

Chichester Festival Theatre Visit on 14th August 2017

Our excellent guide was Richard Knowles, Education Projects Manager, whose enthusiasm for the Theatre was infectious and who had a fund of knowledge to share with us.

The theatre was founded in 1962 by Leslie Evershed-Martin, a Chichester optician, inspired by a theatre built by the community in London, Ontario. The architects were Philip Powell and Moya Hidalgo. The style is brutalist and it is now a Grade II* listed building. The brief was to remove any seating divisions by area; the entire audience was to be able to see the thrust stage; there were to be no pillars obstructing sight-lines; the foyer with its bars was to enable the audience to mix without restriction.

The inaugural Artistic Director was Sir Laurence Olivier.

We were shown, first, an actor's dressing room fitted with a stage monitor and speaker, places for costumes, wigs, and make up, and then the wigs and clothing dept.: vodka is used as a cleaning aid. Wigs cost on average £2,000 each and are made from human and yak hair. Costumes and props come from house clearances wherever possible.

Under the stage itself are the RSJs of the sub-stage, designed so that they can be re-assembled to the order of the stage director of any particular play. There is a lift up to the stage proper with additional trap doors, and places for actors' quick changes without the need to return to their dressing rooms. Scenery comes into this area for placement on the stage proper (part of the new building).

Staffing: experts in pyrotechnics, gas, and smoke are employed where appropriate.

We entered the stage which is a thrust design so that the entire audience can see the actors. There are monitors at strategic places under the overhead cables so the actors can, for instance, see the conductor and orchestra when appropriate.

The building of the theatre itself is hexagonal with concrete elbows held together by the overhead cables which are accompanied by gantries with further electric cables for floodlights and speakers. Care is taken to ensure that no undue stress is put upon the overhead gantries by floodlights and the weight of these is constantly monitored.

We climbed up to the back of the auditorium and examined the booths for the theatre director, the lighting director, and the sound director.

Last of all, before we descended again to ground level, we were proudly shown the small staircase window with an uninterrupted view over the city roofs towards the cathedral, specially inserted at the request of Leslie Evershed-Martin during the construction of the theatre.