



PHOTO: DAVID SIMS, COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

The Theatre Pr

Fifty years at a company that set the agenda
for theatre design—and so much else

By David Barbour

This year, Theatre Projects Consultants celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Those five decades have seen many changes, as the company morphed from a lighting rental/design firm to advocate for sound design, a producer of West End shows, and much more, not least of which is the consultancy that, arguably, has defined the way we think about new theatres. Recently, the company made news, as the reins were handed to a new generation. *LSA* spoke to more than two dozen people to trace Theatre Projects' story. It's a long and involved saga, rich in the history of modern theatre and associated entertainment forms.

1957: Theatre Projects Limited is founded by Richard Pilbrow

Richard Pilbrow: I got my first job, out of drama school, on [John Patrick's hit Broadway comedy] *Teahouse of the August Moon*. It was produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein's U.K. production company, Williamson Music. I was hired by Bob Stanton, a wonderful man who died recently. We were rigging the show in Edinburgh, and discovered that nobody had brought the lighting plot! Being a snotty kid—I was 22 or so—I had it all, in my Leefax. So I hung and lit the show. Bob and his boss, Bill Stiles,

took me to tea, saying "You've saved the day; we're going to look after your career." And they did. That's why I'm sitting here.

I did the tour of *Teahouse* for about nine months. I was a deputy and my boss was a sweet man, but also a drunk and usually incapable, so I actually sort of ran the company. It was an amazing experience. Then they transferred me back to London for the next Williamson show at Her Majesty's Theatre, [Ira Levin's comedy] *No Time for Sergeants*; that ran for two years. I was shattered to learn I didn't really like being a stage manager. I was in Samuel French's bookstore one day, and opened a book by Joel Rubin and Lee Watson and saw Peggy Clark's lighting plot. I thought, I've never heard of such a thing. Good God, it's a profession. I had lit all the school plays—why not be a lighting designer?



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

objects Timeline

Bob allowed me to take over the band room under the stage at Her Majesty's to create the first Theatre Projects office. It contained my model theatre, with which I hoped to lure unsuspecting producers into thinking that lighting design might be a good idea!

1957: The TP office moves to 17 Whitcomb Street, off Leicester Square. Pilbrow borrows 150 pounds to purchase lighting equipment from the London production of *Oklahoma!* to rent and light his first theatre production, *Lady at the Wheel*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.

Pilbrow: I bought the gear from Williamson Music; they had stored it under the stage at the Drury Lane after *Oklahoma!* had closed. It was covered in rust and all had to be rewired.

I took a little office around the

corner from Her Majesty's. We had absolutely no money. We were starving. My flat was filled, from floor to ceiling, with all this junk, covered in rust. Then my Dad, who had a tiny property business in South London, gave me an old air raid shelter and we stored the gear there. Finally, the phone rang, and, for that first show, half of the equipment went out.

The idea of the company was, nobody would employ me as a designer, so the money would come from renting equipment. I always had the theory that the way to get ahead was to surround myself with people who knew more than I did. That's why we were Theatre Projects, as opposed to Richard Pilbrow.

1959: At the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, the 59 Theatre Company season brings together

L to R: Pilbrow at work; *Brand*, designed by Pilbrow and Collison; *One Over the Eight*, designed by Pilbrow and Walton; and the Steppenwolf Theatre, a Pilbrow favorite.

Richard Pilbrow and sound designer David Collison, who becomes the first independent sound designer in the British theatre. Following the season, he joins Theatre Projects.

Pilbrow: I met David Collison when he was hired for [Henrik Ibsen's] *Brand* at the 59 Theatre Company. We did lots of stuff together, including [the Lionel Bart musical] *Blitz!*

David Collison: I was the first person to be called a sound designer, in 1963. I was a stage manager first. Eventually, I started recording effects, because the library was so limited in those days, and people asked me for help on their shows. Michael Elliot [a director with 59



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

This page, left: Former TPC president Victor Gotesman, Brian Hall, and Pilbrow. Right: TP's 40th anniversary party. Opposite: TPC's offices in Langley Street, London.

Theatre Company] said he regarded sound to be as important as lighting, sets, and costumes. He wanted to give me a credit, and said, "What do you want to be called?" I said, "I don't know. [Richard] calls himself a lighting designer; shall I call myself a sound designer?"

Richard told me about his company. He was making quite a name for himself, doing a lot of shows. The company was him and his wife, and one other person, Bryan Kendall, in a tiny attic room off of Leicester Square. He said, "It's not called a lighting company, because I want it to encompass all the technical aspects of theatre." I said, "It sounds like fun. Do you want a sound department?" He said, "Well, I've got a corner of the room you could have." I had one tape recorder, one microphone. To dub from one tape to another, I had to rent another tape machine.

1960: Lighting designer Robert Ornbo joins Theatre Projects and the company moves to offices in Goodwin's Court.

Robert Ornbo: I was chief electrician at the Princess, a West End Theatre; it's now the Shaftesbury. Richard came in to do a show called *Girl on the Highway*. A dreadful play, but we got on very well. He asked me if I wanted to

join his new company. I went along as a right hand and general assistant. In those days, lighting was regarded as illumination only. Once the play had been done, they said, "Oh, we have to light it." If they wanted to do anything special, it was applied later. There was no pre-planning—but we pre-planned, and we drew things.

1961: Theatre Projects becomes the U.K. agent for the German lighting firm, Reich & Vogel, and imports 5kW scene projectors. These are used for scene projections for the revue, *One Over the Eight*, for which Theatre Projects devises a new method of photographing slides with a pre-determined distortion, which means that slides can be front-projected from an oblique angle onto surfaces that need not necessarily be flat.

Pilbrow: I had just done a show with [set designer] Tony Walton, called *Pieces of Eight*. The producer, Michael Codron, wanted to do a sequel, *One Over the Eight*. I said to Tony, "I think I have a way to use lots of your pictures." I rented the equipment from Reich & Vogel. I asked them, "How do you pre-distort projections?" They said, "Well, you put it up in the theatre, you draw on a blank slide, put it into the machine, and see if it comes out right." I said, "That won't work; we get in on a Sunday and open on a Monday. Can't you do this mathematically?"

