

1930 REVISITED: THE PRINCE EDWARD THEATRE REOPENS WITH CRAZY FOR YOU

Iain Mackintosh offers an architectural rather than technical appraisal of the West End's newest revival of an old theatre

"This theatre . . . just imagine . . . give it a whole new life!" says hero Bobby when shown the old Gaiety, Deadrock Nevada, by heroine Polly in Act One Scene 6 of *Crazy For You*. Which is just what architect Nick Thompson and designer wife Clare Ferraby have done with the old Prince Edward for owners Cameron Mackintosh and his equal partner, Lord Delfont's First Leisure Corporation.

This article is being written during preview before press and public have pronounced judgement on either show or building. The judgement will be favourable: here is one of the most perfectly matched openings in London theatre history, show and building both over 60 years old but both rejuvenated as if for each other. The sum of the theatrical experience is probably greater than either part but who cares when everybody has such a good night out?

The new Prince Edward is not quite the old Prince Edward as it was when it opened in 1930. Neither is *Crazy for You* the Gershwin musical *Girl Crazy* which opened in New York in 1930. Both are more 1930 than 1930 ever was, both have been tweaked here and had a face lift there to provide a hugely enjoyable, larger than life, evocation of their own youth. And, I suspect, both creators, Michael White and Mike Ockrent for the show, Cameron

Mackintosh and Nick Thompson for the theatre, have had their tongues firmly in their cheeks. If they can manage it they should also chuckle all the way to the bank. But each should remember what they owe to the other: *Crazy for You* might wear thin at Drury Lane, the new Prince Edward seem overcooked for *King Lear* or the Nederlands Dans Theater.

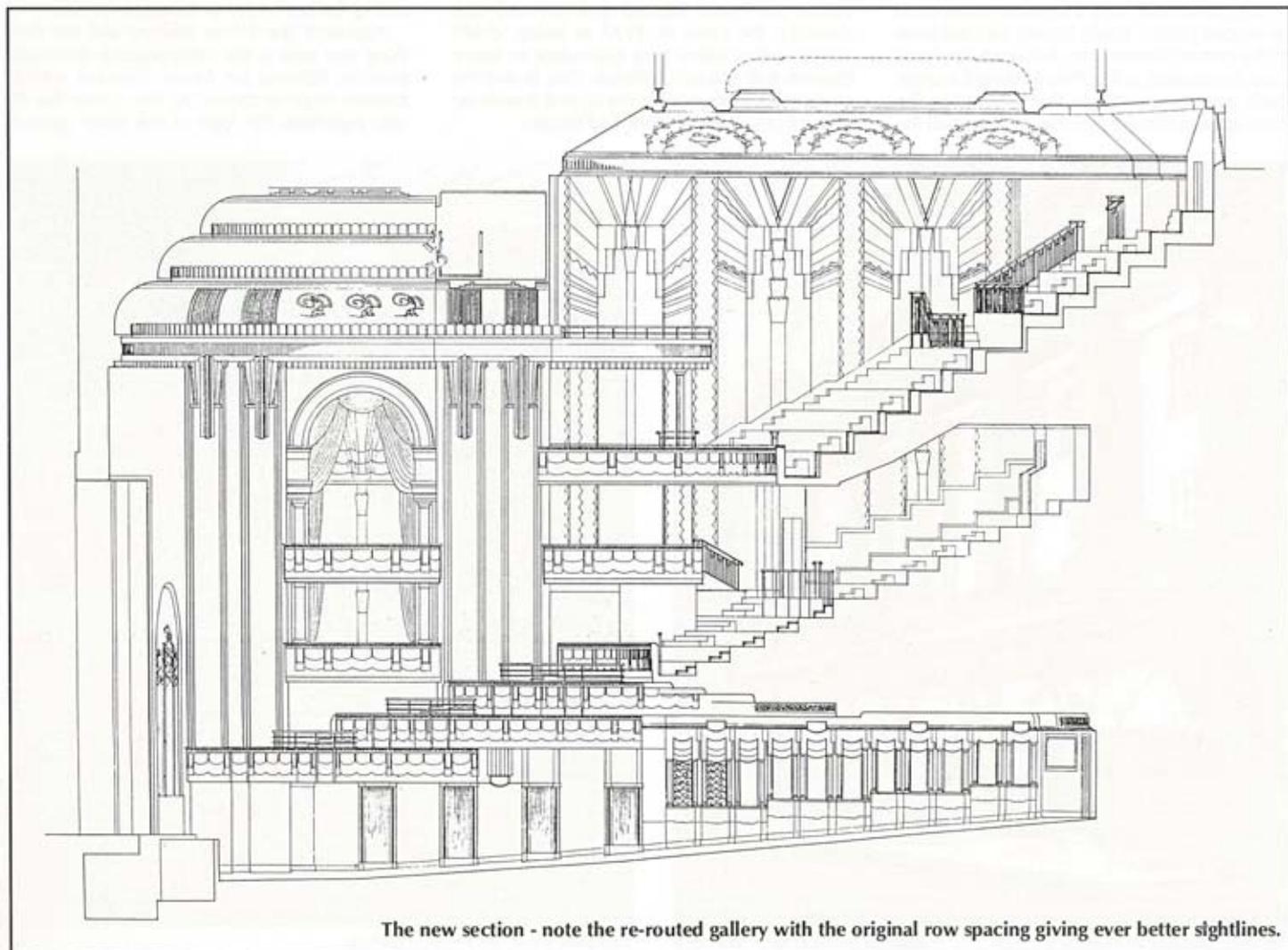
Everyone has heard of Gershwin but few of the theatre's true begetter Edward A. Stone, 'architect' of the Prince Edward (the inverted commas are because Stone, like Matcham and Sprague, was not a fully qualified architect which I for one find reassuring). Stone was one of the principal designers of both cinemas and architects in London in the 30s, in the cinema to be placed alongside Cecil Masey teamed with Komisarjevsky, Robert Cromie and George Coles.

