

BACKSTAGE

Scene change



Installing some of the 13 tons of beam trusses used in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* at Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London

PHOTO: MATT WATSON

Updating and maintaining historic theatres, ensuring they can host modern shows with hi-tech scenery, lighting and sound, poses rigorous challenges for venue owners and backstage teams alike. Jo Caird finds out how they do it

Audience members might admire the auditorium, wish there were more ladies' loos or grumble about the number of stairs to climb to reach their seats, but for the majority it's not the building that's the focus on a visit to a historic theatre. They are there to see a piece of theatre, opera or dance, and spare little thought for the infrastructure serving that evening's performance.

It takes a dramatic and frightening event like the ceiling collapse at London's Apollo Theatre in December 2013 to jolt them into thinking more deeply about these remarkable buildings.

As investigations continue into the Apollo incident, and as we approach the theatre's scheduled reopening on March 26 with *Let the Right One In*, it feels like an appropriate time to consider some of the challenges of maintaining historic theatres and making sure they're fit for purpose for artists and audiences today.

At the heart of the issue is the fact that we're asking more of our theatres than ever before.

Mark Price of the Theatres Trust says older theatres were "simply not designed or intended for the modern lighting and sound equipment required for today's theatre productions; for the weight and size of modern scenery and AV projection equipment".

David Blyth, property director at the Ambassador Theatre Group, describes how the new generation of large-scale touring musical theatre productions are making demands on the group's 38 UK theatres, 14 of which are more than 100 years old.

"What we're doing at the moment in the regions is assessing all of the theatres to ensure that they are suitable and fit for purpose to take the large, heavy shows that are now starting to tour," he says.

In some cases, Blyth's team finds that it's simply a matter of strengthening an existing steel grid, which is what happened at the 1912-built Bristol Hippodrome in advance of *The Lion King* tour in 2012. In other older theatres, wooden grids must be replaced altogether. Such work can be expensive, but there are sometimes opportunities for

splitting the costs with producers. And even when that's not possible, it's not like that money is being thrown away. "The advantage is there, because it enables you to take the next big show," says Blyth.

But not all backstage issues can be resolved so simply.

During the theatre building boom of the late 19th and early 20th century, playhouses and variety theatres were built on prime real estate in towns and cities all over the UK. Theatre owners, keen to achieve the greatest possible return on their investment, squeezed buildings onto tiny plots of land and left it to genius theatre architects such as Frank Matcham and Charles Phipps to work out the details.

The result, says Mark Foley, of architectural firm Burrell Foley Fischer – currently at work on the New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth, which dates back to 1884 – is that "backstage areas were absolutely minimal. Tucked in wherever they could be fitted on whatever level around the stage area to get performers into those spaces".

Foley often looks into extending into neighbouring property

"to relieve some of the pressure of having to work within the historic context of the backstage areas". From properly equipped dressing rooms to new generation plant rooms, "there's an awful lot you need to get into an old building structure without destroying what is so exciting and unique about the spaces," Foley says.

It's not all about grand capital projects, though. Just keeping the weather out can be a headache – one that is compounded by the fact that so many of our historic theatres are listed buildings. Blyth says that having good relationships with organisations such as English Heritage and the Theatres Trust is absolutely essential when it comes to maintaining and upgrading the listed theatres in ATG's portfolio.

Working with the right people is also crucial. "What you need when you've got buildings of this age is contractors and experts who understand that type of building," says Blyth. "We go out to tender for jobs, but we very much look at contractors who work with historic buildings because they are a different animal to anything else."

The process of updating these theatres can be complicated by past attempts to modernise them. David Rustige, front of house manager at the Oldham Coliseum, recalls that during the

1885 theatre's recent £1.5 million refurbishment, "our electrics department didn't know where some of the circuitry went to because it had been added on and added on over the years".

At the King's Theatre, Glasgow, a Matcham venue dating back to 1904, ATG is removing the unsightly lighting bins built onto the front of the balconies in the 1950s to disguise the lanterns. They will be replaced with specially designed lighting bars that stand away from the elaborate plasterwork, as can be seen at another ATG theatre, the Harold Pinter, in London's West End.

Of course, alongside these sorts of technologically advanced solutions and large-scale renovation projects, there's the relentless pragmatism and ingenuity of backstage teams. There are plenty of cases where there's simply no option but to work within the constraints of these older buildings.

At the ATG-run Theatre Royal Brighton, for example, an 1807 house remodelled in 1866, the entrance to backstage is through a pair of former 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," says Blyth. "That's theatre."