Tony Walton: Richard went off to Berlin to study the techniques of projection and discovered that it was all trial and error. When he announced we'd have to figure it out, all the German technicians came in to have a good laugh at him. That sparked his ambition to bring it off, I think.

Pilbrow: Codron said he'd buy the projectors, then he changed his mind, so Theatre Projects had to buy them—but it was a huge success.

Walton: Well, there was this moment. We opened at the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon. We did our dry tech before the company and it was very exciting. Huge, very clean, images. But it hadn't dawned on us that the entire stage at Stratford was trapped. When the company went into the opening number, the towers on which the projectors sat began to shake—and the images were no longer blending! Codron, who didn't have a *long* temper, said, "You have two hours to sort this out." Richard and I went to the Dirty Duck pub for two stiff brandies. The bartender had a cork collection; we asked if we could have some of them, and then we sliced them and shoved them into every available crevice around the traps so that the projection towers became stable, and all was well.

Pilbrow: When it opened in London, I think it was [the critic] Harold Hobson who said he'd never seen anything like

it—how could you change so many multi-colored backcloths on one stage?

1961: The RSC production of *As You Like It*, with Vanessa Redgrave, features lighting by Pilbrow and sound by Collison; it's the first major use of lighting templates in the U.K.. Pilbrow holds first meeting of Association of British Theatre Technicians, becoming a joint founder. Theatre Projects has its first consulting project for an arts center in Barmouth, North Wales.

Pilbrow: A man walked into the office one day and said, "I hear you do

theatres." He asked me what I was doing that weekend and would I go to North Wales with him. His name was Sir Clayton Russon; he owned the biggest firm of seed merchants. He built a theatre in Barmouth—and I was the consultant. Nobody had built theatres since the '30s, so people were building venues with dressing rooms or they didn't have a box office. People would ask our advice.

1962: Pilbrow is invited by Tony Walton to design the projection for the Broadway production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*,

produced by Harold Prince, with lighting by Jean Rosenthal.

Walton: It was a one-set musical in need of visual variety, so I designed painterly skies that cross-faded with each song and at other key moments throughout the production. There were hundreds of images, made with matched pairs of 7" square slides. We had to make distorted images on glass; we had wonderful little old ladies, who did the tea-room ads in the London cinema, to make the artwork from my photographed originals. Hair-raisingly, a box of slides was dropped from a production tower in New Haven. We ended up spending that night and most of the next day, hysterically trying to replicate the shattered images by hand.

1962: *Pickwick*, the musical, is David Collison's first sound design for a musical and the first West End show to use a multi-microphone technique with a sound operator in the auditorium.

Collison: I was doing sound effects, but I had no technical training whatsoever. The set designer, Sean Kenny, was a mate. He rang me up one day from Manchester where they were doing *Pickwick*. He said, "We're in dead trouble up here." The set moved around and Harry Secombe [the show's star] was sometimes on top of a two-story piece moving around the stage, and nobody could hear him. Sean said, "I told Bernard Delfont [the producer] that you're the leading expert in the country and you'll be here tomorrow morning." I hired every microphone I could. I crept into the back of the theatre—everyone greeted me like some kind of savior! By using a bit of common sense, I made the whole thing audible. That's how I became a sound designer [laughs]

1962: Pilbrow and Theatre Projects are appointed lighting consultants by Sir Laurence Olivier for the National Theatre at the Old Vic. Theatre Projects sets up a new company with Walton