Stone cinemas still standing include the atmospheric Astoria Rainbow in Finsbury Park, the Astorias in the Old Kent Road and Brixton, the Warner in Leicester Square, which is currently being reconstituted yet again, and the Streatham Hill Astoria (Odeon) with its facade and side elevation so very similar to that of the Prince Edward. Of West End theatres three designed by Stone survive: the Piccadilly (1928), the Prince Edward and the Whitehall

(both 1930). There is a link with a fourth, the Duchess (1929) where the architect was Ewen S. Barr but the interior designers were the same as for the three Stone theatres, Marc-Henri Levy and Gaston Laverdet, trading as Marc-Henri and Laverdet.

It is their work that lifts Stone's theatres above Stone's cinemas and which Clare Ferraby has highlighted and exaggerated in a way they might have envied, the renovation having all the advantages of a generous budget and the chance of a second or rather third attempt at the difficult task of making a big impact on a small site.

These London theatres of 1928/29/30 all had a certain Parisien chic. They had also benefited from the greatest theatre building boom in recorded history, that of the years 1905 to 1929 in North America. This boom did not really gather pace until after our great boom of buildings by Phipps, Matcham, Sprague Crewe, etc., had eroded. In North America in their halycon days two building types emerged: the movie-palace which has had too much written about it and the 'Broadway theatre' which in contrast has been inadequately recorded. These Broadway theatres were much smaller than the movie-palaces and were different in character, more subdued and less vulgar. They



The new section - note the re-routed gallery with the original row spacing giving ever better sightlines.



Successful pastiche light fitting.



Crazy for You in performance at the Prince Edward Theatre.

do not really appeal to the American movie-palace buff who would kill for Spanish American plasterwork. The Broadway legitimate theatre achieved an intimacy in the 800 to 1600 seat range as fine as did the Victorian and Edwardian theatres we know and love in Britain but in an entirely different way. It is this sort of theatre that Stone and others emulated briefly in London.

