

Adaptable Theatres ... 60 years on.

The third biennial congress of the Association internationale des techniciens de theatre

When it opened in June 1961, the Association Internationale des techniciens de Theatre (AITT) 'Adaptable Theatres' Colloquium, London, was the first international conference in Britain dedicated to the subject of modern theatre technology, design, and innovation. As host, the colloquium heralded the emergence of the ABTT on both a national and international stage, providing a forum for architects, designers, and technicians to debate the technical requirements of modern theatre. Described as an opportunity to counter the lack of a knowledgeable technical group from the UK and Northern Ireland, that was so noticeable to those in attendance of the first AITT conference in Paris (1958), and the second in Berlin (1960), the 1961 colloquium was designed to highlight British technical expertise.

Previous colloquia had given rise to a trans-national consciousness within British technical theatre, particularly manifest through the importing of continental techniques, styles and on-stage innovations, each of which influenced a growing specialisation of backstage labour. A desire amongst British experts grew for international recognition, to provide validation of advances made in post-war technical theatre that had emerged as a consequence of new technology, an increase in skilled professionals, and a growing collective knowledge of stage techniques. However, technical theatre lacked representation or a means of representing itself, with the absence of a professional body denying British specialists the opportunity to present ideas on design, practice and modernisation to contemporaries. This sense of collective failure was the backdrop to the formation of the ABTT, which, as a consequence, went on to shift individual action to a collective, yet disjointed, force majeure.

The chosen subject for the conference was the planning of adaptable theatres, with particular reference to civic projects and theatres seating up to 1000. Themes included the construction of new auditoria, technical requirements for the stage, the rise of specialisms within backstage labour, failings of current architecture, and the role of health, safety and regulations in modern theatre. Speakers

included Peter Hall, Richard Southern, Frederick Bentham, Ian Albery, Peter Moro and Richard Pilbrow, pre-eminent in their respected fields, all advocating for change in British theatre practice – campaigning for a move away from traditional theatre design and over-reliance on the proscenium stage. A report on the conference, edited by Stephen Joseph, was distributed to over forty regional council and civic institutions across the UK - during a period of increased public subsidy for the arts - supporting a paradigm shift in theatre building and stage design. Adaptable Theatres provided the platform for a technical narrative to progress beyond its previous individual sequestration: now it was a collective voice, louder, and with a common purpose. During the next three decades more than sixty major new projects were constructed across Britain with ABTT support, many through public subsidies, representing a new kind of theatre based on civic pride, urbanity, and community.

Sixty years on, this little-known conference should be celebrated far beyond the technical realm, recognised for its influence and importance upon a radically changing Britain, celebrated for the transformative role it played in theatre design, culture, and practice.

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About me:

My PhD research examines the influence of the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) on the development of post-war British technical theatre. I argue that the ABTT was central to the professionalisation of post-war British theatre, and that as a result, backstage labour came through increasing forms of regulative governance, with the ABTT substantially influencing the way models of standardisation developed across the sector, particularly in its formative years, 1961 – 1985.