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

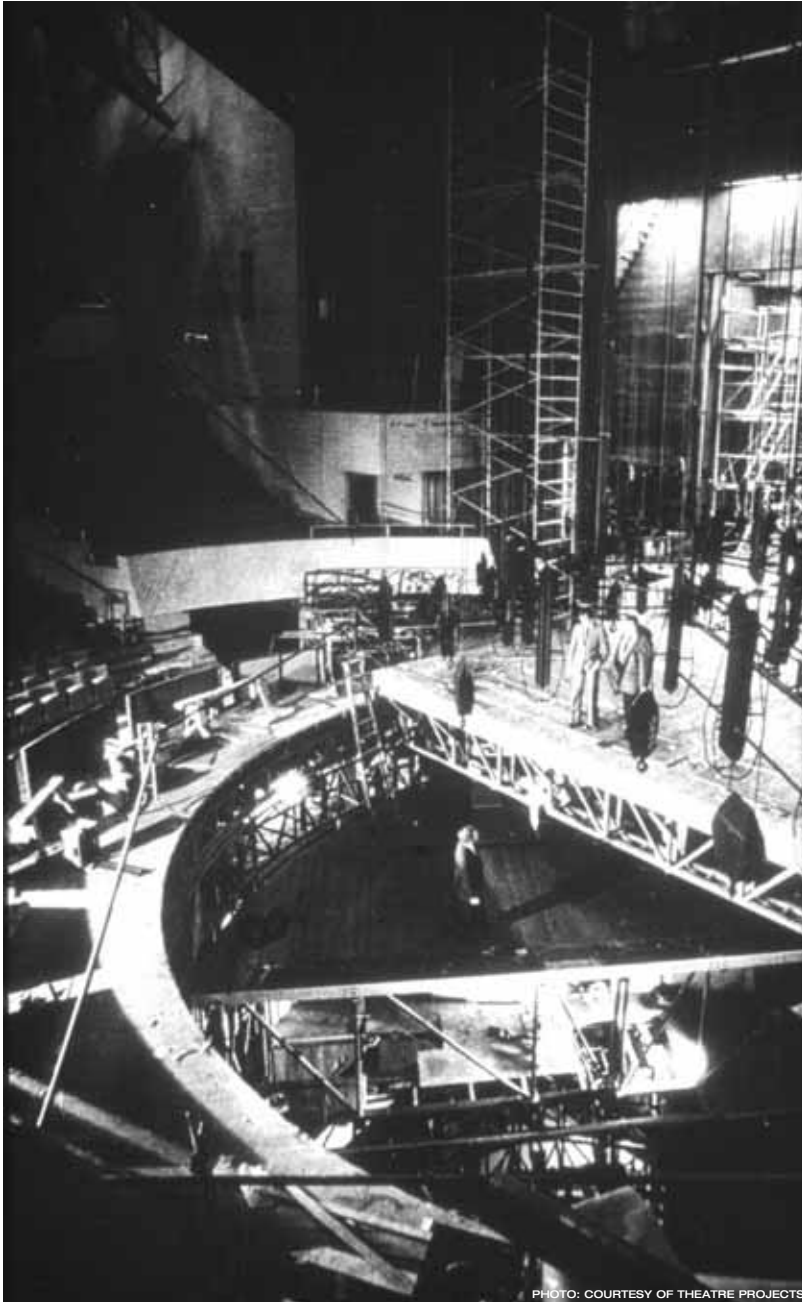


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

This page: The drum revolve under construction at the Olivier Theatre, London. Opposite: A backstage view of *Show Boat* (1994), lit by Pilbrow.

and Prince to produce the London version of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The production company produces five more Prince musicals.

Pilbrow: Hal was displeased with how his shows had been done in London.

Tony had produced a couple of shows. He talked to me and I turned him down at first. Then Viki, my first wife, said, "Come on, let's do it!" So we formed Forum Associates and did *A Funny Thing*. We had a sleeping partner in Chappell's, the music publisher. Louis Dreyfus, the owner, was in his 80s. He was a great mentor after Bob Stanton. He put up a third of the money, Hal put up a third, and, between us, Tony and I put up a third. *Forum* was a massive hit

and ran two years. Next we did *She Loves Me*, which was an artistic success and a financial disaster.

Walton: But it accidentally led us into being investors in the Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. It wasn't so easy to raise money for *She Loves Me*, which hadn't been a hit in New York, but Hal was determined to prove how special it was. It had the same history in London—lovely reviews, all of which said, "Charming, charming," which is a death description. After a few weeks, Hal called and said, "I really need your help." We said, "Hal, we really need your help," and told him about our problems with *She Loves Me*. He said, "I've forgotten all about that. I need your help with the Tevye show. None of my investors think it has a prayer; they say it's only for Jewish audiences." We blithered on about how we had every penny in *She Loves Me*. He said, "*I'm counting on my friends*." So somehow we put money in; it still trickles back pleasantly, from Jones Beach or wherever.

1963-80: Theatre Projects is responsible for over two dozen West End productions.

Pilbrow: I was one of the pioneers of bringing regional theatre shows into London, including Michael Elliot and his 69 Theatre Company and Prospect Productions' *Edward II* and *Richard II*, with Ian McKellen in the title role. Then I thought, I really want to direct a show. A girl in the office knew this really wonderful playwright, Stanley Eveling. I decided to direct his play, *Mister*, myself. I had the time of my life and lost every penny. But it was wonderful—even my investors said they didn't mind losing their money.

The lighting design team

1960s: Theatre Projects develops a team of lighting designers. Pilbrow begins to work closely with Sir

Laurence Olivier at the Chichester Festival and the National Theatre, then in residence at the Old Vic.

Ornbo: We were in the right place at the right time, and it all took off rather quickly. Theatre Projects developed into a company hiring equipment and providing lighting designers. We had a team of nine or ten designers, lighting virtually everything in the West End, and later, in Europe and the U.S.. Initially, it started with Richard—but, if he was busy, he'd say, "I have a very good assistant named Robert Ornbo." Then Robert Ornbo got a name for himself, and, eventually, so did the others.

Andrew Bridge: My father was a producer, post-World War II, and he employed Richard as one of the first lighting designers—so it was nice that he offered me a job in the store, coiling cables [laughs]. Richard was forming a team of lighting designers and I was in there, with the likes of Robert Ornbo, David Hersey, Robert Bryan, and lots of other people. I was the assistant. When Richard had his fingers in too many pies, I was very good at saying, "He's just coming."

Robert Bryan: There was the famous occasion when Robert Ornbo and I were working on a project out of

town—I don't think we got to bed for the whole weekend. We got back to London and went to the pub at lunchtime and were late coming back to the office. Robert put his key in the door and it wouldn't turn. Richard said, "You're late. It's a lockout." Robert said, "F--- it," and we went back to the pub. The Richard joined us and we went to the pictures for the afternoon!

David Hersey: I came over from New York in early 1968, with \$500 in my pocket and the mistaken belief that, if anything went wrong, I could wash dishes and earn enough money to go back. I got introduced to Richard. I had been to see [Simon Gray's play] *Wise Child*, with Alec Guinness [which Pilbrow lit]. I guess I hadn't paid attention to the credits. Richard asked me about the lighting and I was very offhand and cavalier about it. "It was okay," I said; "nothing special." I didn't rubbish it exactly, but—let's say I was a brash American [laughs].

Ornbo: It worked very well. Of course, things changed. At one time, I was doing all the comedies in the West End, then I became king of the musicals. A few years later, I was doing nothing but opera. Later, I did all the naming ceremonies for big cruise vessels.

Hersey: I joined the ALD [Association of Lighting Designers] and I'm number ten, which will give you an idea of how few lighting designers there were at the time. It was even smaller than Broadway.

Bridge: The danger with Richard was that lighting design was becoming an art and it was sometimes hard to get the crews to do that extra bit. And the rigs got to be enormous.

Ornbo: The crews in the West End were rather suspicious of this new attitude. They were used to the old ways of working—now there was someone coming along with a plan and interfering with how it was plugged up.

