

Thinking big will break down traditional barriers

THE TALLEST structure in Edinburgh just now is the giant yellow crane which temporarily towers over the glories of the traditional skyline.

It pinpoints for visitors the location in Nicholson Street where the Edinburgh Festival Theatre is taking shape.

Proudly featuring the largest stage in any UK theatre, it is a blend of the 1928 auditorium of the Empire theatre, by W & T R Milburn, within a new building designed by Law, Dunbar, Naismith.

The Edinburgh Festival Theatre is set to open in ten months time. To be precise, at 5pm British Summer Time on Saturday June 25, Scottish Opera will perform Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* under the baton of their new music director Richard Armstrong.

An opening summer season will follow in July before the Edinburgh International Festival has possession of the 1,900-seat theatre, probably for four weeks. From next September through to the Christmas/New Year period will follow the remainder of the EIF's initial six month programme, due to be announced in February.

By building out from the core of the old Empire the architects, led by Colin Ross, have been able to create a modern, welcoming, glass walled frontage and create backstage facilities unrivalled in the UK for large productions.

The total flat stage area will be 850 metres including detachable wing stage and rear scene dock elements. Dressing rooms and band room spaces can accommodate 180 artists. Other stage level facilities include a Green Room, maintenance, wardrobe and offices to accommodate visiting and regular technical staff.

Ahead of the 30 year saga of "When will Edinburgh build an Opera House?" the 1991 solution, buy the Empire and re-build it, came upon people quite suddenly. The local rivalries were put to one side and the £20 million project to create a lyric theatre, and enable the International Festival to truly attract the biggest and the best, has proceeded remarkably smoothly.

Critical players in the process were former Edinburgh District Council leader Mark Lazarovic, Lord Younger who has energetically led the trust set up to develop and manage the theatre, and Des Bonner, Chief Executive of Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise. LEEL was established, along with the other local enterprise companies in Scotland, in 1991 and has taken a major interest in the region's cultural economy from the outset.

Now, once main contractors Bovis and the design team, which includes international specialists Theatre Projects Consultants, have completed their task, the responsibility for making a success of the venture rests on general manager Paul Iles and his colleagues.

Iles, who has worked extensively in theatre management in Australia and the UK, has gathered a strong team around him. Commercial director Pam Brown who is pursuing the £4.5 million target private sector contribution to the project budget, was formerly with the Gleneagles Hotel.

Joining over the coming months are technical manager Alan Campbell who is making the 50 mile trip across the central belt from Scottish Opera, theatre manager David Todd, coming 200 yards up the road from the Queen's Hall, and assistant administrator Brian Loudon, who will cross town from the Royal Lyceum.

Not all the early key appointments are local, however. The marketing manager will be Chris May from London Contemporary Dance. Iles anticipates they will run on 35 full-time equivalent permanent staff. Numbers will build up gradually over the autumn and winter.

The plan is for Bovis to hand over the building progressively during the spring with completion by May. Iles intends that technical testing and staff training will be interspersed with open days for locals to go round the theatre. He also plans two hard hat performances during the handover period.

Paul Iles was most recently at Blackpool's Grand Theatre and is expecting to include lots of variety in the electric mix which the Nicholson Street fare will provide.

He is scornful of traditional barriers. "I think that this theatrical apartheid between a receiving theatre and a repertory theatre is evaporating," he says.

The aim is to perform for 51 weeks a year. With four weeks for the

BRIAN BAKER brings a progress report from Edinburgh's nascent Festival Theatre. As the bricks go up on what will be one of the city's busiest buildings, the crucial players unwrap their plans for the venue which will be open in time for next year's festival



International Festival and seven weeks to be used each year as their new Edinburgh space by Scottish Opera and Scottish Ballet, that's a heavy 40 weeks of attractions to bring.

Whilst there will be a lot of one night shows in the Festival Theatre's programmes, Iles says some attractions will play for three weeks. He doesn't rule out longer runs either, though probably a maximum of six weeks.

Unlike many traditional receiving or presenting theatres the Festival will attempt to establish the social/arts centre feel associated with the rep's.

In doing this they are aided by Ross's magnificent front of house architecture. There will be a 80-seat ground floor café. Extensive use will be made of the hospitality boxes which will double by day as lecture theatres and seminar rooms and during the August extravaganza as a Festival club.

Iles is evolving exciting plans for varied uses for the Upper Circle foyer. There are three large foyers built around a grand staircase which will provide five entrances to the three-tiered auditorium.

The uppermost will be used as a cabaret stage for late night entertainment. Iles is particularly enthused about jazz evenings. "Business imperatives require it he will not hesitate to use it for bingo sessions too.

He has worked for trust managed theatres before and favours it. Iles points out that from next year "we will have the three most common operating formulae in touring theatres in Edinburgh. The Playhouse is commercially owned, the Kings is operated by the Recreation Dept and we are an independent charitable trust."

After Edinburgh DC bought the site from Rank's it retained the freehold and leased to the Edinburgh Festival Theatre Trust the responsibility for raising the construction costs and operating the theatre.

There will be no revenue subsidy. "It will become 100 per cent self supporting within two years of opening," says Iles. It will be open to it to hunt sponsorship though he promises a very commercial ethos.

Current corporate operations are focussed on raising the target of £4.5 million private sector contribution to the £16 million capital cost. (Edinburgh DC paid Rank's £4 million purchase price).

This week it launched a Founders Circle scheme. This will entitle subscribers to first pick at seats in any section of the theatre for a ten or 25 year period. There are Individual, Family and Silver categories and donations start at £2,500.

This will be followed in the new year by a Friends of the Festival Theatre scheme. In addition to raising finance towards the further £1.8 million needed to reach the £4.5 million target, these schemes are intended to promote a local sense of ownership of the project.

The International Festival is delighted with progress. Deputy director James Waters says "Our technical people who have been on site have all

been impressed that it is being done properly and on target for the opening. We are thrilled."

In the latter part of the year they face some interesting venue choices in their programming for the 1994 International Festival. For the moment he says they expect to use all the current major venues and put a full programme into Nicholson Street.

However, "there is no indication of extra funding for the Festival Theatre programme so we will have to take some potentially tough decisions on which venues we use," he says.

Pricing at the new venue will be tricky. According to which of the four orchestral pit arrangements available are in use, seating varies between 1,915 and 1,771. The Apollo-owned Playhouse can take 3,000.

On the other hand, says Waters: "The question of whether a production is too big to bring to the Festival goes by the board." It is likely to use it particularly for opera and dance.

However, the combination of the restored auditorium and the new stage and back stage structure means, in Iles' words: "We have the openness of a concert hall yet the embrace of the Playhouse whilst, despite the stage area breadth, it is also intimate enough for drama." No one will sit more than 85ft from the stage.

Iles vision is that it "becomes a crossroads theatre for the large funded national opera, dance and theatre companies and for commercial producers from within and outwith the UK."

It expects to engage in some co-productions and is talking with Comunicado Theatre Company and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. With a view to generating projects within Scotland to tour England Iles is in discussion at present with the Glasgow King's Theatre.

As if such a dazzling addition to Scotland's cultural real estate wasn't enough, there are provisional plans for a second phase in the late nineties which would move them further into production with a possible home base rear of the theatre for a contemporary dance company.



Focal point - how the new theatre will look on completion