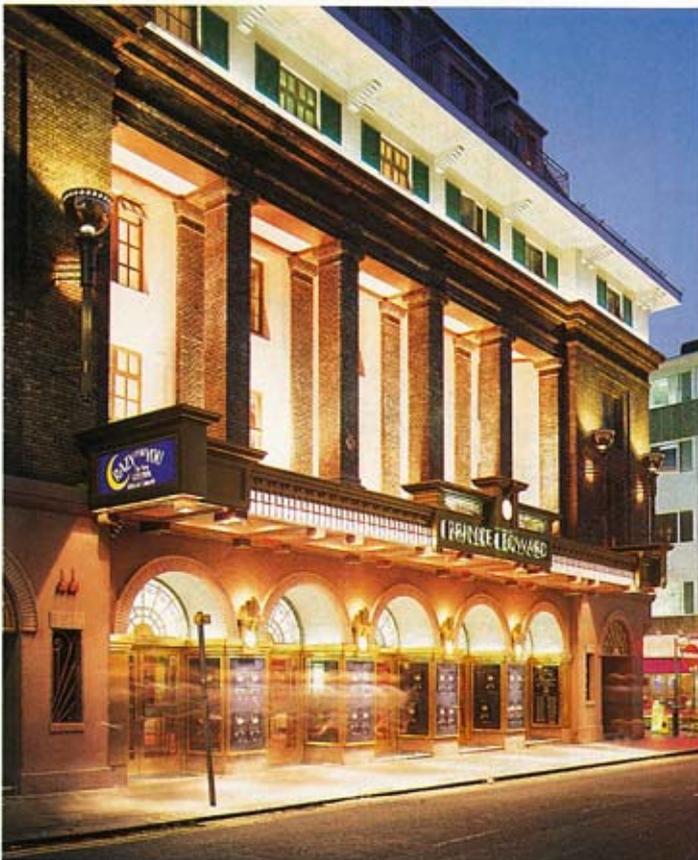
They generally have a common entrance - Her Majesty's (1897) had four separate entrances for four carefully distinguished strata of theatregoer, four routes from street to seat, though all cunningly wound round the one box office which had four windows. However, Prince Edward did have a separate entrance to the second gallery, easily broken into the foyer in the current renovation. But once up those stairs the comfort at the Prince Edward's upper levels was comparable to that enjoyed in the stalls, quite unlike the benches of almost all the

older theatres. The manager could charge 2s 4d for a fully upholstered seat with arm-rest compared with the 1s or 1s 6d perches in the 'gods' elsewhere in London.

Here is the key to the architectural approach of Stone: the management sensed a new middle class audience and required their architects to forswear huge capacities with 12 inches per persona in gallery and pit (the old rear stalls) but rather to achieve a large box office by creating a more homogenous level of comfort throughout the house and substituting for the old six or eight to one price differential (most expensive seat to cheapest place) of most West End theatres something more like three to one. Hence the Prince Edward with its 1650 seat capacity, the same in 1930 as today, could deliver a box office take equivalent to larger theatres with packed galleries. This is also the quality that distinguishes the typical Broadway house from a typical West End theatre.

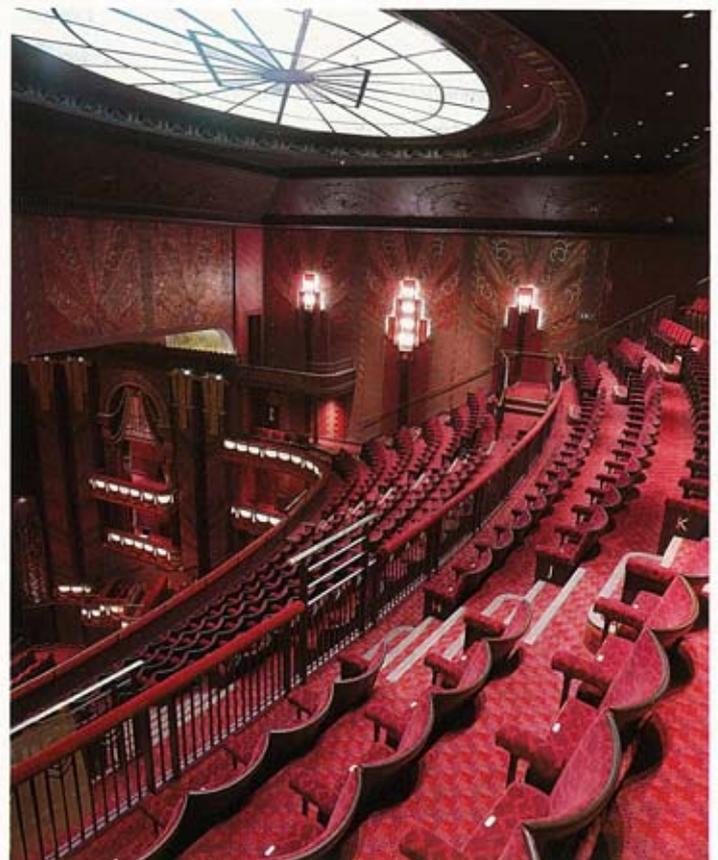
Cameron Mackintosh (no relation) and his colleagues Martin McCallum and Nick Allott sensed what could be achieved at the Prince Edward. It is customary to criticise West End managements, of theatres and of productions alike, for charging too much for the gallery - £8 up there when the front stalls are only £20, two point five to one where it once was six to one. But if the front stalls are worth £30 at the Prince Edward, then the second balcony (now called the Grand Circle) is certainly worth £11.50. Here a close price differential, which is artificial elsewhere, is right and proper. On top of that client and architect have seen to it that the standard of decor is constant throughout, adding further luxury to the upper circle.