Bridge: Larry Olivier was directing this J. B. Priestly play at the Old Vic. Richard had discovered the joys of Reich & Vogel beamlights; there was a window up left on the box set and he wanted to put 20 beamlights through it. That was the day I learned about weight loads, because the boom was bending under the weight of the units. We were also using these new colors called Rosco—with American numbers [TP introduced Rosco to the U.K. market]. I was on the set, trying to focus specials and Larry said, "My dear, what is that color—bastard amber?" I said, "It's 802." "What do you mean, 802?" he said. "I'm afraid it's an American color," I said. He said, "*American colors? Oh, my God!*" But Richard really pushed the boundaries, doing lots of cues and specials and introducing new equipment.

Hersey: I assisted Richard on a triple bill at the Old Vic, *In His Own Write* [by John Lennon], which Tony Walton designed. We had 12 Carousel projectors. My job was to stay up all night and put the slides in sequence. Then Sir Laurence came to see it and my next job was to stay up all night and take the slides out. I vowed to stay away from projections, but it didn't

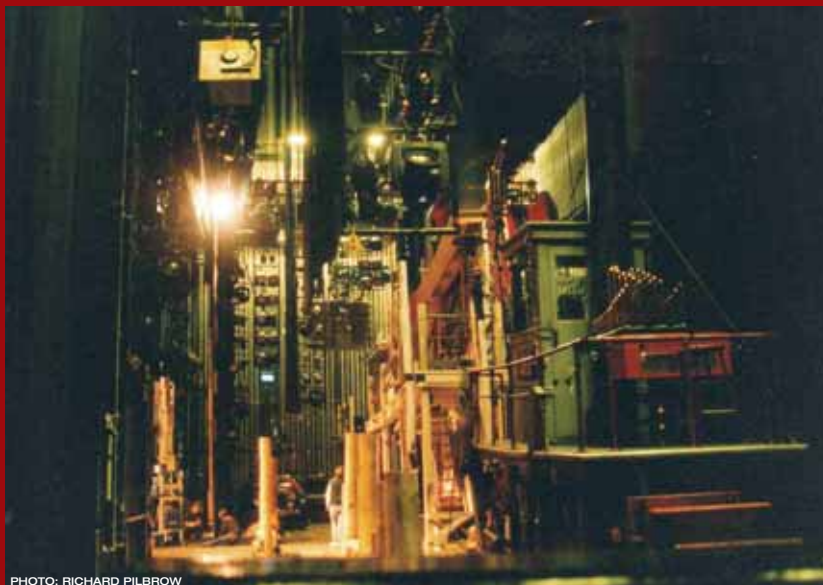


PHOTO: RICHARD PILBROW

quite work out that way [laughs].

Bridge: I remember Richard having an argument with a West End producer about buying a few gobos. He was always trying to persuade producers that lighting is creative.

Bryan: The early plays at the National were all lit by Richard. But he couldn't do everything. Gradually, he persuaded Sir Laurence that it was a good idea to use the team.

Hersey: Then Richard got the contract at the National Theatre to provide all the lighting designers. One of the first shows I did that make a big difference in my life was a play that nobody else wanted to go near, called *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* [by Fernando Arrabal]. I learned to see on that project. That was strictly because of Theatre Projects.

Bryan: Quite early on, David Hersey said, "This is the most extraordinary company. I can't think of anywhere in the world where there are four or five guys lighting shows and helping each other out. There's no jealousy." He added, "It would never work in America." [Laughs]

Bridge: There was one interesting time, when I nearly gave up the game. We were at the Palladium doing a production with [the producer] Harold Fielding. A TP designer named Nick Chelton lit it. He had a bit of a temper. He was really an artist, but in the wrong medium; opera was more his thing. I was his assistant. Anyway, it just wasn't working. He did his homework to the nth degree, but the lighting was too naturalistic, and this was a flashy musical. It got to the half-hour call in the dress rehearsal, and I was sandwiched in between scrimms, focusing something. There was a shout

and a big 2K unit fell down, missing me by inches, because Nick was having his rag with it. I got called to the stage door, and there was Nick, walking out, because he was too stressed out about "the art." The dress rehearsal was ready to start. I got to the desk and said to the operator, "Do you have any cues?" Halfway through the performance, in slipped Richard, followed by [lighting designer] John B. Read, followed by Robert Ormbo, and Robert Bryan. It was a family and they sorted it out. That's how the Theatre Projects team worked.

The iconic London theatres

1966: Pilbrow joins the National Theatre Building Committee and is asked to be theatre consultant for stage planning and lighting, sound, communications, and stage equipment. This is the beginning of a long-running project that, when it opens, will include the world's most advanced computer-controlled point flying system; the drum revolve in the Olivier Theatre; Lightboard, which set the standard for modern lighting control systems; and new approaches to sound and communications control. Also, the Cottesloe Theatre, conceived by Iain Mackintosh, establishes the concept of the courtyard theatre, which has a profound impact on theatre design

internationally.

Pilbrow: I was Olivier's lighting director, and I was co-opted onto the South Bank Building Committee when George Devine [founder of the Royal Court Theatre] died. They could never agree on anything—or even say the same thing from one week to the next. I started sitting next to Denys Lasdun, [the building's architect] who, of course, had never done a theatre before. I got to be sort-of friends with him. He went to Olivier and said that somebody must represent the theatre full-time, then asked me if I would take it on. I went to the phone and called my old school friend, Richard Brett. I had tried for years to get him to join TP. He had gone to the BBC and was a very senior engineer. He always wanted a pension, which, of course, the BBC gave him. Well, I'd never *heard* of a pension. I left that interview with Olivier, went to a public call box, and said, "Dick, I can now offer you a job with a pension. We've just gotten a job with the National Theatre."

Richard Brett: Richard and the lighting designers had been doing a bit of consulting. But, with the National Theatre, we started Theatre Projects Consultants, and I was the managing director, for my sins.



PHOTO: CARLTON STUDIOS, COURTESY OF THE ROYAL EXCHANGE THEATRE

This page: The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, a key TPC project. Opposite: The Music Center at Strathmore, Bethesda, Maryland, which opened in 2005.

Pilbrow: Dick was, I would say, responsible for the professionalism of theatre consulting in England.

Brett: The National Theatre project took 14 years to the final count. The building opened in 1976, with its mechanical operations not fully operational.

