

you can perform anywhere in the auditorium – stage end, back of the stalls or in the centre. Once again it's extremely well planned. It needs upgrading, as you would expect for a 19-year-old theatre, but its design and planning remain effective. We use the full flat floor for trade shows, exhibitions, even truck launches. We've done musicals, rock, pop, comedy, ballet, opera, drama. I went through our programme for four years to determine the range this venue can handle: drama in the round, classical music in the round, promenade concerts, snooker, boxing, wrestling, darts, squash, indoor bowls, ballroom dancing, dinner functions, circus in the round, car and truck launches, flat-floor exhibitions and company catering events and functions.

Now you might think, "That's all well and good; but how much does all this cost? This must be expensive; you must add lots of extra staff." We have six full-time stage staff, one full-time stage manager and a team of 12 part-time staff. They cope with all the technical requirements and the flexibility. Each major changeover, from classical concert to lyric theatre, takes less than 2½ hours; we allow 4 hours. It takes 5 crew but we allow 6. The cost works out on average at £175 (US\$287, €245) a changeover. It's highly cost-effective; it allows us to programme a change in the middle of a performance day. Let me give you an actual example; a major company function, Avon Cosmetics, which has its manufacturing base in Northampton, with 1,400 employees, wanted a Christmas function, a bonus time. Because the unions insisted it had to be in working time, the function started at 11 o'clock in the morning with a full flat floor for 1,400 people, with a five-act cabaret, finishing at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. At 8 o'clock that night, Jim Davidson, the comedian, is on the stage presenting a normal performance. The flexibility of the building allows us to do that, so trying to decrease the down-time, and getting effective use of the auditorium for as long as possible has helped us make it really work.

The total annual costs of the changes really depend on what the programme is; we average between 60 and 80 major changes a year. For these we do not exceed £15,000 (US\$25,000, €21,000) in labour costs and around £1,500 (US\$2,500, €2,100) in duck (gaffer) tape. We use this to deal with the gaps in the floor when moving the towers and wagons around; we

cover the gaps with aluminium sheets which are stuck down with gaffer tape. I estimate about £1,200 (US\$2,000, €1,700) in replacement air bearings – although in two of the last five years we have not replaced any bearings at all – and £1,000 (US\$1,650, €1,400) in annual redecoration costs – as you can imagine, with 10 tonne dodgems running around the building, it makes a bit of a mess of the plasterwork occasionally! We do have a continual process of re-plastering and re-painting, but the real costs are not excessive.

These costs of around £19,000 (US\$31,000, €26,500) a year are equivalent to the net profit on four catering functions. If I put this in the context of 'this is all about money, time, effectiveness, our ability to change, to drive profits', there's another side to it as well. The people of Northampton have, and have paid for, this facility; they fund it currently to the tune of £600,000 (US\$984,000, €840,000) a year. They deserve the best range of events and performances that we can give them. Added to that, our ability to run a major season with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, allied to Glyndebourne, allied to Northern Ballet or Birmingham Royal Ballet, means also that our sponsors are interested because we can provide such a wide range of events. And that includes Mickey Duff a couple of years back deciding that it was such a great place for boxing that he would like to mount a whole range of boxing clubs. I can also allow me, as the Chief Executive, to go out and speak to people about what we can do – trade launches as well as good popular entertainment.

The Chief Executive of one of the most flexible spaces in the world describes here why it is so successful, and is followed by architects and consultants who have designed similar and alternative schemes in the UK and the US.

The positive side of the facility is this ability to programme a wide and diverse range of productions and events. Funnily enough this includes the development of a positive Health and Safety risk assessment culture; something that people had not really realised when we started. Others are programming flexibility to allow decreased downtime, the cost-effective changes, the increased earnings potential and multi-event programming. And unlike Cerritos, which requires locking down of some of the parts and some quite complicated changes to facilitate exits, all our exits and walkways are built into the towers and so are easily set up when the towers are positioned.