

Preserving Shows on Theatrecrafts

Jon Primrose

In the last issue I explained the story of the Theatrecrafts.com website and the launch of the Backstage Heritage Collection. This time, it's the story of the Shows pages.

It's become clear that the best way to tell the story of the evolution of equipment, techniques and systems that theatre is made from, and the people who make them, is through shows and events.

The gold standard for Theatre listings online is currently the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com) which is incredibly useful and packed with listings of people, places and productions, way back to the opening date of Broadway theatres. In the UK, the wonderful folk at UK Theatre Web are preserving data about shows (as they have been for 30 years) and the Broadway World International section includes West End references as well.

However, none of them are covering the technical or production details of shows.

Which shows should I include? As I don't have the resources to cover every production everywhere, I've established some criteria to explain my choices.

Criteria #1 – Interesting or Important or Firsts

If I've seen a show, or have been told about it, and it looks interesting or has resources online that cover the technology behind it, I will add it to the website. There are many examples, including *Moby Dick A Whale Of A Tale* in 1992, which was the first show that Martin Levan used self-burned recordable CDs for sound

effects, and the first use of a Cadac J-Type sound desk.

Criteria #2 – Print Coverage

This is the main deciding factor. Many high profile events and shows are covered in journals, which can be viewed on the Theatrecrafts website. You may have spotted on the Archive page (under Journals & Publications) there are scanned copies of Tabs, Cue and Live! magazines, and I am working through them adding mentions of shows, venues, people and equipment to the website so they can be found easily.

I'm also adding articles from *Lighting & Sound International*, which is also listed on the site. LSI articles and excerpts about shows and references to venues, equipment, technologies and people going back to 1985 are listed in the Collections section, with links to PDFs or to the digital edition online. LSI is the source for most of the references on the site; a lot has passed through its' pages over the 40 years since it began and it's a great reference for what happened when, where and by who.

Although the first issues were aimed at the nightclub / concert market, issue 1 (November 1985) had a profile of Theatre Projects (and, of course, Richard Pilbrow) alongside information about the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts and the Kuala Lumpur Putra World Trade Centre.

The first theatre show that was covered in detail was *Peter Pan* in issue 4 (February 1986), but the focus was mainly on the fibre optic stars. There was then an article on Andrew Bridge and his lighting for the epic 'Time' at the Dominion (Issue 6, April 1986).

Issue 10 in September 1986 covered the Bolshoi Ballet on tour in great detail, with coverage of the production management challenges, lighting and sound, which makes it the first performance project covered by LSI from so many perspectives.

Many shows have followed, most of which (since March 1993) have been covered by Rob Halliday, sometimes because he was working on them and had additional insight. Rob's coverage includes all elements of the show and are hugely valuable at preserving information.

Criteria #3 Social Media & Websites

Many folk across the world are sharing exclusive behind-the-scenes views into technical theatre on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. While I don't (necessarily) recommend rushing to sign up

Photo 1: Scenic Automation control from *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). Built by Barry Steele, and on display at Classic Gear Live, 2024.



for these, I'm keeping an eye out for material that could be added to the website. As theatre is ephemeral, so is the social media algorithm, so it's often difficult to find specific resources without trawling through an awful lot of ads and lifestyle content – I'm hoping to capture useful clips and link directly to them on the website. Of course, if folk producing the content want to get in touch about preserving the media for posterity, maybe in longer form, I'd love to hear from them.

Criteria #4 – Paperwork

I've been grateful to receive copies of lighting plans from various shows and venues, and these are scanned at high resolution and available to view (not download) on the website for historical interest. If the shows they relate to aren't listed, I'll add them. Some key lighting plans are available to purchase as large format prints (up to A0 size!) in aid of the BackUp Tech charity, so please check out the Shop at Theatrecrafts.com if you are looking for a unique gift. Use code ABTT for a 10% discount!

Criteria #5 – Interviews

I'm looking to add more interviews with industry professionals and will add shows they mention. A recent trawl through the past work of production electrician Gerry Amies led to some interesting revelations – the interview can be heard on the Theatrecrafts Podcast. As ever, if you are interested in adding your voice to the archives, please let me know.

Criteria #6 – Exhibits

The Classic Gear Live stand at the PLASA show in London each year unearths some wonderful history that is being preserved. The exhibits are preserved on the Backstage Heritage Collection website at Theatrecrafts.com and the exhibits can also be seen on the relevant Show pages. Examples include *The Phantom of the Opera* (which also meets most of the other criteria above, as I have the lighting plan available to view, along with an interview, and plenty of resources); the original scenic automation control was shown at PLASA in 2024.

Criteria #7 – Research Requests

I often receive interesting requests from students at the University of Exeter (where I work) to help them in unearthing specific information. One recent request was about the technology used in promoting new cars, so I've added a page on Car Launches, which are covered often in industry magazines. I've also added a section on Virtual Reality in theatre,



which covers a few shows and events, such as the incredible Draw Me Close which was shown at the Young Vic in 2019.