Pilbrow: The building kept getting postponed. It was years late. Olivier left and Peter Hall took over. Finally, Peter insisted on it opening, correctly, and very little was finished. The walls were plastered—just. The ceilings were up, but only half the wiring, when the company started rehearsing. Of all our advanced equipment, nothing was finished and nothing worked. We just got the lighting switched on.

Brett: To get the Lyttleton Theatre finished, I said, “We have to take on the project management.” I had a desk in the stalls with a telephone and was the clearing house for contractors and people with problems. It was not the normal consultancy.

Pilbrow: The flying system didn’t work. The drum revolve didn’t work. It was like driving a Ferrari with no wheels. It was very embarrassing. People said the National was a disaster technically, and it was. But the contractors worked nights on it from 1976-79—and it’s worked fabulously ever since. After 30 years of use, they finally upgraded the flying system computers; they were some of the oldest working computers in Britain. That was all Dick Brett.

Iain Mackintosh: The drum revolve was so innovative. It probably got installed too early and got caught up in the hideousness of the construction site. Bill Dudley, the scenic designer, discovered, later on, that it really worked. The atmosphere was terrible; it would have been much worse if Peter Hall hadn’t moved in and said, “Bugger you all, I’m going to do some shows.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

Maddening though he was at times, he just wanted to move in and start cooking. He was absolutely right.

Lou Fleming: I was doubtful about joining TPC initially, when I was invited, because I had been aware for years of the famous stage drum revolve fiasco at the Olivier. Fortunately, people seem to have forgotten it. Years later, I saw *Wind in the Willows* there and it was amazing what Bill Dudley did with the drum revolve.

Brett: The lighting console, Lightboard, was very much a collaboration between Richard, me, and Martin Moore. Through him, it came to fruition.

Collison: We built the first modular sound mixing desk for the theatre and came up with an intercom, Tech Pro, which is still sold in America, although not by us. The modular mixing desk was originally called the TP Mixer. We made a small one for our hire department to rent out. Then we did the Concert Mixer for the O’Keefe Center in Toronto. They were jolly good. Unfortunately, we did a deal with Strand Electric, because we didn’t have the money to capitalize on it. Strand Electric set up a company to sell it worldwide—I got involved for a bit—but they didn’t get it together.

They also built the enormous mixer for the Barbican [in London], which had memory control—another first—but, after the theatre opened, they closed Strand Sound. We lost all that stuff. TP got into financial problems and didn’t have the resources to resurrect it.

Alan Russell: The likes of Richard and Dick Brett were so engrossed in the National theatre, I was given the Barbican [home of Royal Shakespeare Company]. It was back in the bad old days of British construction, union problems, changes of mind with the client and architect. It was originally conceived by Peter Hall and the late [scenic designer] John Bury, I tried to follow their ideas all the way through. I think we’d achieved it, but RSC had grown in a completely different direction and was no longer the building that they wanted—and, of course, Peter and John had moved on to the National Theatre.

Pilbrow: The reputation of the National, before it opened, started us working overseas. We did most of the English reps in the ‘60s, but the National gave us an international profile, and we started working in Hong Kong, Nigeria, doing the globetrotting thing.

Russell: [The National and the

Barbican] went on and on, and set up the company for many years. They provided the bread and butter on which the company was built.

A new concept for theatre design

Pilbrow: I had this growing feeling through the '70s that there was something incredibly wrong with the theatres we were building. We were doing the George Izenour thing, which said that everyone had to be on one level, because they were social equals, with perfect sightlines and acoustics. We were getting the lights in the right place, the sightlines were right, and the stages were right—but there was something wrong with the theatres, and I didn't quite know what that was. Iain Mackintosh established that theatre was all about intimacy. Prospect Productions, which he ran, toured the world, playing different theatres. He'd begun to realize which theatres worked and which didn't. He and I got close, and I offered him a job. Three weeks after that, Peter Hall asked me to come up with a design for the Cottesloe, the National's studio theatre, which I'd designed originally—but it was just a black box, and Peter wanted something new. Iain came in on a Monday with what is now a rather famous drawing of the Cottesloe—and he became an enormous influence.

Mackintosh: I invented the phrase "courtyard theatre" in an article for *The Stage*. I called it that, because I didn't want anything that described a form, like "in the round," "traverse," "endstage," or "thrust." I thought "courtyard" was sufficiently vague.

Pilbrow: A couple of years later, we did the restoration of the Theatre Royal, Nottingham. I looked across the room and was figuratively hit over the head.

Russell: To our amazement, we discovered that the theatres we liked were the old Victorian theatres of the West End. Why did we like them? Was it the cherubs and the gold leaf? No, it



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

was the geometry. We relearned the secrets of Matcham and Phipps, who built them. We're still learning their skills in geometry and sightlines. There are so many hidden ideas in those rooms.

Pilbrow: Old theatres did this with you [he forms an embrace]; modern theatres did that [he spreads his arms]. That's really why we work around the world—it's all on that one message.

Russell: Richard had all the feelings about auditoria, but it was Iain who crystallized it into a philosophy. It gave you a starting point in auditorium design.

Brett: It was quite difficult at times to get architects to understand what was needed. There was a continuing problem of arrogance—they didn't want to know how a theatre should be shaped, because it would affect their notions of how the room should look.

Mackintosh: Resistance continued to it for at least 25 years. If you get the stage architecture wrong by 2', you live with it for the next 50 years. If the lighting is wrong, you change it. The Globe Theatre in London literally has no lighting—and it continues to sell out. You have 700 people standing for three hours. You get into a direct relationship

Above: The Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, one of TPC's most acclaimed recent projects. Opposite: Theatre Royal, Nottingham, another major project.

with the director, actors, and text.

Global expansion and business disaster

1970s: Theatre Projects enters into a period of continual expansion. More and more new divisions are opened. Pilbrow takes on new commitments. The consultancy moves into the U.S.

Collison: The consultancy was asked to do a lot of strange things, not strictly theatre. We did a lot of exhibitions, things at Madame Tussauds.

