

Sightline

Journal of Theatre Technology and Design

Spring 2020



**Climate Emergency – new initiatives:
On Bear Ridge
Green Adventures**

**The Sondheim Theatre refurbishment
Did the Earth Move? – The Prince of Egypt
Diversity in Sight?**

The Sondheim Theatre

Julian Middleton,
Aedas Arts Team

The Sondheim Theatre was, until relatively recently, known as the Queen's Theatre. Facing onto Shaftesbury Avenue, it forms part of an imposing city block with the adjoining Gielgud Theatre. Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd acquired the then Queen's and Gielgud Theatres back in 1999.

Sir Cameron Mackintosh, through Delfont Mackintosh Theatres, has variously restored, reimagined and rejuvenated his portfolio of eight West End theatres over the last 35 years. Spending has been in the order of £125 million – with work centred on his passion and commitment to leave these buildings equipped for the next hundred years. Prior to the recent work at the Sondheim, it is fair to say that the auditorium was surprisingly understated, lacking in architectural detail and with a rather subdued colour scheme that combined to create a relatively dull space. Re-opening its doors in January of this year, the space is now a gloriously enhanced version of its former self. The auditorium once again exudes that sense of elegant detail, subtle colouring – and that underlying sense of domesticity and warmth that characterises a Sprague designed theatre.

Development background

The architectural ensemble comprising the Gielgud and former Queen's Theatres, together with a commercial premises set between, originally presented a unified, symmetrical composition to Shaftesbury Avenue. Behind this facade the two theatres occupy the complete block, being separated only by a party-wall. The block was designed by respected theatre-architect WGR Sprague for Jack Jacobs and Sydney Marler, as a speculative development. The Gielgud (formerly the Hicks) opened in 1906 and the

Sondheim (formerly the Queen's) in 1907.

For the first thirty-three years the two theatres appeared as near identical twins, in their vigorous Edwardian Baroque style. The Queen's Theatre however, suffered severe damage during the Second World War with the loss of the foyers and street frontage. Repair was delayed for nearly 20 years and, when the theatre finally reopened in 1959, it presented a new modern face to the street. A decision not to reinstate the original design would have come as no surprise in the late 1950s. At that time the works of the late Victorian and Edwardian 'theatre architects' were unadmired and hardly any of their works (and none of Sprague's) were included in the statutory lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

The reconstruction was the work of Westwood Partners (Bryan Westwood and Noel Brandon-Jones) with Hugh Casson giving advice on interior decor. They altered the symmetry of the block by substituting a glass curtain wall for the original stone façade. Behind this new frontage the foyer, grand staircase and bars (all war casualties) were replaced. The auditorium was restored rather than rebuilt, but a number of significant variations were made to Sprague's original design.

WGR Sprague

The original architect, WGR Sprague (1865-1933) was one of the leading architects of the three-decade theatre building boom which peaked at the beginning of the twentieth century. After Frank Matcham, the most prolific theatre designer of that time, Sprague and Bertie Crewe led the field. Sprague's theatres were quite different from those of either Matcham or Crewe. His designs were always architecturally well-mannered and, if he took liberties with the classical vocabulary or mixed motifs from different periods, it was done with great skill, for the sake of theatrical effect. His interiors were invariably elegant, with perfectly integrated proscenium, box and balcony front compositions.

Sprague was responsible for no fewer than eight of the present West End's medium-sized and small playhouses. The most beautiful of them, Wyndham's, opened in 1899, the Noël Coward (originally the New) in 1903, the tiny Ambassadors in 1913 and St Martin's in 1916. In 1905 Sprague designed another notable 'theatre pair', the Novello (formerly Waldorf) and Aldwych Theatres in the newly-cut crescent called the Aldwych. These eight theatres, taken together, represent Sprague at the peak of his powers.

Photography © Peter Dazeley, from his book *London Theatres*



The auditorium before its transformation

The auditorium has been refreshed on a couple of occasions during the ownership of Delfont Mackintosh Theatres. In 2004, working with Cameron's long-time interior designer Clare Ferraby, a first light-touch redecoration scheme was undertaken at the time the venue became home for *Les Misérables*. A further upgrade in 2009 made some modest physical alterations, including the introduction of accessible seating slips and new seating.

