

# WEST YORKSHIRE PLAYHOUSE

Francis Reid

Labelled as the last major producing theatre complex to be built this century, the West Yorkshire Playhouse is in some danger of being regarded as marking the end of an era. But I made my visit in the hope of finding indicators for the future rather than a curtain call for what was known in my youth as 'The Rep Movement'. I was not disappointed. This is certainly a playhouse for today. And one that stands a pretty good chance of serving a long tomorrow without inducing despair in its audiences, actors and technicians. This is because Leeds seems to have got the key pointers right: **scale and flexibility**.

A recurring difficulty of post-war theatre construction has been the frequency with which there have been marked differences of aspiration and philosophy between the commissioning client and the actual first users of the building. The key members of the Leeds team who opened the theatre, and who continue to run it, are those who wrote the brief, debated every pencil mark on every drawing with the design team, and eyeballed every detail of the daily construction process.

An unusual, indeed for Britain almost unique, feature was the use of a competition to select the architect. Having advised one of the competing teams, reviewed the results for the Architect's Journal and seen the result, how do I feel about the appointment of architects by competition rather than interview? On the basis of results justifying means, it has to be said that the end product at Leeds is certainly a happy one. Whether it is better or worse than the alternatives can never truly be known because so much detailed design development is geared to debate between architects, clients, consultants, planners and firemen and financiers. However, one must surely question so much creative energy (not to mention resources estimated to exceed half a million pounds of design time) being deployed on odds of nine to one against winning.



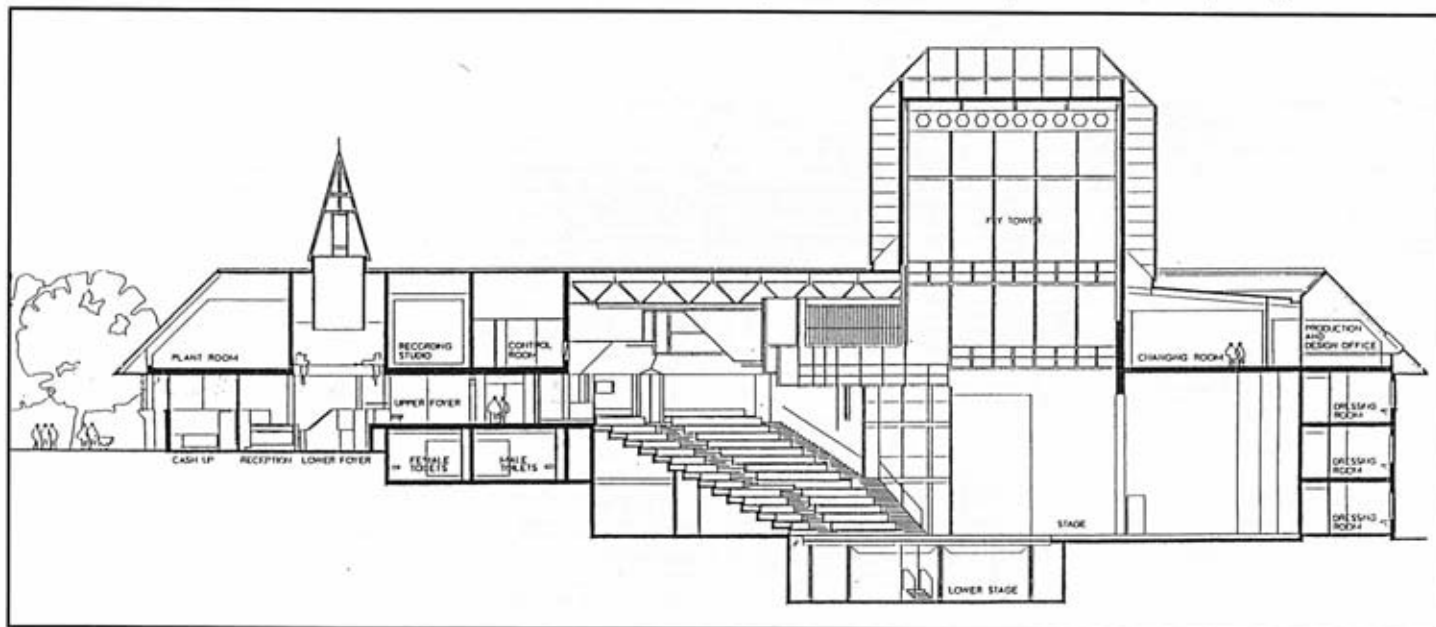
*"the National Theatre that we failed to build on the South Bank."*

The Grand Theatre, providing a base for Opera North and a home for major ballet and musical touring companies, is eminently suitable for all forms of lyric theatre. Consequently it has been possible to dedicate the facilities of the new complex to the specific needs of drama. A major first for a regional producing theatre is that both auditoria have equal status. West Yorkshire Playhouse is not cast in the conventional mode of main house and studio. The Quarry Theatre and The Courtyard Theatre are both main houses providing alternative environments appropriate to the staging styles chosen for particular productions.