Pilbrow: The central theory was, we wanted to do art, to tell stories, but we needed money. So we rented equipment. But then, I thought, somebody must pay better than the theatre. So we did a show for Madame Tussauds, and starting doing industrial shows all over Europe.

Collison: The sound hire company just sort of happened. Previously there had been a dominant company called Stagesound [purchased in 1974]. I did about 50 musicals in the West End. We built our own team of sound operators because otherwise it would be the

stage manager, who couldn't do anything else. We started having proper sound operators you could rely on.

Pilbrow: We had a costume company at one point. We built the costumes for *Fiddler*. The people who ran the costume department at the Old Vic left there and started TP Design Services. At the same time, I was beginning to light shows in the U.S. [Tom Stoppard's] *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* came from the National to Broadway. Hal hired me to light [the Kander and Ebb musical] *Zorba*; I was the first foreigner to light an original Broadway musical.

Molly Pilbrow, former TP staff member, TPC's marketing director, and Richard Pilbrow's second wife: [Lighting designer] Jules Fisher introduced Richard and me; it's all Jules' fault [laughs]. I assisted Richard on *The Rothschilds* [a musical by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, of *Fiddler on the Roof* fame]. It was one of those shows where you're in Detroit and the director gets fired and the choreographer takes over. Then I went to London in 1971 and we started living together. I started assisting Richard on shows, and joined the company the following year. I did a fair amount of assisting, especially with American

designers, because I quickly learned the British way of doing things. The pace of work was considerably different from New York at the time. It was good to have someone in the middle between, say, Jules Fisher and the crew. I did *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Pippin* there with Jules; I did *Pippin* in Vienna. I also worked with Tharon Musser on *A Chorus Line* and *A Little Night Music*.

Russell: We were tiptoeing around the world, but not yet the U.S. At one point, we had 24 projects in Iran. We had an office of six people in Tehran; we did it as a joint venture with a U.K.-based architect and [acoustician] Russell Johnson. They all moved along happily until the revolution, when we were all kicked out. One of our guys' visas ran out, but the visa office was closed down. He couldn't leave, because his paperwork wasn't in order and he couldn't get his paperwork in order because the office was closed. He was trapped there for two months. Finally, everyone was repatriated, and we licked out wounds.

Pilbrow: In the late 70s, I began to get the feeling that we could consult in America. So I hired Wally Russell, who'd been a great friend for many years, as president of TP Inc. We hired

Lou Fleming and began to seriously seek work. It began with the Calgary Center for the Performing Arts and, in Toronto, the Bluma Appel Theatre.

Fleming: I joined TPC on June 3, 1982. Before that, I was a managing director of Artec Consultants. I'm Canadian by background; Richard and Wally Russell wanted someone who had consulting experience in the United States and Canada, and who, with Wally, could take TPC into the U.S. I opened the New York office and hired Robert Long and Steven Wolf out of Artec.

Robert Long: I studied under and worked for George Izenour. Then I worked at Juilliard, followed by Artec. I was the first American consultant hired, because Wally Russell and Lou Fleming were Canadians. Our job was to find work for the London office. The only thing we had to "sell" was the courtyard theatre, telling, to the best of my ability, the story that Richard told so well, about how the previous generation of theatres had gotten off track. It's a story that I can hear in my sleep.

Fleming: The jobs came fairly quickly. I had a knack for writing proposals. In those days, we did a lot of feasibility studies. In 1984, we did the Dallas Opera House project. It's taken them until now get around to building it. I also headed the team for the feasibility studies for the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center in Charlotte in 1983-84. It opened in 1992.

Long: The American Society of Theatre Consultants was founded in January 1983. I went to the USITT conference in Corpus Christi several months later to see if I could join the organization. My membership wasn't passed for three or four years. There was resistance, a fear of this English company winning projects.

Molly Pilbrow: I took on marketing by default. Robert Long handled a fair amount of it, too. Marketing was never



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS



PHOTO: MIKE SMALLCOMBE

Two views of the National Theatre, London, today. This page: The Olivier Theatre. Opposite: The Cottesloe.

particularly important in London, but it became so here.

Anne Minors, former TPC architect: At the time I joined, in 1984, I remember reading the newsletter and it said they were hiring 32 graphic equalizers for the Michael Jackson tour. There were lighting projects and the video suite downstairs in the office. The empire was still there. They were still doing productions, like [the West End production of] *I'm Not Rappaport*. [1986, and the last TP production].

Pilbrow: I loved the children's books by Arthur Ransome and wanted to get the film rights to [his novel] *Swallows and Amazons*. There were 14 books and Ransome's widow wouldn't sell them. She didn't want them vulgarized. She was an amazing character, a Russian. Ransome had been the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Moscow during the revolution—and this woman had been Leon Trotsky's secretary! I finally persuaded her that we wanted to do it just as he would like, and it was successful. [Pilbrow also produced two television series: *All You Need is Love*, and *Swallows and Amazons Forever*].

Minors: We were doing all sorts of things. We had a job in Holland, a theatre, which was our first attempt at 3D drawing on the computer. We were doing themed pubs. We were doing presentation suites for a big corporate entity. I started working on projects in Florida, as well as the early days of the Cerritos Center [in Cerritos, California]. In the U.K., we were doing the early stages of the Orange Tree Theatre in London. Certainly, there was a lot of work in the States.

Pilbrow [when asked if he ever turned down any project]: No. Never. I think that's probably literally true.

Ornbo: That was the downfall, in a way: Richard kept on opening new companies to do this, that, and the other. And, of course, some failed. We disastrously opened a branch in Holland, which lost millions. The production company lost money. That's why they sold off the hire company.

Collison: Everybody thought Richard was rich, because he lit shows on Broadway and the West End and produced Hal Prince musicals over here. But anytime he made money, he'd stick it in a project. We made a hell of a lot of money from *Fiddler on the Roof*, and the whole lot went into buying a

computer AV design system for the consultancy.