However the auditorium still reflected the design inconsistencies of the post-war reconstruction. In 1959 whilst some decorative elements were reinstated, others were not. Walls under the tiers were left unadorned. Modern interventions such as removing the side boxes and the introduction of sprayed ceilings to tier soffits combined to create a space that lacked aesthetic coherence.

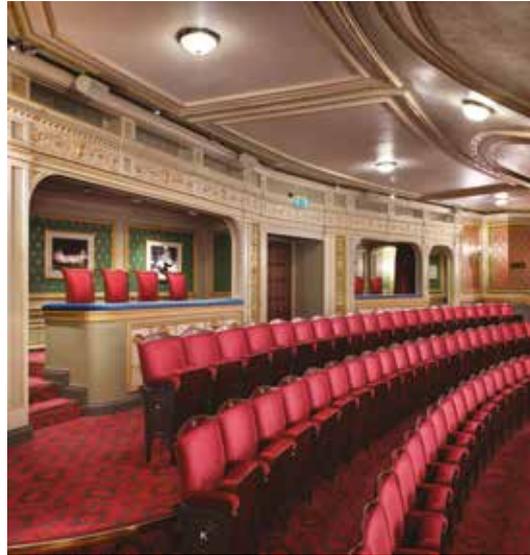
The auditorium project

The auditorium refurbishment project took advantage of the necessary closure period required to undertake ceiling strengthening works to the main ceiling and central dome. This allowed an opportunity in which to completely refresh the interior – and the wider building.

In parallel to the auditorium work, stand-alone projects were carried out to bring the backstage areas up to standard and to substantially upgrade and increase the audience WC provision. These were run as individual projects with separate designers and contractors.

The vision for the auditorium was for a holistic interior upgrade that improved audience seating, improved the accessible seating positions, upgraded performance infrastructure and lighting and provided a comprehensive redecoration which included the addition and reinstatement of architectural elements that reinforced Sprague's original design intent. The aspiration was to return the auditorium to its former aesthetic completeness. Key components of this work can be summarised as follows:

- Re-seating to improve audience comfort and sightlines.
- Reintroduction of rear boxes at the back of the Dress Circle Level.
- Reinstatement of the Dress Circle (accessible) side boxes.
- New decorative treatment and augmentation to the side walls.
- New decorative treatment to the under tier ceiling soffits.



*Rear auditorium dress circle, showing the two new audience boxes.
Photograph © Philip Vile*

- Augmentation to coffering in the upper/ Grand Circle
- Integration of new followspot boxes.
- Upgrade to auditorium doors.
- New decorative scheme and enhanced lighting.

The alterations, new architectural interventions and interior decorative scheme, prepared by Clare Ferraby, all drew inspiration from the documentary evidence of Sprague's original auditorium – which is well illustrated in archive photographs. Additionally, as the owner of five Sprague designed theatres, Cameron Mackintosh brings a wealth of personal knowledge and energy to the design process.

This rebalancing of the relationship between the original Edwardian and the late 1950s components also informed the decorative upgrade to the public areas.

Dress Circle Rear Boxes

These two new boxes are set at the rear of the Dress Circle tier to either side of the main entrance doors. They play a substantial role in re-dressing the back wall and give scale to the space and recall the original sweep of rear boxes which existed prior to 1940. They occupy former storages spaces and are treated as alcoves within the back wall. The softened arched corners refer to the geometry of other new boxes, whilst the plasterwork and the plaster mouldings follow detailing from the circle front.

Dress Circle Side Boxes

When the auditorium was re-constructed in the late 1950s, the side boxes were not reinstated to Sprague's original design which left the side wall areas flat and plain and the Dress

*Auditorium central dome.
Photograph © Philip Vile*



Circle simply ending with two rows of seating against the side wall. This was a key feature in contributing to the perception that this was a relatively narrow theatre space.

