

# Modern Theatres:

## Festival Theatre at Stratford Festival

The Modern Theatres series continues with Gary McCluskie discussing the Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario

The only thing a rural Canadian community of 19,000 had in connection with William Shakespeare in the early 1950s was the name of his hometown. Stratford, Ontario, 90 miles west of Toronto, seemed an unlikely place to become a major force in staging the Bard's plays. But when a railroad company closed up shop, local journalist Tom Patterson took on the task to reinvent Stratford as a celebrated centre for seasonal theatre. It not only became that, but also, with its innovative thrust stage design, set new standards for staging all kinds of plays with an influence that continues to resonate 65 years later.

Stratford has become one of the most significant performing arts organisations in Canada. The innovative concept and design of the Festival Theatre has been developed and replicated in many countries around the world, including the UK, Germany, Japan, Italy, the United States, and, most recently, France.

The zeitgeist was with this bold post-war vision. The legendary British theatre director Tyrone Guthrie, intrigued by the idea, became more so when Patterson told him there was no venue as yet to launch the festival. "Guthrie had been experimenting with thrust-like staging and saw the opportunity to custom build the kind of theatre he wanted," said David Prosser, current Communications Director at the Stratford Festival. Guthrie had staged a landmark production of a medieval comedy in 1948 at the second Edinburgh International Festival. The venue was essentially found space – Edinburgh's General Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland on the Mound – where a version of the thrust stage was used to great effect.

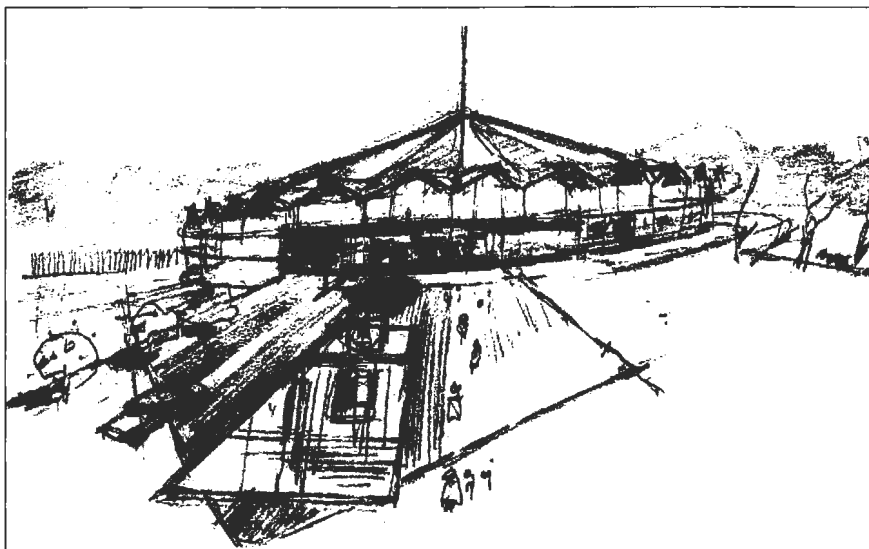
In October 1952, the Stratford Festival was incorporated and Guthrie became its

first Artistic Director, recruiting stars Alex Guinness and Irene Worth as well as actors from across Canada for the first season the following summer. The venue would consist of a concrete amphitheatre beneath a large canvas tent, a design solution of an architect recommended by an acquaintance of Guthrie's who had no theatre design experience and only six months to realize the structure. But it was the stage – designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, whom Guthrie recruited from the UK – that would revolutionize the production and theatrical experience of Shakespeare's plays along with many other dramatic forms in the decades that followed. Moiseiwitsch's pioneering role in 20th-century theatre included hundreds of set and costume designs for acclaimed productions in addition to subsequent thrust stage designs after Stratford, among them the Crucible Theatre, in Sheffield, England.

"This was an original invention, not a reproduction of an Elizabethan stage," said Prosser. "It had influences of Greek and Roman theatres. The thrust was hexagonal, not a projecting square that we often associate with Shakespeare and was reproduced at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London." Stratford's protruding stage consisted of nine acting levels and eight major entrances in addition to a balcony, trapdoors and two vomitoria. Steps lead to the audience level on all sides of the thrust. The tent theatre's original configuration accommodated 1,800 seats with none more than 65 feet from the stage.