Russell: There was a Dutch company called Courage Light, run by two brothers. John Ball, the group managing director of TP, struck up a relationship with them, giving them worn-out hire stock for a percentage of the rental. A few years later, TP bought Courage Light and renamed it Theatre Projects DB, and the brothers ran it. But it got itself into heavy losses. It was the straw that broke the back of TP.

Long: When I joined in '83, there were 200 employees. There were 23 divisions—architectural lighting, commercial production, books, rental, sound. There were all these trucks going around London with the TP logo.

Bridge: What goes around, comes around: *Phantom of the Opera*, which is my baby, was originally going to be lit by Richard. But all the dates changed and he couldn't do it, and he recommended me. I'm still doing it.

Pilbrow: In the late '70s, TP was growing like a mushroom. We had 200 on staff. But we never had any money, and it began to get ludicrous. I had helped to found a company called Space Time Systems, to do computer ticket systems. We met with venture capital people about it, and I persuaded them to invest into Theatre Projects. Originally, I was the 100% owner, then I came down, in two stages, to where I owned 25%. During that time, I was mostly here in the U.S., and, every time I went back to London, I was greeted by the commercial people, saying we were going broke, so I'd go out and raise more money. Finally, I started to think, there's something very wrong here. Our auditors said there was no problem. I went to my father's tax accountant, who did a business analysis; she said, "This is a house of cards and you probably are bankrupt."

Mackintosh: We recovered from it, but

I don't think anybody knows how ghastly it was at the time.

Pilbrow: I called Wally Russell and said, "Could you come to England? We've got a problem." He flew in for the weekend and stayed six months. And we were indeed bankrupt. We fired the managing director, the finance director, the auditors. That was in 1983. I made the decision that we would get rid of everything, except what was important, which was consulting. It took five years. The industry got every penny back. I lost everything.

Collison: I left around 1990. When we



PHOTO: MIKE SMALLCOMBE

found out that some of the management were up to no good, Richard made me managing director of the group. I found myself in charge of paying bills and having to sell off parts of the company. It was a very unpleasant two years, at the end of which was the buyout. I was fed up with sitting behind a desk.

Pilbrow: We had a management buyout of the consultancy in 1988, which David Staples [now managing director, U.K.] organized. Molly and I moved here to the U.S. with Daisy [their daughter]. I thought, we'll never be

successful in America as a funny little English firm. To be good in America, you've got to be American. So I hired Bob Scales, and he turned us into an American company.

Minors: I left TPC after three years, during the management buyout. I rejoined a year later in 1988. When I left, one project we were doing was a television center for the BBC. Lo and behold, I came back and the telephone rang; it was someone from the BBC, and they just carried on as I'd been there the whole time!

A new TPC

1990-The Present: Theatre Projects Consultants develops into a global company based in Connecticut and London. Pilbrow returns to lighting design, working on Broadway and elsewhere. Just before the 50th anniversary, leadership is transferred to a new generation.

Pilbrow: After the buyout, I started lighting shows again.

Dawn Chiang: I met Richard in 1990, and we've co-designed many shows together. He's so innovative and fresh-

minded; he has a natural curiosity. On *Show Boat*, we took the David Hersey light curtains that tipped upstage-downstage and got them to also tip stage left to stage right. Philip Nye, working for DHA, engineered them. We got 11 of them—ten, plus one spare, and Philip had the twelfth as his working model back at DHA. They came just in time for load-in; we put them up on the pipes and they've been working ever since. *The Life* was the first Broadway show to use two Wholehogs—one for conventionals and one for moving lights—and, at the end of tech, we merged the whole show onto one Wholehog. We also used WYSIWYG, which was very new on Broadway. They needed an extra day to get the scenery in—and we were able to agree to that; we worked with the mains off, working in WYSIWYG in the house. The programmer pre-programmed 32 moving lights to 40 preset focuses in less than 30 minutes. Richard has also used the new Virtual Magic Sheet on a number of productions at Goodspeed Musicals.

Pilbrow: Do you know what we're doing next? *Sleeping Beauty* at ABT, with Tony designing the sets. I'm scared witless!

1991-92: Theatre Projects opens the Head Theatre, Baltimore, a flexible courtyard space. The Steppenwolf Theatre is a modern version of a classic American playhouse. The North Carolina Performing Arts Center opens. A new stage house is completed for Teatro Colon Buenos Aires.

Pilbrow: We've done three things in America. We invented a modern American classic theatre. Steppenwolf is an archetype of that. We also did the modern multi-purpose hall; the first big one was in Charlotte, North Carolina. Third, we invented what I call the flexible concert hall, in which you can do lots of stuff, have the stage and sides removed. They're theatres without fly towers.



PHOTO: DAN HOWELL & PETER SCHIAZZA, COURTESY OF THEATRE PROJECTS

Brian Hall, principal theatre designer, U.S. office: Probably about 25% of the work we do never happens; that's a good record, because most architects have drawers filled with projects they've never done.

Minors: I came back to work on the Toronto Ballet Opera House. Most of the work was done in London. I'd go to Connecticut, spend time with Richard, go to the architects in Boston, go to Toronto and present to the client. November 9, 1990 is engrained on my mind; that was the day they cancelled the project. It was three days away from going to bid.

Staples: Then there are projects that just seem to drag on. Every year, we do a budget; it's a standing joke that we list the Indra Gandhi Center for the Arts. We were chosen for it in 1986, and we're still negotiating the contract, in theory.

1994: In the UK, the new Glyndebourne Opera House opens. In the USA, the new Ozawa Concert Hall for the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood opens.

Gene Leitermann, general manager, U.S. office: We were talking about project fatigue the other day. I haven't experienced it, because each day is a new challenge. There's so much variety and freedom, it's hard to pass up.

Hall: Theatre Projects is a curious animal. It's composed of people with different skills in the theatre. I was a partner in a firm called Arcop, working with Fred Lebensold, a major theatre architect. He had a mindset that was similar to TP, before there was a TP.