The Quarry takes its name from the Quarry Hill flats, a mega housing estate

whose demolition provided a prime civic centre site for the new complex. It is cloned from the original Leeds Playhouse of 1970 — a temporary demountable theatre within a shell originally earmarked for a student sports hall but now to be retained by the University as an assembly and conference space. This provisional theatre was so successful with both actors and audiences that, under the leadership of the project's catalysing triumvirate (Board chairman Bernard Atha, artistic director John Harrison and executive director Will Weston), there was always a clear intent that its format should be fundamental to the concept of the new building. This has been achieved triumphantly.

Contemporary theatre architecture has often tended to be rather more successful within the constraints of adapting existing spaces than when exploiting the freedom of



open sites. In recreating the spirit of the original Leeds auditorium in a new space, whose dimensions could be chosen rather than imposed, much could have been lost. But I find only gain. The audience continue to be seated in the faceted blocks rather than continuous curves, and a small increase in auditorium width allows fewer rows while retaining the same capacity (750 seats). Flexibility in the tiers adjacent to the stage allows optional vomitories to be formed when required.

A major gain is the way technology has been used to enhance the design capability of the stage and make its technical management cost-effective. A 'D' shaped motorised wagon stage (13m deep  $\times$  16m wide), capable of moving a distributed load of 25 tonnes and being flushed into the surface on a compensating elevator in the downstage position, allows the current production to be removed to provide a clear stage for rehearsal. (It is not easy to play Sunday one-nighters or rehearse elegant interiors on a shingle beach!).

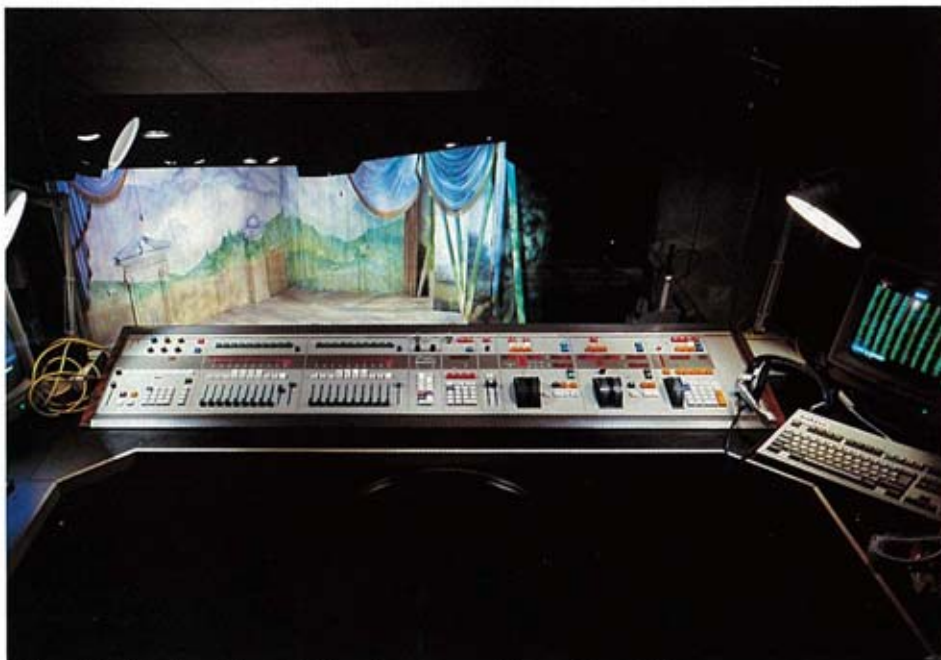
The wagon and elevator floor are

modular, with 34 1.2m  $\times$  2.4m removable sections provided for trapping. A floor track along the centre line and a standard hand-operated truck winch in the basement allow a small scenic truck to be operated in the most commonly required mode, without the need to lay a raised floor. The fly tower over the main stage area provides 18.5m max flying height while there are 10m of suspension height available over the forestage. All bars are truss type with 55 single purchase sets running across stage and six double purchase running up/down stage. Rope locks are transferable to stage level, and all fly and intermediate galleries have timber pin rails with removable belaying pins for flexibility in tying-off handlines.