But it wasn't this radical shift from a proscenium stage that almost ended Stratford's dream before it began: like so many artistic endeavours, a lack of funding nearly bankrupted the idea. With construction underway, the debts were mounting. The Stratford community had been divided about any public investment in the enterprise, including the initial \$125 commitment by the local council to send Patterson to New York to research how to launch a theatre festival. He returned unsuccessful in his attempt to meet with Laurence Olivier.

In that spring of 1953, the buzz began to grow in Stratford and grass roots support turned in the festival's favour; women's auxiliary clubs and local business groups got behind it, spurred by the sight of the tall wooden masts that would hold up the tent canopy in the park next to the Avon River. When told the Festival Foundation was having cash flow problems, the contractor building the stage instructed his staff to keep working. The Governor General Vincent Massey and a



local insurance company both came forward with donations that ensured the festival would make it to opening night on July 13.

Besides the perceived benefits to the local economy of tourism and Stratford becoming a destination in its own right, the initiative to launch the festival was seen to embody the objectives of the Massey Commission, which laid out priorities for a nascent country in search of a modern cultural identity (the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences; 1949-1951). One of the report's major conclusions was "it is in the national interest to give encouragement to institutions which express national feeling, promote common understanding and add to the variety and richness of Canadian life, rural as well as urban." The Stratford Festival fit the bill.

That first season the festival mounted 22 performances of *Richard III* and 21 performances of *All's Well that Ends Well*, both starring Alex Guinness and Irene Worth. But it could be said Moiseiwitsch's stage was also a star attraction. In its review July 1, 1953, the *Montreal Star* wrote:

"The first big surprise was the amazing flexibility and the deceiving latitude of the comparatively small stage and Mr. Guthrie's three-dimensional use of it. Characters erupt out of nowhere and converged on its several platforms from all directions and just as quickly melted away into the obscurity from which they had appeared."

The newspaper's review continued to

focus on the stage: "One thing certain is that they were never visually bored by Miss Moiseiwitsch's permanent set. Its inner stage and balcony are formal and solid with graceful, slender columns, but its complementary doors and stairways on either side are not symmetrically balanced. This variety of line is carried out elsewhere in various ways. The garden seat set just off the main platform, which can be built up to form an elevated throne, is not balanced on the other side and the main platform with its surrounding steps has its corners cut off. The many levels in such a small space gave Mr. Guthrie some wonderful opportunities for literally building up pyramids of figures and it was interesting to note how he varied his approach in the two plays."

For the actors, the Stratford Festival stage presented an entirely new dynamic in which to perform. In an interview with the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Guinness stated: "Twenty years of looking out straight is hard to forget. At first when we started rehearsing, we were all in a panic because Guthrie said you must show yourselves. We were like spinning tops, we couldn't relax, but as we went along we found we could settle down and relax." To the *Herald Tribune*, Guinness described this new performance space. The stage was "on absolutely the right lines. It is not any academic replica for professors to play about with, not highbrow or strange but vital." The actor also offered some suggestions for amending the stage design, stating in the first season the front row of seats was too close to the stage and the sweep of the auditorium's circle, at 220 degrees, was too wide and should be narrowed. For the following season, the front row was moved back. In later renovations, the arc of the auditorium was reduced to 175 degrees.

For the audience, the proximity and intimacy of the experience introduced the notion that they, too, are participants in the spectacle before them. This idea was later interpreted in other performing arts venues, including the vineyard configuration for orchestra, notably the Berlin Philharmonie, which opened in 1963, and continues to be reinterpreted and refined in many other ways.

Stratford's first Artistic Director was well aware many audience members would see spectators on the other side of the stage from them and how this changes the nature of the theatrical "illusion" and the relationship between audience and the stage. In an article in *Shakespeare Survey* No 8, Guthrie noted, "I suggest that theatrical performance is a

*Stratford Festival Theatre, before the changes 1957*



form of ritual, that the audience is not asked to subscribe to an illusion, but to participate in the ritual. [...] The attraction for me of the "open" stage as opposed to the proscenium, is primarily this: that it stressed the ritual as opposed to the illusory quality of performance". (p130-131)

Michael Langham, the Stratford Festival's second Artistic Director, described the impact on acting styles as follows: [on the proscenium stage] "the actors must play to the audience and only pretend to play to each other, while on the open stage their bond of relationship is direct, true and complete, and serves to pull the audience deeply into the experience of the play. The audience is physically closer to the actors than in any but the smallest proscenium theatre at the same time as being seen from three sides, putting onto the actor a duty towards naturalism at the same time as requiring the best technique – the blend of which is uniquely 'Stratford'".