1995: The three-auditorium Aronoff Center opens in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Stan Pressner: I met Richard several years ago when I spoke on what he calls a crazies committee—where a bunch of artists come in and talk with an architect and a client. I made a speech about what do you want this to be—a temple of the arts or a carnival of the arts. Richard came up to me afterwards and said, "You were absolutely brilliant! You sounded just like me!" That's how I got to be an affiliate of Theatre Projects.

Staples: The two offices, in the U.S. and U.K., are interrelated, yet are autonomous in their operational areas. A group of nine of us owns the companies, with common policy and strategy at the highest level. Below that, the two companies look after their own staffing and projects. We have partners' meetings every month or so. We collaborate on marketing and the website. And there are projects on which we actively work alongside each other.

The new partners: Gene Leitermann, John Coyne, Michael Nishball, Benton Delinger, David Staples, Marion Daehms, Jeremy Godden, Alan Russell, and Mark Stroomer.

1997: The Seattle Repertory Theatre Company's new 284-seat theatre opens. Two of America's great renovated theatres, ACT's Geary, in San Francisco, and the New Amsterdam, on New York's 42nd Street, are opened.

Mark Stroomer, director of design, U.K. office: The U.S. office looks after the whole of the Americas. We look after Europe and the rest of the world, but we have some crossover projects. I'm an architect by training. If you work for a classical architecture or engineering firm, everyone has the same background. Here, some people come from the lighting side, some come from commercial—everyone's got a different attitude.

John Coyne, director of design, U.S. office: I was an architect in Chicago; one project at the firm was the Steppenwolf Theatre, which exposed me to Theatre Projects. I went to Yale for set design. Then I missed architecture and wanted to be involved in bigger projects. I was designing sets for the Dallas Theatre Center, and the artistic director put me together with Richard.

1999: The Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier opens in Chicago. It's described by Sir Peter Hall as "one of the best, if not the best, Shakespeare spaces in the world."

Keith Gerchak, senior consultant, U.S. office: I got my degree in architecture. I've been an actor since I was 12. It's a philosophy of Richard's about keeping practitioners on staff, so we know what we're talking about. I'm the backstage guy—support rooms, circulation. I was on a tour recently, where we had to deal with load-ins; we were carrying pieces upstairs and bumping across thresholds. A theatre fails if you haven't satisfactorily addressed the issue of load-in. We played in 65 venues across the country; it was a great six months, because I got to see everything, from 1800s opera houses to big theatres that seat 2,700.

Coyne: I just finished designing a play, *Moonlight and Magnolias*, in Dallas. I've got *Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria Rusticana* coming up at San Diego Opera next year. It's really good to do that. It keeps your finger on the pulse.

2000: The Royal Court Theatre renovation opens in London, as does the Lowry Centre in Salford, England.

Tom Davis, senior consultant, U.K. office: We're working on projects in the UAE and Abu Dhabi. We're not walking in with an English or American flag, saying, "Okay guys, this is how we work in this country." You've got to go in and learn a bit before designing something.

Benton Delinger, director of project management, U.S. office: I've had 20 years of sound design, production managing, stage managing, welding, all these things that give me knowledge of how buildings go together. Our job is to point out if something works from a functional standpoint—it's not to say, "It's my way or the highway." When I was a production manager, I'd tell my staff, the one word I don't want to hear is no, because once you've done that

you've drawn a line in the sand.

2001: The Kimmel Center, home to the Philadelphia Orchestra, opens.

Hall: We get on well with architects, because we see what their problems are. I do lots of sketches to show the shape of a room. To an architect, this is good; it's not taking his work away, yet it defines the space. It helps to speak the architect's language.

Leitermann: We can't do a project with fewer than three people—a project manager, a design lead, and a technical lead. It works beautifully in terms of delivering quality.

2003: Walt Disney Concert Hall opens; it is one of the most talked-about buildings in years.

Millie Dixon, associate, U.S. office: We have the best arguments! [Laughs] This is the greatest office. Someone will be on the phone saying something, and Jules [Lauve] will stand up and say, "No! Do it like this!" And I'll stand up and say, "No! Do it like this!"

Hall: An architect's office is like a pyramid, with the architect at the top and the rest of the guys at the bottom, drafting. Here, it's like an upside-down pyramid. Everyone is pretty much on the same skill level.

2004: The Overture Centre, in Madison, Wisconsin; Marie P. DeBartolo Center at Notre Dame University; and Kirk Douglas Theatre, Culver City, California all open in September.

Coyne: We've talked about what makes people flourish here. We don't say you have to come from the theatre, but you have to embrace that mentality, that you all have to pitch in to get it done by opening that. That's a big part of the Theatre Projects culture: people just do what it takes.

Dixon: We're pursuing lots of new

ideas—houses of worship, casinos, even arenas and stadiums, as well as amphitheatres, museums, lecture rooms. All of these spaces are getting more complicated.

2005: Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, D.C. is another version of the flexible courtyard space, for a theatre dedicated to new work.

Jules Lauve, associate, U.S. office: We're working on the first opera house built in this country in the last half century, the Winspear Opera House in Dallas. But the beauty of TPC is that the company never stays the same. I'm sure that, at one point, few people in the industry would have imagined that TPC would be involved in a casino showroom. But we're doing in several projects in Macao and we're now pursuing that industry in all corners of the globe.

Coyne: The landscape is shifting on several fronts. Years ago, architects looked to the past for ideas; now we're in a baroque modernism phase and there isn't that acceptance of the past. The challenge is to get the architect excited about the same principles, without revealing that this is what the theatre has been doing for hundreds of years.

2005-06: The new projects keep coming. Openings include the Strathmore Center in Maryland and Williams College '62 Center for Theatre and Dance.

Staples: This is our 50th anniversary. For any entertainment industry company to be around that long is an achievement. Thirty years ago, we hadn't worked outside the U.K. Now, we've been in 62 countries. There's a core series of beliefs that have survived over time. We've got a good team of people; that's what keeps me coming to work every day.

Bryan: We always did work bloody hard. But Richard had a huge enthusiasm that filtered down to everybody. You always went to work with a whistle. 🎺