There has been growing realisation over the last couple of decades that the form which has become known as courtyard is the most flexible format available for theatre performances. In naming their alternative space the Courtyard Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse have promoted the word 'courtyard' to a generic status equivalent to opera house. I hope that Iain Mackintosh,

champion of the form in general and the word in particular, feels suitably elated. Courtyards adapt to most formats, particularly End Stage, Georgian, Traverse, Promenade and even Italianate Opera House. The one format which a courtyard cannot provide is the open thrust stage with fan seated auditorium, derived from the classical theatres of the Greeks and Romans. But that is precisely what the Quarry Theatre supplies, so Leeds has everything... with the possible exception of a true theatre-in-the-round which can only be contrived uneasily in a courtyard.

The Courtyard Theatre (seating around 350, depending on format) was not open when L+SI went to press and so we cannot whet reader's appetites with a photograph. But it has strong visual resonances with the National Theatre's Cottesloe, except that the ratio of width to length makes its auditorium tend towards a square feel rather than the Cottesloe's rectangle. The Cottesloe, although courtyard in form, is still a black box: but Leeds, with its coloured gallery fascias, reaffirms the increasingly universal



Both auditoriums have Strand Galaxy 3 systems and Green Ginger Dimmers.



The Quarry Theatre (right) and rehearsal room (above).



belief that neutrality is more complex than mere black paint.

The theatre room is flat floor throughout, but the basic format is end stage for which retractable bleacher seating is provided. The first three rows of seating are lowered on an elevator and modular units provide a raised stage. A grid over the stage area gives a maximum flying height of 9.8m with fly galleries at 5.5m and technical galleries at 8m above stage level. Suspension is by self-sustaining winch sets, but there are arrangements for installing temporary counterweights plus pin rails with removable belaying pins at 300mm centres. Over the area not covered by the grid, five RSJs offer winch and handline provision for alternative staging formats.

Lighting positions in both theatres are comprehensive and the inventory is a mix of the best of CCT, Strand and Thomas. And where the elex department felt that today's catalogues have gaps, they have had their golden oldies refurbished by White Light. Both theatres have Galaxy desks with Green



Ginger/Eurolight dimmers (2,450 in the Quarry and 120 in the Courtyard). An old panatropo operator like myself can only boggle at the size of the sound mixer, its superb open positioning and the soundproof casing of the Revoxes.

Carr and Angier were the stage machinery consultants and their detailing is full of imaginative touches. The theatre acted as their own theatre consultants with light and sound chiefs (Tim Thornally and Mic Pool) having a very positive input into the choice and installation of the equipment which they would subsequently have to use and maintain. Mike Brown masterminded the whole technology operation and has done a great job. As production manager of the original playhouse he built up a picture of exactly what was required: the theatre's directors and management are to be highly commended for giving him his head. They have been rewarded with systems which were not only cost-effective to install but, more importantly, will be cost-effective to operate.

The scope of tie-line provision is particularly comprehensive and every likely duct requirement for future and temporary cabling appears to have been foreseen. Communications are particularly well planned and Northern Light have taken yet another step in consolidating their role as master cuers, pagers and worklighters.

The West Yorkshire Playhouse is a fully comprehensive entertainment factory. A workshop block provides every construction facility and throughout the scenic, prop and wardrobe manufacturing areas there is concern for health and safety that sets new standards for our theatres. Another enhanced standard is that the comprehensive disabled facilities extend to the backstage area. Dressing rooms seem practical, look cosy, and have windows. The rehearsal room is stage sized, has roller shutter access to the scene dock and its own little greenroom.

The huge bar and the bistro-style restaurant are ideally situated to building up lunchtime pub trade and can double as informal performance spaces. Two other rooms, linked to the catering facilities, can be hired during the day for meetings or used for entertainment by the sponsors without which no theatre is now permitted to function. The Box Office is open plan and exudes an air, still more rare in our theatres than it ought to be, of the customer being king.

And what of the architecture? The Appleton Partnership have provided a building that is very much of today. This is very positively a late 80s building and if its architectural style has something of the visual feel that we associate with supermarkets — well that's okay because we live in a market-oriented society to which theatre is increasingly having to pay more than just lip service. The whole building is a considerable relief from the concrete bunkers of the recent past. The flytower makes no apologies but stands in proud proclamation of its theatrical function. The banded brickwork has a feel of local industrial building traditions and the slate roof helps to bridge any theatre's inevitably uneasy gap between the institutional and the domestic. The building, generally, scores pretty highly on the 'come hither' scale.

