

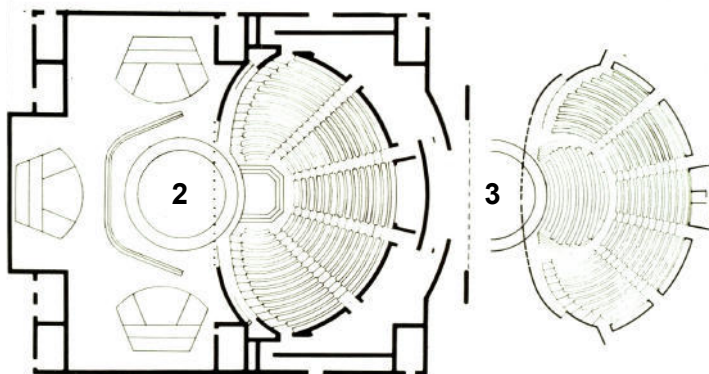
(€8.8m US\$11.3m). It finally cost £16m (€23.5m US\$30.2m) plus fees. James Dunbar Naismith, senior partner in the architectural firm of Law & Dunbar Naismith and also vice-chairman of the Edinburgh Festival Society for nearly 20 years, sagely said to the design team, "Once a job is finished, I have often been criticized for spending too little, never for spending too much." Hence it hurts to remember that the project which the client had

Part of the opening presentation by theatre consultant Iain Mackintosh who, with arts management consultant Jodi Myers and lighting designer / production manager Stan Pressner, examined the current status and likely future of the performing arts and their buildings.

g been told it would cost (3m) by the previous ered cuts at the time ing to keep the building US\$22.7m). How can I lding such a boring story us that ballet rehearsals in a rehearsal room, but t one – or that the stage- ut in order to save area ber of dressing rooms desired, albeit all with lavatories and showers en suite? Or at Glyndebourne where the rather narrow site resulted in a half-level approach to the dressing rooms and once again the stage level lavatories were sacrificed?

The escape into flexibility

And now my last cause for concern. This is the escape into flexibility. How easy it is for a theatre consultant to promise a flexible multi-form theatre which magically offers all forms of staging in a single venue. The stage engineer rather likes the idea as it can mean lots of expensive elevators. Forty years ago, in 1964, the director Tyrone Guthrie, the



The Vivian Beaumont Theater in the Lincoln Center in New York failed to meet the expectations of flexibility that had been claimed for it.

1: the concept, 2: the plan for the open stage, 3: the flexibility that was to provide a proscenium format, and 4: the result

Pictures and diagrams: courtesy Theatre Projects Consultants

great exponent of open thrust stage architecture, was completing the second of his marvellous, uncompromising thrust stages at Minneapolis. At the time, this was possibly the best; the Sheffield Crucible was yet to come, in 1971. Guthrie had sat on a committee for what became the Vivian Beaumont Theater in New York at the Lincoln Center. He was sceptical; he described the claim that this was a theatre which could transform itself from a thrust stage into a proscenium stage: "You press an electronic this and you pull a something else there, and lo and behold! A whole lot of seats shuffle out of sight and disappear into thin air. An apron stage thrusts itself forward and there you are in another kind of form. On paper it is extremely ingenious. I could be very wrong but my belief is that it is neither as good as it could be as a proscenium theatre, nor as good as it could be as an open stage: that in order to get the flexibility of changing between the two, you have to spend a great deal of money on buttons and machinery and so on and, when this has all occurred, it is still a compromise, and an exceedingly clever compromise, but unmistakably a compromise." Those who know the Vivian Beaumont know that Guthrie was right and the designers of the building, and the committee which instructed them, were wrong. It is a compromise and moreover its format is hardly ever changed.

Perhaps those who design these arrangements and those who install them will disagree. Of course, such flexibility is realisable up to a capacity of 400 or so, but even then a choice has to be made as to what is the prime form. It was Shakespeare who wrote 'if two men ride a horse then one must ride behind'. How even more true if half a dozen are hitching a ride.

Flexibility at the larger scale is usually a sign of the client failing to make up his mind

With more than 500 seats the problems with flexibility start. I myself have been guilty of promising that it could be done – for Adrian Noble, then Director of the RSC, who wanted 'a 21st century Renaissance stage that Shakespeare would have recognized' for the summer, which miraculously transformed itself into a proscenium house for his musicals in the winter – and that seated 1,100 people in both forms. I was wrong in saying this could be done, and suffered three years of hell and insecurity, admittedly not helped by an