

What the audience doesn't see

A backstage tour of the Arts Theatre, Cambridge

Monday morning. This week's visiting production is coming to the Arts Theatre, carried in 42 tonne lorries to the front entrance in Peas Hill. The Arts is in the centre of Cambridge, reached through a system of one-way streets that were never meant for lorries. The Corn Exchange, a stone's throw away, may have lorries turning up at the same time. The theatre's technical crew have to make sure that the set – the scenery – and everything else is brought inside as quickly as possible. And if something has been measured wrongly, it may have to be carried round to King's Parade. You need to be pretty strong to be in the technical crew.

That isn't the only time that transport and traffic can be a problem: when a school booked all 666 seats in the theatre for a performance, it had ten coaches manoeuvring outside, with predictable results.



The lighting board

The Arts is carrying out a million-pound refurbishment, one outcome of which will be an improved foyer – and the removal of the coffee and wine bar currently at the narrowest point of the corridor, where audience members need to pass. There'll be new bars and seating areas, with room to move around the building.

To allow for the refurbishment, the theatre will be closed for a few weeks this summer – not for too long, though, as the income from performances is crucial.

Not that the income is particularly large. Nearly all the productions staged at the Arts are brought in, productions that are touring theatres around the country with a similarly sized stage. The theatre's share of the takings is 25%; if it's a popular show, with a starry cast, that figure is more likely to be 15–20%. Hence the booking fee, which goes in full to the theatre. I'll never complain again about being charged a booking fee.



The sound mixer desk

A challenge for the Arts is that it has grown in a hotchpotch of buildings (rented from King's College) in the centre of Cambridge. In the longer term, it hopes to acquire more of the Peas Hills site and open a studio theatre.

It's a different world backstage, and a pretty impressive one at that. Sound and lighting are controlled from a room above the circle, with a clear view of the stage.

The lighting board is state-of-the-art, the result of a recent £30k investment that included a back-up board in case of technical problems. Next to it, the sound mixer desk is used for sound effects and announcements to the audience.



The Stage Manager's corner

The safety curtain weighs three tonnes, and has a water drench to help prevent fires from spreading. There are 48 flying bars over the stage: not the local pub for Mary Poppins and Peter Pan, but girders from which things like troughs of snow can be suspended, and scenery flown in and out. Each bar is counterbalanced by massive weights to minimise the effort required to raise or lower it.

If a production calls for rain outside a window, water is pumped onto the top of the window, and runs down into a trough, creating a very convincing rain effect. In fact, according to Ollie, a stage technician at the Arts, the attention to detail in UK theatres is world-famous. He also remarked that if a Stage Manager is liked, they can't be very good – they run the whole show, and what they say goes.

Above the auditorium there are three bridges, and this is where follow spots are operated. They're mainly used in pantomimes (each year's panto at the Arts is an in-house production, by the way).

On each side of the auditorium, between the stage and the boxes for the audience, there's a Juliet – a box with access to and from the stage. No prizes for guessing the origin of that name!



Behind the set

Wearing our Language Testing 123 hats (and T-shirts), my partner John and I recently spent a fascinating couple of hours at the theatre with Lauren, Vicky and Ollie, three of the staff. Although we're both involved in amateur productions, and have had backstage tours of a few professional theatres, our visit to the Arts was highly informative. And now we can truthfully say we've been on stage there. Shame there was nobody in the auditorium at the time!

Michael Black