

A Crowded Life

A Theatre Project,
by Richard Pilbrow.
Forward by Joseph Volpe

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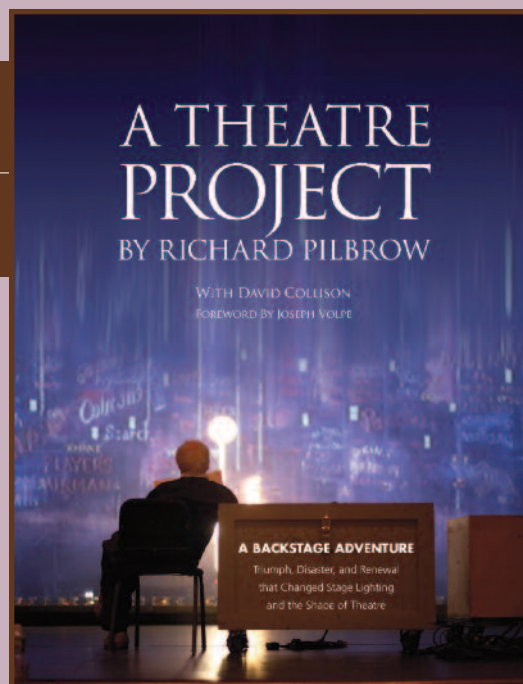
By: Rob Halliday

A small disclosure to start things off: I owe my career to Richard Pilbrow—or, at least, to his first book, *Stage Lighting*, which was what the school library had on the subject in the pre-Internet days of my youth. On first reading, I didn't understand it all, but I got enough to let me try lighting shows—and to get me hooked.

I suspect others share that story, either with that book or its 1997 successor, *Stage Lighting Design—The Art, The Craft, The Life*. It updated the technology sections and also added insights from the author's working life, plus a series of fascinating interviews with leading lighting practitioners that showed there were many different ways of approaching lighting.

Now Richard has a new book, one which extends the “craft” and “life” parts even further to make a volume that is part memoir, part biography, part theatre history, part social history. It's called *A Theatre Project*, the name taken from Theatre Projects, the company Pilbrow dreamt up as a boy and that he has carried with him throughout his life. Its subtitle, “A Backstage Adventure: Triumph, Disaster, and Renewal that Changed Stage Lighting and the Shape of Theatre,” actually provides a pretty good summary of the content. Be warned: If you're looking for a textbook on the art or mechanics of lighting, this is not it. (The older book is still available for that!) Instead, it's something you probably never thought you were looking for: a remarkably candid account of a life in showbiz, the good and the bad. It makes gripping reading, in part because it is so unexpected.

Perhaps a quick introduction—for those who have no idea of Pilbrow's history or who only know Theatre Projects through its current “Consultants” incarnation: Pilbrow grew up with a love of theatre and lighting; he trained as a stage manager, but became disillusioned with that role. Instead, he discovered, through Joel Rubin and



Lee Watson's book *Theatrical Lighting Practice*, the profession of lighting design. While there were a few LDs working in the UK at the time, it was perhaps this profession of lighting that Richard pioneered in Britain. With entrepreneurial zeal, he established a little lighting rental operation, using some ancient, cast-off lights, figuring that producers might go for a keen start-up that could undercut the monopoly of Strand Electric. The designer would then throw himself in for free...

That company was the first incarnation of Theatre Projects. Its foundation, in 1957, and subsequent growth coincided with a remarkable period in British theatre history—the rise of new writers, the opening of new theatres as Britain re-awoke after the war, the emergence of new technology, the creation of the National Theatre. Remarkably, TP was involved in all of this and more, even going into theatre producing and film and television. The book makes clear that there was never a carefully considered business plan, just Pilbrow's boundless optimism, limitless enthusiasm, willingness to pursue interesting ideas—and the simple strength of saying yes when asked. All supported by his remarkable ability to draw others into his dreams, building teams of talented people around him.

The book is a history of all of this—a combined biography of Pilbrow and his company, if you like—though again with a team approach, with thoughts and memories from those who were there supporting the author's narrative. While some stories are familiar from the author's earlier books, they gain a new perspective from history, and there are plenty more besides. The telling is broadly chronological, though liberties are taken with that chronology, revealed by the ever-shifting back-and-forth dress styles in the many photographs that accompany the text. Something clearly changed the author from clean-cut chap

in suit and tie to bearded, long-haired, leather-jacket-clad media mogul. He blames the '60s...

There are two astounding aspects of the story. One is the breadth of involvement TP had right across the "business" of show business, which is almost inconceivable now—except, perhaps, in the case of PRG, long the ultimate owner of those TP lighting assets. Perhaps the ambition came as part of that purchase?

The other is the way everything imploded. That darker part of the tale is also told here, though, to be honest, not as successfully. As you read, yet again, of the author returning from a glamorous overseas show, learning the bills are not being paid, being reassured the situation is in hand, then departing for the next exotic locale, you just want to shout, "How could you not notice?"—as if your cry could somehow transcend time and change history. I suspect the eternal optimist doesn't really like dwelling on negatives. Or it may well be how things actually played out at the time—look at the list of projects in the book's appendix, then try to work out when the author found time to sleep, let alone manage a business!

Or maybe he just doesn't want to think about it. Certainly at the time it took its toll; the book's most remarkable passage covers the author's spell in The Priory, a hospital, recovering from a nervous breakdown— not something I've seen covered in any other industry textbook! It's a key, pivotal moment in the story, though; after

that, he has to turn down what would have been the most lucrative work of his career (lighting *The Phantom of the Opera*), watch his company implode, spin out the part he now really cared about, Theatre Projects Consultants (one senses that, though Richard loves lighting, he became aware that it leaves no long-term mark on the world, whereas creating new performance spaces does—and since they are permanent, better to get them right than wrong), relocate to the US, and, in effect, build a new life from scratch there.

We are fortunate indeed that someone who has seen and done so much has both the writing skills and the willingness to share those memories. And fortunate, too, that so much care has been lavished on the book. It is beautifully produced, well-designed, well-presented, packed full of pictures and illustrations. It's easy to read in the E-versions that I know are coming, but I'd opt for the really classy paper version. Whatever format you choose, you'll find a gripping, fascinating story, well-told. It is very highly recommended.

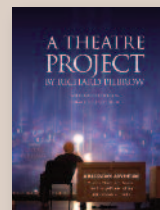
If there is a present-day equivalent of Richard out there, they're probably lining up the film rights right now—how many other stories can tie together Laurence Olivier, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole, Judi Dench, and *The Phantom of the Opera*? Or maybe it is just that little bit too far-fetched for film, as all the truly great real life stories are! 📺

A THEATRE PROJECT

A BACKSTAGE ADVENTURE



An autobiographical Story
BY RICHARD PILBROW
 with David Collison
 Foreword by Joseph Volpe
 468 pages and 500 illustrations



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