Perhaps the greatest compliment I can offer to all concerned is to suggest that The West Yorkshire Playhouse is the National Theatre that we failed to build on the South Bank.

# Northern Light

---

## The West Yorkshire Playhouse

---

Manufactured, installed and supplied  
**System 2000** Working Lighting  
 Control, Paging Equipment,  
 Production Lighting Boxes and  
 FOH/Foyer Lighting Control

---

39/41 Assembly St.,  
 Edinburgh EH6 7RG  
 Tel: 031-553 2383  
 Fax: 031-553 3296

79 Loanbank Quadrant,  
 Glasgow G51 3HZ  
 Tel: 041-440 1771  
 Fax: 041-445 4406

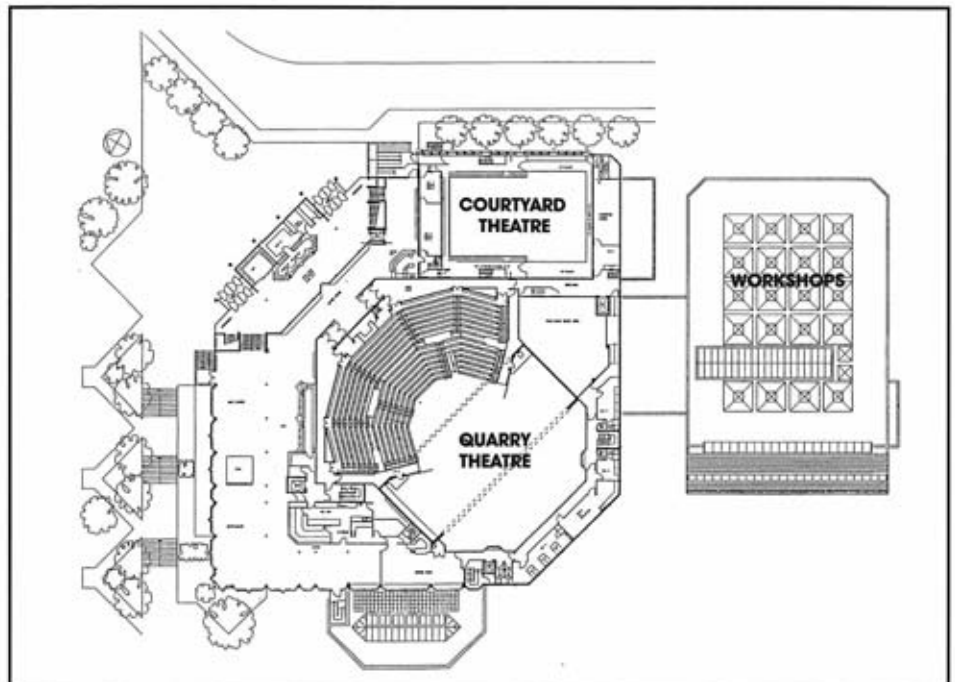
**Credits**

Architects: The Appleton Partnership  
 Mechanical and electrical engineers:  
 Ove Arup and Partners  
 Quantity surveyors: Davis Langdon  
 & Everest  
 Stage machinery consultants: Carr  
 & Angier  
 Acoustic consultants: Sandy Brown  
 Associates  
 Theatre consultants: West Yorkshire  
 Playhouse  
 Technical advisor: Mike Brown  
 Production lighting equipment:  
 Tim Thornally  
 Production sound equipment: Mic Pool  
 Main contractor: Fairclough Building Ltd  
 Stage machinery: Theatre Tech

Production lighting controls: Strand Lighting  
 Paging & worklight systems, outlet panels:  
 Northern Light  
 Front of house area dimmers and controls:  
 Northern Light  
 Production dimmers: Eurolight/Green Ginger  
 Production lighting patch panels: Eurolight  
 House light dimmers and control: Eurolight  
 Hill Audio sound controls: Pro Audio  
 Amplifiers, tape recorders & outboard  
 equipment: Pro Audio  
 Tannoy loudspeakers: Audix  
 Ring intercom: Canford Audio/Tech Pro  
 Cable systems (Lighting): CLS  
 Lighting systems: Strand, CCT, Thomas



Michael Brown production manager and theatre technical adviser.



# LIGHTING+*SOUND* *International*



COEMAR AT SIB IN RIMINI

- SIB/Magis: Angles on Projection
- Francis Reid at The West Yorkshire Playhouse
- A World First from Light Works
- Rosco: an International Dialogue
- Big R's Latest Venue in Milton Keynes
- Quartzcolor: Strand's New Italian Factory

MAY 1990