The reinstatement of the two boxes opens up the outer walls of the space, giving a sense of air and breadth – allowing the auditorium both to open out, whilst simultaneously embracing the stage. This move dramatically enhances the visual perception of the room – restoring Sprague’s original composition and taking away the narrowness associated with the 1959 interior.

Dress Circle boxes

Working in collaboration with theatre consultants Charcoalblue and members of the *Les Misérables* production team, notably lighting designer Paule Constable, two new follow spot enclosures have been created at the back of the upper circle. Created to appear as rear audience boxes, these two new elements anchor the new decorative design for this upper level of the theatre. They also highlight the value of close collaboration with the production design team in helping to resolve in a practical hands-on way the technical infrastructure imperatives that underpin the decorative design work. Throughout the refurbished Sondheim, the technical installation is incredibly discrete and well curated.

Wall Treatments

In the 1959 reconstruction, the side and rear wall treatments at all levels of the theatre were minimal, plain surfaces. Mechanical grilles were clearly located for expediency with limited regard for aesthetic or compositional control. The 2019 decorative design draws heavily on the companion auditorium of the neighbouring Gielgud, with wall-moulding squeezes taken to allow an appropriate restoration within the Sondheim. The panelling layouts were refined with a more architectural, appropriately well-mannered, composition to reinforce a vertical rhythm within the room – and work around the existing lighting positions.

Under Circle Ceiling soffits

With the original fibrous plaster ceilings lost, the 1950s reconstruction to the Stalls and Dress Circle soffits was an ugly sprayed textured-plaster finish. Particularly in the deep stalls of a Sprague theatre, this was an overbearing and visually intrusive surface. Utilising archive photography of the 1907 interior, it was possible to discern that aspects of these ceilings were similar to those within the Gielgud, which once again allowed for the replication of the appropriate moulding for these surfaces. The work involved a skimming off of the stippled surface before fibre-liner paper and the new fibrous plaster mouldings were added.



Photography
© Peter Dazeley, from his
book *London Theatres*

Upper Circle

As per the conventions of the day, upper Grand Circle patrons received a more muted level of detail and finish to their spaces in the early 1900s. Beyond the main ceiling dome the back section above the Grand Circle audience was fairly utilitarian – and was little altered in 1959. There was a large plain inclined surface and some utilitarian down-stand beams. As with work at other venues in the group, one of the many Cameron Mackintosh legacies is giving theatre-goers the same quality of experience wherever they are sitting in the auditorium. Coving and recessed lighting is added to the ceiling to create a series of coffered sections bringing visual detail to these areas in line with the rest of the interior treatment. On the inclined soffit new panel mouldings are added alongside the elegant figures that are a signature of the theatre. These elements all reinforce the decorative cohesion of the space and link the plasterwork of the main ceiling with this upper section.

The decorative scheme

Clare Ferraby has worked with Cameron Mackintosh for many years on all the Delfont Mackintosh Theatre refurbishments. She has a particular understanding of the detailing subtlety of Sprague's work – alongside the colouring that is required to draw together the warmth and underlying domesticity of these interiors. At the Sondheim, she developed the concept design on site with Cameron and the team of specialist painters.

There are many achievements wrapped-up in the Sondheim project for Delfont Mackintosh Theatres – not least delivering three separate contracts and opening on time for the previews in late December. Once again they have delivered a refurbishment that utterly transforms a venue, making it a far superior version of its former self. All the audience sees, and experiences, is the perfect theatre of the new show in a beautifully restored space. As Matt Kinley's set design for the new *Les Misérables* breaks free of the proscenium and creates a delicate filigree across the restored proscenium zone – it is the perfect metaphor for what the project has achieved, that often elusive 'happy-balance' between architecture and theatre.

Client – Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd
Project Manager – Devonshire Partnership
Architect – Julian Middleton / Aedas Arts Team
Interior Designer – Clare Ferraby
Theatre Consultant – Charcoalblue
Structural Engineer – Conisbee
MEP Services Engineer – Bryden Wood Ltd
Cost Consultant – Banks Wood and Partners
Access Consultant – People Friendly Design
Fire Engineering – Astute Fire
CDMC – PFB Consultancy
Contractor – Ornate Plaster (UK)