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Southampton gets its Gaumont

Theatre consultant ANTHONY EASTERBROOK describes the £4¼m refurbishment due to take place through 1986 that will transform the theatre into the major touring venue for the region.

The marriage has been arranged! It has been a long wooing, and during the course of many years the local public's anticipation of a wedding has frequently been dashed by what appeared to have been lovers' tiffs. But at last it is going to happen—no doubt whatever. And even though the bride is 57, rising 58, it has to be said that the groom is immensely older—although in strict legal terms this is not entirely true.

The marriage is, of course, that between The Gaumont Theatre and Southampton City Council, and herein lies the slight distortion of the truth. Following the best modern precepts, Southampton have set up a special limited company called Southampton City Leisure Limited. And it is this company which will be responsible for managing the Gaumont Theatre when it at last reopens in its new guise.

So what, actually, is going to happen in this matter? It would be simple to say that Southampton had made an offer to Rank for the Gaumont and were now engaged in a process of refurbishment. In truth the situation is more ingenious. It will be Rank who will carry out the necessary work (to Southampton's satisfaction) in accordance with a careful schedule of works drawn up by the City, and which has the agreement of both parties. To pursue the metaphor of the first paragraph, the Best Man is The City Architect's department which will keep a close watch on the overall work. They will be assisted by two Groomsmen, the Consultants Dale and Goldfinger as Mechanical and Electrical Engineers and John Wyckham Associates as Theatre Consultants, who will endeavour to ensure that the theatricality of the project is maintained.

Rank have appointed a full design team (listed at the end of this article) and work is already well advanced on drawings. Early in 1986 work on the building will start in earnest and it is expected that everything will be complete by the early part of 1987. It is intended that the essential character of the building will be retained as it is, after all, a rather good example of the architecture and interior design of the period. However, over the years, the accommodation in the foyer areas—particularly at the upper levels—has been much abused with partitioning and the hope is that these spaces will be dealt with in such a way as to reveal many of the original features as well as improving public facilities.



The 2250-seat Gaumont at Southampton will undergo a £4¼m refit during 1986 following its purchase by the City Council.

The box office will be reorganised to accommodate a computer system, and it is intended that there will be terminals in other places in Southampton, particularly at the Information Centre in Above Bar.

At present it is difficult, if not impossible,

for wheelchair-bound people to enter the auditorium. Plans will be developed to ensure that such people are not discriminated against in the future and of course, the necessary disabled toilet facilities will be provided.



The three-tier auditorium of Southampton Gaumont. Some seating will be lost in the circle when a new control suite is constructed at the centre rear.

The auditorium, apart from being completely redecorated, will have new seating and carpets. Some seating will be lost in the Circle because a new control suite will be constructed in the centre towards the rear. Patrons will no doubt remember the rather unsatisfactory situation in which a sound control desk was placed in the open circle (even when it might have been thought that such a facility was not vital to the performance) to the detriment of the sightlines of a number of highly priced seats. This situation is unlikely to occur in the newly planned theatre.

Much work will be done in the orchestra pit. At the moment the pit is a fixed one and for large orchestras such as those employed by the major touring opera and ballet companies, it has been necessary to remove a number of stalls seats and place some of the orchestra at auditorium level. This is a most unsatisfactory situation from a number of points of view. First of all it is unsightly (except, perhaps to musicians); secondly it is extremely labour intensive; and thirdly it plays havoc with the condition of the furnishings which have to be set and reset constantly.

In the future the orchestra pit will comprise two electrically operated elevators, so that small and medium sized orchestras may be accommodated under normal conditions, but when larger orchestras of up to 85-90 musicians are required then the second elevator will come into play. The pit will be designed in such a way that the elevators can form not only an orchestra pit, but when stationed at auditorium level can allow more seating to be set. At stage level, they will provide an extensive forestage for concerts, conferences or, indeed, dramatic performances.

As part of the technical upgrading of the building a modern computer-operated stage lighting system will be provided with a much greater capacity and flexibility than that at present installed. The opportunity will be taken to rationalise the auditorium lighting



The new orchestra pit will comprise two electrically operated elevators enabling any orchestral configuration up to 85-90 musicians. They will also enable the seating to be increased if kept at auditorium level, or provide an extensive forestage for concerts, conferences or even dramatic performances when raised to stage level.

positions so as to give less offence to the decoration of the building. The Gaumont is not so different from any other similar place in that, over the years, additional equipment has been bolted, hung or glued to every available space. The result is inevitably very untidy and, dare it be said, perhaps not in the best interests of lighting the stage anyway.

A similar situation has occurred with the sound system. This too has 'growned' like Topsy and the resulting mishmash of loudspeakers, microphones and so forth does little for the acoustic of the building and is hardly an advertisement for the state of the art in sound. Little wonder, therefore,

that many visiting companies ignore the theatre equipment and place their own loudspeakers, tastefully fed with draped flexible cables, all around the auditorium. It is almost certain that major pop groups touring to the future Gaumont will still wish to use their own equipment, but it is hoped that the new sound installation will be suitable for use by all but the very largest companies. At least the principal sound installation will provide for digitally delayed sound in the rear parts of the auditorium so that when electronically reinforced sound is required it will be apparently as good as the natural acoustic: an acoustic which, it should be said, is extraordinarily good.