Approach the Prince Edward and the first thing one sees is the extravagantly theatrical exterior lighting by Andre Tammes which features huge torcheres. At the corner the lit sign expresses the logo of the show against



The new exterior in February 1993.

interior photos: John Walsom



Top shot from the second gallery.



New boxes, new slips in the old style.

Stone's brick, rather more elegant than the familiar billboard backing to lit signs elsewhere in the West End. Over the portico is an American style canopy, something Stone might have done but didn't. It's a bit high but had to fix to the existing steelwork. The Prince Edward is certainly a theatre which lights up Old Compton Street.

The circular foyer has been beautifully restored. The lay lights which are wonderful everywhere have just the right pink, french grey

and creamy feel. On the floor Clare Ferraby lays the first of her carpets which march on into upper and lower foyers. The colour schemes are sensibly consistent throughout the whole building: reds, smudged pinks and thirties style bronze gilt with two or three closely co-ordinated carpets which create a feeling of space that would not have been achieved if different colour schemes were used in different places.

Inside the auditorium some tricks old and

new are played. Cleverest and newest are the harem screens to the side aisles at the rear of the stalls which take the barn size scale down beautifully and make actors of the audience. At the back of the stalls a couple of glazed boxes for a director or 'supplementary control', the other lighting control option being at the back of the upper balcony. Look up and immediately cascading side boxes come into view. This is the chief device in reducing the scale of the audience chamber.

The history of these is complex. Stone's original theatre had the single box each side as one finds in so many theatres of the thirties. But Stone returned to the Prince Edward in 1936 to turn it into the Casino. He added at each end of the first circle four stepped boxes of the sort first seen at the Palace in Times Square, New York (1913 and still there).

From the fourth box stairs led down to the large projecting dance floor so that diners from tables in the circle could wend their way down to the dance floor when supper and floor shows were over. (The second circle was closed in the Casino and war time services club days). When the Casino reverted to the Prince Edward after a chequered and largely cinematic career in 1978 for *Evita* the stepped boxes were still there.

Now Mackintosh/Thompson have added a fifth box to the stairway of four, a second large box over each side boxes and two new slips plus a 'Hersey follow spot position' over. Cunningly they have taken the Lalique back-lit panels of Marc-Henri and Laverdet, which were previously confined to the circle fronts, and spread them all over circles boxes and slips. Such decorative consistency softens the complex geometry.

In almost any other circumstance this cut and paste approach to theatre architecture would be disastrous: here it is exuberantly successful. As with *Girl Crazy* the original hot rhythm was strong enough to take a little hype. Marc-Henri and Laverdet and even Stone would surely be flattered.

They would have to have explained to them the other and even more noteworthy success of this auditorium and that is the channelling and control of the flotsam and jetsam of light and sound of today's theatre. Many readers of this magazine will scarcely remember the days when West End and Broadway theatres housing the biggest musicals did not boast the advance spot bars originated by Jules Fisher in New York or the advance perches which Richard Pilbrow invented for *Blitz*.

The latter have been controlled in legitimate houses like the Albery which has continued the Associated Theatre Shaftesbury Avenue custom of allowing F.O.H. spots only if the producer paints them gold. But in the musical houses today long Lekos and big Bose boxes perch malevolently on every vantage point like a flock of vultures. So much for Sprague, Matcham and the architecture of yesteryear which so many of the punters prefer to the architecture of today, especially when the latter is in concrete.

At the Prince Edward all those necessary side positions are there but you don't read them because the reds and pinks have been graduated to near black in the proscenium zone and the pilasters marbled to kill those light leaks from instruments on the main vertical side positions which manufacturers tell you don't happen but do. And yet there are enough highlights in this all important zone to avoid that dreary Aldwych grey of the RSC days that made you think they had arrived at the Barbican before it had opened.

At the sides all is exposed but almost invisibly. Overhead the stuff actually is invisible. Stone had created an arch back in 1930 to differentiate the forward lower ceiling from the upper rear ceiling. Rightly Mackintosh/Thompson did not lower these ceilings but simply lowered the arch, widening it slightly to create a double hung bridge, big enough to hold the annual AGM of the ABTT. Like all really good ideas it appears easy.