From the perspective of staging, the bare thrust stage allows the director and designer to move away from the old pictorial realism of the proscenium stage's illusionistic scenery – which took time to move from scene to scene and held up the story. Instead, the setting on a thrust stage can be suggested through design elements, principally furniture and costuming – leaving the actors to move from scene to scene with a new fluidity. The Boston Herald (August 2, 1953) noted how the Stratford stage accomplished this. "It is particularly interesting to observe how this multi-level, multi-exit permanent setting not only does away with the need for formal scenery but makes possible a continuous flow of action and movement when the text of a play, as in so much of Richard III, calls for the rapid manoeuvring of large crowds of people, either in procession or in violent action. That it also lends flavour and variety in the far more intimate story of All's Well That Ends Well, is also very encouraging for it indicates that even Shakespeare's closet dramas gain by this liberation of action."

This heightened level of engagement among actors Prosser likens to "the three-dimensional, cross-cutting cinematic quality of the thrust stage."

The success of the first season was unequivocal – the initial four-week run was extended to six – and the festival was keen to expand its repertoire for its second year. In addition to two Shakespeare works, *Measure for Measure* and *Taming of the Shrew*, Guthrie wanted to venture beyond Elizabethan drama, for which the stage seemed particularly well



Michael Langham (l), and Sir Laurence Olivier (r) at Stratford Festival Theatre 1964

Photo by Peter Smith  
©Stratford Festival theatre

suiting, and added the ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In spite of the versatility of the thrust stage to different styles of drama, performers and audience were nonetheless reminded that this magical world created in Stratford was only a canvas flap away from the outdoors. Spectators noted the sound of rain hitting the tarp drowned out the voices on stage and the proximity of a railroad level crossing meant the shrill whistle of steam locomotives frequently unsuspected the disbelief the performers worked hard to instill in their rapt audience.

Guthrie remained as Artistic Director for the first three seasons at Stratford, leaving before

Stratford Festival Theatre, after changes 1962



a permanent home for Moiseiwitsch's stage was built in 1956. Robert Fairfield was given the assignment to design the Festival Theatre on the strength of his initial tent solution, and was indeed an evocation of the canvas with an upturned "pie-crust" perimeter and a single peaked top in the centre. It was dedicated on June 30, 1957 and opened with Christopher Plummer in *Hamlet* to a full house of 2,192 spectators. Refinements to the hall made over the years included a greatly expanded rear façade, moving the side doors outwards opposite the 'voms' or stage entrances from the tunnels beneath the auditorium seating; the stage balcony was raised by eight inches and the number of supporting pillars reduced from nine to five. In 1975, a rearrangement of the performance levels changed the acting area and made the balcony removable, though this is rarely done.

By 1997, the then 40-year-old theatre was in need of refurbishment. This included renovating the lobby and adding new administrative offices, and even a greenhouse. In the auditorium, the previously mentioned arc was reduced to 175 degrees; 450 seats were removed and the 20-inch-wide seats replaced with 22-inch seats, bringing the total to 1,742. Zigzag sidewalls were installed to improve acoustics, an acoustical canopy was suspended above the stage and a tunnel linked the two 'voms'.

The enduring stage created by Guthrie and Moiseiwitsch has had a profound influence on the development of Canadian theatre. The

ongoing success of Stratford has fostered generations of actors and brought leading international stars to the rural countryside of southwestern Ontario. As the festival's Prosser explained: "The combination of the technique and naturalism required for Stratford's Festival Stage and its sister thrust stage, the Studio Theatre (2002, 260 seats) has arguably had a huge impact on the Canadian theatre profession as a whole, with actors from our stages taking the lessons learned there across the country – and beyond – in their other work."

Shortly after departing Stratford, Guthrie solicited interest through a newspaper ad to develop a resident theatre company in the US. Minneapolis proved most willing to support the project and the Guthrie Theatre, with a thrust stage designed by Moiseiwitsch, opened in 1963. The theatre by Ralph Rapson seated 1,441 and the seven-sided stage took up 1120 square feet (104 m<sup>2</sup>). In 1980, modifications allowed the size, shape and height of the stage to be adjusted and the back wall opened up to create more depth. In 2006, the theatre's location was slated for other purposes and was demolished, the same year a new Guthrie Theatre designed by Jean Nouvel opened as part of a three-theatre complex that preserved the signature thrust configuration for the 1,100-seat main auditorium.

