with a glass facade and a prominent sign that reads 'UNITY'. The building is situated on a street with other buildings and cars visible. A large, stylized 'TM' logo is overlaid on the top right of the image, set against a dark red and gold background.

# TM

Theatres  
Magazine  
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# Showcase: Liverpool Unity

Theatres & Placemaking

Spotlight on Salford Victoria

Pub theatres

Amateur theatricals in the long nineteenth century 1789–1914

Modern theatre in Scotland 1960–1995

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**As pub theatres in England are afforded more protection in the planning system, Jo Caird investigates the unique challenges they face and the pragmatic approaches used to overcome them.**

When The White Bear was bought by the pub chain Young's in 2015, the first that Michael Kingsbury, founding artistic director of The White Bear Theatre, heard about it was when his new landlord informed him that they would soon be embarking on a major refit of the venue. The news came as a "great shock", he says, but looking back, he's not all that surprised that he wasn't told sooner. "These things are often kept secret in case someone comes to scupper the deal."

For anyone running a pub theatre, a change of ownership can be a deeply worrying event. The new Neighbourhood Planning Act offers some protection — as of 23 May, it's no longer possible to change the use of a pub without planning permission — but a dispute with a landlord can still make life difficult, or even impossible. Having your notice served — as happened to the fledgling Twickenham Theatre in 2014, leading to its closure just one month after opening its inaugural production — is the nightmare scenario of course, but events needn't be as sudden and dramatic as eviction to have a serious impact. Because of the nature of pub theatre — the fact that you're sharing premises with another business, one whose customer base may not have much crossover with your own — a good relationship with your landlord is crucial.

Kingsbury need not have fretted, however. Young's were "very reassuring that the theatre was here to stay and me as well, having set it up," he recalls. The process of refurbishing the Kennington venue — which involved moving

upstairs after nearly three decades on the ground floor — took far longer than Kingsbury expected (11 months) but actually proved pretty painless, partly thanks to guidance from Theatres Trust. The brewery, he says, acknowledged early on the benefit of the theatre not just on their own business in terms of food and drink sales, but also more generally to the London culture scene.

The theatre, meanwhile, has benefited too. Kingsbury has the same playing space as before, but more seats, a smart new dressing room and a dedicated stage management room. And the atmosphere in the pub is much more welcoming than it used to be now that live football matches have been replaced by fancy gastropub dining.

When Kingsbury set up The White Bear Theatre in 1988, the fact that it was in the back room of a pub was more about chance than design — that was the space available.

For Bristol's The Wardrobe Theatre, which was founded in 2011, and moved into its current home at The Old Market Assembly at the end of 2015, having a bar on the premises is an essential element of the offer.

"It inherently makes it a more exciting space," says Matthew Whittle, the theatre's co-director. "Just as important as seeing the show is being able to talk to people about it, meet the people that made it and chat with them over a pint afterwards."

The two businesses share a building and a landlord but are totally separate operationally, each looking after its own space and staffing. A corridor running between the bar and the theatre's box office provides an additional element of physical separation, a sort of buffer zone that stops them treading on each other's toes.

As far as the relationship with the landlord is concerned, all is going smoothly so far. The theatre footed the bill for converting what was once the dingy back room of a nightclub into a well-appointed 100-seat performance space (plus a dressing room made possible with funding from Theatres Trust's Small Grants Scheme), and the landlord is very pleased with the transformation, says Whittle.

It's not the perfect set-up — "space is always a massive issue: there isn't really a backstage apart from the dressing room so there's nowhere to store sets" — but Whittle and his co-directors were delighted to be able to take what they'd learnt in their previous, much smaller home, and create a theatre that would allow them to expand on their aims.

A pragmatic approach has also been necessary at The Other Room, which became Cardiff's first pub theatre when it opened above Porter's in early 2015. "We didn't quite have enough money to do the building which meant that until very recently, the half of the floor under the seating bank was just concrete," explains Ben Atterbury, the theatre's creative producer. "But we built the half of the floor that the audience could see."

Fit-out isn't the only area of responsibility for those running pub theatres; while landlords typically take care of maintenance concerning the structure of the building, anything associated with the theatres themselves falls under the remit of the tenant. Ingenuity is sometimes required.

Adam Spreadbury-Maher, artistic director of The King's Head Theatre in Islington, recalls that for many years the dressing room didn't have a working toilet because fixing it would have required ripping up the floor of the auditorium. The director and his team put their heads together and came up with a solution involving pump technology. It's a small but significant success that he's rather proud of.

When it comes to the realities of running a pub theatre day-to-day, Spreadbury-Maher stresses the importance of "giving yourself time in the

programme to do maintenance, particularly electrical maintenance, to make sure that everything's compliant. You've got to look after the old girl."

Planning ahead has been crucial at The Other Room too, says Atterbury. "There's a lot of work that needs to go on underneath the surface before you even approach the idea. And although they can be lengthy exercises, doing things like feasibility studies often makes conversations with trusts and foundations and funders way more easy because you've done your research and you can sit down and go, 'this space is needed'."

Total belief in your project is also fundamental for anyone considering setting up a pub theatre, says Spreadbury-Maher. "It's definitely vocational, so you need to have the energy within you. This needs to be something that you have to do." The right team is also crucial, whether that's colleagues whose role is to support you as artistic director, as at The King's Head or The White Bear, or inspiring individuals to collaborate with. As Atterbury puts it, "Working with brilliant people who scare the sh\*t out of you is always a good move to make."

However hard the work, it's worth the effort. "Because of the financial model of fringe theatres, in that they're cheaper to run and operate, it means that more new work happens there," says Spreadbury-Mayer. "More new works happen in pub theatres than in any other theatre. That is so important. It's critical. It's the lifeblood of new British theatre".