Except there was not much time. *Some Like it Hot* closed on 20th June 1992, eight months after the architects had been appointed to

devise a scheme for refurbishment. A further eight months separates the end of *Some Like it Hot* and the first preview of *Crazy for You*, on 19th February 1993. Not a long time to spend £2.7m (exclusive of fees), even shorter than the 11 months Renton Howard Wood Levin and Theatre Projects Consultants had to do auditorium, stage and foyers of the Theatre Royal Nottingham in 1977/8. At the Prince Edward all had to be achieved in a city centre with scarcely space for a site hut.

First Leisure brought to the Prince Edward project the expertise of project management and the purchasing power of a chain that buys acres of carpet for bingo halls. The architects were a useful five minutes away in Endell Street. But the chief reason why things could move fast is that one man was able to make all decisions: the Prince Edward was renovated in the same way as most London theatres were built a century ago with the owner instructing an architect/builder on a one to one basis. Compare if you will my current experience at Edinburgh where the Empire is being transformed into the Festival Theatre with absolutely everything new except the audience chamber itself.

Here trustees led by a public spirited politician are guided by a well staffed quango who employ a conscientious project manager who has working for him an excellent construction manager. Oh yes, and somewhere there is an architect and a theatre consultant who are of one mind and who dreamed the whole thing up but sometimes feel as if they are bystanders in the whole 'cost conscious' 'fast track' procedure.

At least in our other big job, at Glynedebourne, Sir George Christie ultimately makes all the decisions himself! Nevertheless, all professionals will envy RHWL in their good fortune in having a client, in Cameron Mackintosh, prepared to take as much care about the details of a renovation as he does about a mega-musical.

There are two other reasons why the success of the Prince Edward cannot be projected on to all other situations. Firstly, it is a single purpose building: for musical theatre - no opera, no ballet, no pantomime, no drama, no conferences, no cinema. The pit is a pit for musicals and does not have to accommodate orchestras of 8, 16, 24, 56, 84, 100 or no orchestra at all as will Edinburgh's old Empire. Second, the building was decorated from the outset in an applied style to which further layers can be added to raise the temperature.

This is not so with the Victorian and Edwardian theatres where the plasterwork is more organic and defines the form. In such theatres too much wallpaper, too much Wilton and endless brass rails have turned the old pit into rear stalls from which you see too little and are charged too much.

Rip out all the old circulation and paint it all cream as this team, which has been so

successful at the Prince Edward, did in the earlier theatre of Robinson, Matcham and Sprague and the theatre itself can seem as authentic as a box of Mackintosh's Quality Street (no relation). Come to that the grey good taste of 'restorations' by others that substitute decorative good manners for Matcham's tobacco stained maturity or Milburn's swaggering doesn't work either (who else misses the old Richmond or is disappointed by the unimaginative repainting of the Dominion?).

For this period I prefer the more straightforward, unfussy approach of Arup Associates, for example at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow or Opera House, Buxton. But for the period of Porter and Gershwin, of Coward and Novello the Thompson/Ferraby team have my unqualified support.

Let us have more! There's the New Theatre Oxford and the Royal Court Liverpool. In London perhaps the Piccadilly where all that black which seemed so right for *Man of La Mancha*, *Edward II* and *Richard II* at the end of the 60s and early 70s soon palled. Marc-Henri and Laverdet could do with a boost here. Best of all Cameron Mackintosh could turn his attention to a theatre dead centre in the triangle formed by the Prince Edward, his office and that of Renton Howard Wood Levin: the Saville which is now the ABC cinema, Shaftesbury Avenue. Built in 1929 it has a capacity of 1250, and is just right for those smaller musicals and straight plays.

Recover the Saville which we remember from the 60s for Olivier in *Semi-Detached* and Leonard Rossiter in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, recreate it as thirties plus as triumphantly as he has the Prince Edward and both profession and public will present owner and architect with a standing ovation. Meanwhile let the Prince Edward live happily ever after as Bobby and Polly do having restored the Gaiety, Deadrock and, with a little professional help in Act Two, succeeds in best Rooney/Garland style "to do the show right here".

Iain Mackintosh is design director of Theatre Projects Consultants. His book *Architecture, Actor and Audience*, will be published by Routledge early this summer.

Credits

Client: Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd

Architects: RHWL Partnership

Structural engineers: John Mason & Partners

Lighting designers: Lighting Design Partnership

Production lighting consultant:

Howard Eaton Lighting Ltd

Sound consultants: Autograph Sound Ltd

Acoustic consultants: Arup Acoustics

Quantity surveyors: Frost Bevan Partnership

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