As well as a completely new sound system suitable for both speech reinforcement and sound effects, a comprehensive stage management communication will be installed. It will have all the normally expected methods of communication, both by cuelight and a twin rig intercom, but will also include closed circuit television. This latter facility will enable those members of the public unfortunate enough to arrive late at the performance and perhaps finding their entrance to the auditorium denied for a time, to watch the performance on a television monitor. In addition a comprehensive paging and show relay system will form part of the communication system.



"The acquisition of the Gaumont Theatre Southampton by the City Council was one of my long-held ambitions—but with a difference. This one has been achieved.

"Every large town or city that has seen its only surviving theatre succumb to the developer has lived to regret the fact in later years. I know of many such examples, and as a result was keen to ensure Southampton did not move in the same direction.

"It is in the interest of residents, visitors and in the case of the Gaumont Theatre Southampton, the region, to see these assets in public ownership and their long-term future secured for present and future generations to enjoy. It is civic vandalism in the extreme to dictate otherwise. Theatres are as much a part of the infrastructure of the community as are good roads and sewers.

"Some local authorities never see beyond the bottom line accounting principle. Cost benefit analysis surely means social and financial benefit in that order.

"Residents and visitors to our region can sleep safely in the knowledge that in theatrical and musical terms the best is yet to come!"

John Bullock
Director of Leisure Services
Southampton City Council



Dennis Hall took up his appointment as Director of the Southampton Gaumont in December 1985, after spending all his previous entertainment management career in nearby Bournemouth where he was entertainment and events manager for the Borough.

The Stage Manager's desk will normally be installed downstage right—the bastard prompt long in use in Southampton—but will also be capable of being plugged in downstage left.

The stage area will generally be tidied up. (Easy enough to write about, but very expensive to carry out!) The present downstage right corner is much cluttered with brickwork supporting, apart from anything else, an electricians position and perch. The back wall has all manner of excrescences which will be swept away in the new form, and the stage entrances will be guarded with sound and light lobbies. The existing counterweight system will be overhauled and the control moved from stage level to the fly gallery, stage left. Provision will be made for a cross-over outside the stage volume, probably through the dressing room corridors.

The stage surface itself will be completely repaired and the existing traps restored to proper working order. In order to allow the maximum use of the stage, the scene dock upstage right will be enlarged and form part of the new get-in. The get-in itself is a great problem. It will be remembered by many touring companies that the ground behind the Gaumont falls away quite sharply in two directions. That, combined with the stage being at a tiresome height above ground level, creates enormous difficulties during the long dark nights at weekends.

What is now proposed is that the new scene dock will be served by a long gently-ramped lorry access so that all but exceptionally long pieces of scenery will be but a short carry onto the dock and, if all goes well, that carry will be protected from wind and rain.

Last, but as the cliché has it, not least, those on whom the prosperity of the theatre will depend—the artistes. All the dressing rooms will be refurbished to a good modern standard and provided with showers and toilets far beyond the numbers originally installed.

Additional dressing rooms (and band rooms) will be provided so that once more the Gaumont will really be able to act as host to the best (and largest) companies normally on the road.

This is a mere outline of the things that will be going on in Southampton, and we hope to be able to report from time to time on the progress that is being made there. Not least, we hope to be able to report soon on the new name which will be given to the finished building. For one thing is certain—it will not be the Gaumont!

Design Team

Project Manager	Hugh Corrance
Architect	B.R. Andrews, Dip Arch
Quantity Surveyors	Roger Lavington Associates
Structural Engineers	Patrick Parsons Associates
Interior Designers	Dry Butlin Bicknell & Partners
Lighting Consultants	Rank Strand

Ray Abbatt, who will direct technical operations at the Southampton Gaumont, joined the Rank Organisation in 1950, and was appointed stage manager/chief technician and based at the Gaumont in 1960. He has worked on shows for Rank at many of their major venues including the Dominion in Tottenham Court Road and at the Kilburn State. He has now "moved over" to local government and carrying on looking after things backstage under the new Southampton City Leisure banner.



Anthony Easterbrook, theatre consultant for the Southampton Gaumont Theatre project has been a partner in John Wyckham Associates since 1974. Prior to that he was general manager for the National Theatre of Great Britain, and had spent a total of twenty-five years working 'in' the theatre as stage manager, stage director, production manager, and company manager. He is a past chairman of the ABTT and has been a member of many national theatre committees.

His consultancy work has spanned projects as far apart as Aberdeen (His Majesty's) and Mosul (Iraq). He is joint technical co-ordinator (with John Wyckham) for the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet Companies and especially for liaison with the design team to ensure realisation of the technical needs of both these companies in the re-developed theatre for which project completion date is 1992.