Photo 2: The Shows page at Theatrecrafts.com

Criteria #8 – Searched

Finally, I keep an eye on words or phrases that are searched for on the website, and if I notice that someone is searching for a show that I don't have listed, I'll do some digging to see if there are resources out there which would support its addition.

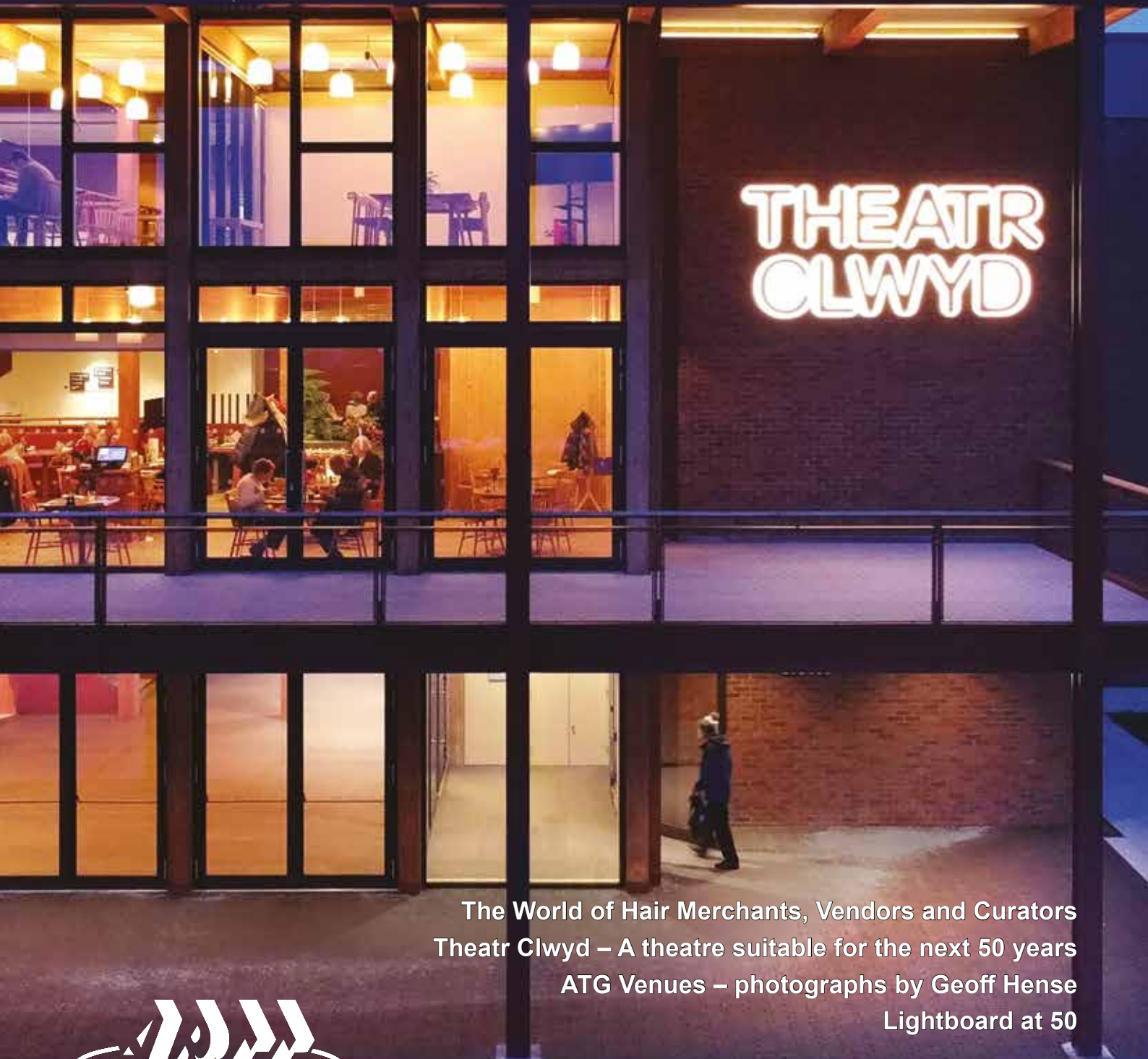
If you are looking for a show on the website, there's a full listing (alphabetically and by category) under the Shows tab. You can also search for the name of a show, or search for a key name.

I'll conclude with an appeal – if you have information about a show that you've worked on, it would be great to hear from you. Even small anecdotes (like the rear wheels of the car in *Sunset Boulevard* being a foot or two off the floor as it rolled on stage, as the Adelphi wings were too narrow) are valuable, and any documents or magazines we are missing are welcomed – we can cover postage costs and can return items to you after they've been scanned. I'm particularly keen to find more copies of Live! magazine to scan, as they seem to be rare now. Also, if you are looking for information, please let me know – the database that drives the website is infinitely tweakable, so there may be ways to display what you need from the data already available. Please get in touch via the Theatrecrafts.com website 'Contact Us' form if you can help in any way.

Sightline

Journal of Theatre Technology and Design

Summer 2026



The World of Hair Merchants, Vendors and Curators
Theatr Clwyd – A theatre suitable for the next 50 years
ATG Venues – photographs by Geoff Hense
Lightboard at 50

