

Type

Sound:, WAV

Duration

01:45:59

Project

Pass it On – Oral History Project for the Chichester Festival Theatre

Recording Date

07 December 2013

Recording locations

Interviewee's home

Interviewees

Christopher Stevens (speaker, male)

Interviewers

Fay Wilson (speaker, female)

Abstract

Born 22-7-1930. Brief description of employment as architect with Powell and Moya, [P&M] after studying at the AA where he was part of the AA Drama Society. Comments on relationship between Philip Powell's father and Chichester. Christopher [CS] was given the job of designing the theatre. Brief description of own marriage to Dutch wife, and possible move to Holland if this task had not been given. Comments on relaxed attitude at P&M. Describes meeting Tyrone Guthrie [TG] and his theatre philosophy, theatre in the round. (9:00) Description of technical and financial considerations in designing theatre (10:00 – 18:00). Comments on P&M's approach to projects, always public sector rather than commercial work. Remarks it is a socialist approach. (20:00) Remarks that the private finance initiative in hospital building led to the demise of P&M. Anecdote when CS's Dutch fiancée arrived in the UK, immigration people phoned Philip Powell to verify her position (24:00) Comments on the fund-raising necessary, and how people bought bags of cement, giving them a stake in the building (29:00). Brief description of start of planning in February 1961, aiming to start building in May. Remarks on the cost-cutting methods used in building, only sealing hardwood doors to save painting them (34:00) Brief description of TG's philosophy of theatre, the relationship between actor and audience, preferring theatre in the round rather than proscenium stage (35:00), whose function had been taken over by cinema and TV. Comments on variations in design of the stage (39:00). Comments that the aim was to keep the theatre plain, with grey walls, rather than lush theatrical appearance (41:45). No traditional trappings, following TG's philosophy. Brief description of

problems with 'The Chances' and its scenery. (43:00) Description of Laurence Olivier's [LO] concern at lack of scenery. (45:00) Comments on difficulties of building scene dock, and increasing use of sets over the years (47:00) . Remarks there was no possibility of a prompt corner. Comments when LO brought company for first rehearsal, actors' concerns about how to orient themselves on stage. (48:44) Description of installation of baffles to improve acoustics. Comments that McAlpines built theatre very quickly, and accepted payments in instalments (52:40) Description of getting a licence, from the Lord Chamberlain. Licensing justices raised many objections, but permission finally achieved (55:00) Anecdote of LO's concern as to how to begin the first performance, with no tabs to open. Arguments with Leslie Evershed-Martin [L.EM] so decided to play National Anthem. When played, CS didn't stand, because Queen was not there, but was reprimanded by a man behind. At first interval, people complained of wobbly seats. (01:00:00) CS spent interval repairing seats. Anecdote of how after performance he continued fixing seats, missing the drinks party, but then found his Dutch wife Gerda sitting on stairs with Sybil Thorndike [ST] singing Afrikaner songs. Anecdote that Lewis Casson, when appearing in Uncle Vanya, annoyed wardrobe department by taking his costume home and soiling it in a bonfire to look more authentic [01:02:30] Comments on lighting installers. (1:03:00) Comments on lack of heating in what was intended as a summer theatre, but even when winter shows began, body heat meant new heaters could be switched off [01:04:49] Remarks that part of the economic constraints meant that the minimum number of loos was installed, based on pre-war regulations for London theatres (01:06:00) Remarks that due to building settlement, polystyrene was fixed above the doors, but birds picked out the polystyrene for nest building, so had to use a substitute material. (1:07:50). Brief discussion of relationship between LO and L.E-M implementing TG's designs. LO would have preferred a proscenium (1:09:00) stage. Comments that LO's presence ensure nationwide and international press coverage of the theatre. Anecdote that Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden arrived unexpectedly (1:12:30). Comments on L.E-M as sometimes difficult, because determined. But able to get things done, and motivate people. Brief discussion of technical difficulties of building in concrete, and problems with acoustics. (1:17:00) Description of the windows on the staircases, to let the light from the park gradually be obscured so that light did not spill into the auditorium. (1:25:00) Anecdote about ST getting stuck in the loo (1:29:30) She said it was her own fault for going into the loo in a crinoline. Comments warmly on the Theatre in the Park in 2013, and says TG would have approved. (1:33:20) Also comments warmly on the current renewal project, and its undertaking by a local firm, Osbornes. (1:34:37) .Comments on the shape of the stage, and problems of orientation for actors, especially with the central gangway facing (1:39:00).Remarks that the description of the building as 'brutalism' is invalid. Comments favourably on the Renew project at the theatre (1:45:00)