Other notable influences of the Guthrie-Moiseiwitsch thrust stage include the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Centre and, in the UK, the Swan Theatre in Stratford-Upon-Avon, the Chichester Festival Theatre, the Olivier Theatre at the Royal National Theatre in London, and most directly the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. Moiseiwitsch designed the stage for the Crucible with input from its founding director Colin George, who took inspiration from her previous work. From his obituary in the fall of 2016, he was quoted as saying he decided the length of the thrust stage by declaiming speeches from *Henry V* from different parts of the theatre. One terse critique of the seating on three sides of the performers came from a local councillor who stated he wouldn't "pay to look at *Hamlet's* backside."

I wonder if the thrust stage is an almost entirely Anglo-Saxon phenomena unique to the English speaking world. Greece has many ancient amphitheatres but the thrust stage was never a major influence in German, Austrian and European theatre.

Are the golden days of thrust stages over? Was it a trend that grew, flourished and then withered? Are people still building new thrust stages?

Sheffield Crucible Theatre,  
1971, RHWL



In Canada, the Festival Stage influenced the design of the Atlantic Festival Theatre in Wolfville, Nova Scotia and the theatre at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, to which Diamond Schmitt Architects added in time for Canada's sesquicentennial celebrations in 2017 improved spaces for performance, new wings for audience and presentation events and a visible presence and identity with a marquee tower. Tellingly, the thrust stage theatre required little in the way of intervention. On the other hand, for Sidney Harman Hall in Washington, DC, home of The Shakespeare Theatre Company, we designed a flexible space that is readily adaptable to a thrust stage. Ten years on, the thrust configuration is rarely used.

For the town of Stratford, the festival has been a major economic driver. From the first season in 1953 with 68,600 in attendance, in 2015, the audience numbered 475,742. And other recent seasons have exceeded the half million mark. For a festival known for staging Shakespeare, only about 30 percent of tickets in 2015 were for productions of the Bard's works. Other classics and contemporary dramas garnered a similar percentage while the remaining 40 percent was allotted to two musicals that season, *Carousel* and *The Sound of Music*. *The economic impact generated by the consistent 150,000 room nights booked per season and goods and services amounted to a \$170-million shot in the arm to the local economy in 2001.*

The thrust stage at Stratford continues to encourage experimentation in the 21<sup>st</sup>

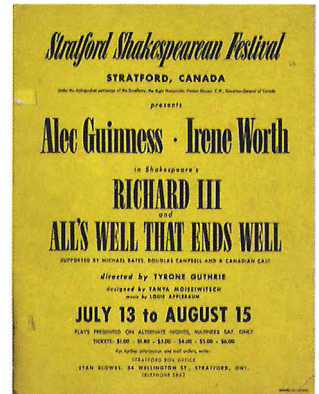
century. In a January 2017 article, Lighting & Sound America magazine examines how the classic proscenium musical *A Chorus Line* was adapted at Stratford the previous season for its first ever non-proscenium staging. "A thrust space is built for the actor and soliloquy in Shakespeare. What musical has more monologues and soliloquies than *A Chorus Line*?" said the show's director, Donna Feore. The signature white line in the set design was moved from the edge of the apron to the back of the stage, freeing up emotional space down stage for when the characters go back in time in their memories.

Augmenting that shift in time was LED lighting technology never before used at the Festival Theatre that served to dramatically delineate the storytelling. A cluster of loudspeakers was hung that remained in full view as an element of the set design. Directors of concurrent productions of *Macbeth*, *As You Like It* and Moliere's farce, *The Hypochondriac*, all chose to use the technology in their shows, taking the experimentation and adaptability of the thrust ever onward in new directions.

#### Footnote:

The genesis of the Stratford Festival and its daring, rocky start is the subject of a 40-minute, Oscar-nominated National Film Board of Canada documentary called *The Stratford Adventure* (1954). It is available online at [nfb.ca](http://nfb.ca)

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*Sketch of Stratford Festival Theatre, Gavin Green*

