

YORKSHIRE



Curtain rises on a bright new future

By GEOFF MELLOR

BRADFORD—once the butt of music hall comedians—is now bouncing back as a tourist centre.

The city is near to Haworth, home of the Brontës; the Dales are but a bus ride away, and the Worth Valley Railway gets enthusiasts from a wide area all steamed up.

In the city itself the National Museum of Photography attracts many visitors, with its historic exhibits, camera obscura, and Imax cinema with its giant screen.

Next door to the Photography Museum stands the Library Theatre, a small 395-seat venue mostly used by amateur organisations, but now apparently earmarked for Cinerama film shows. (I always thought Cinerama had its chips when the London Casino closed, but curator Colin Ford and his camera crew seem intent on reviving it in Bradford as a museum piece.)

What to do with the displaced amateurs is posing problems. The modernised St George's Hall which, together with the Alhambra, is part of the central theatres complex, with its 1,911 seats, is far too big. Other solutions are to be explored.

But the jewel in Bradford's crown is undoubtedly the magnificent 1,462-seat Alhambra Theatre, re-furbished at a cost of £9.5 million and re-opened in 1986.

The first ever supreme of Bradford's central theatres complex was Angela Hinchcliffe, who quit after three months 'for personal reasons'. Next

came the much travelled Peter Tod, who resigned last year to become boss of the re-vamped Birmingham Hippodrome. And now we have Anamaria Wills, who took up the post in September last year, fresh from the hot seat at the new Towngate Theatre in Basildon, where she was Theatre Director.

Married, with a young family, Anamaria was the only woman on the short list of six selected applicants for the position of General Manager. Before Basildon she was head of the marketing department at the National Theatre in London, and this will be an important link if the latter makes Bradford its northern base.

Anamaria welcomed me to her smart office high up in the Alhambra Theatre and told me of her ambitious plans for theatre in Bradford. (I knew from previous press statements that she considered the Alhambra to be the most important regional theatre in Britain.)

I also knew that she considered Peter Tod 'a hard act to follow', but the lady is getting down to organising exciting events for the nineties. She is delighted at the refurbished Alhambra and recognises her job will be a challenge.

One of the first things she tackled upon taking control was to appoint a Head of Sales and Marketing, the motive being to build upon the commercial policy begun by her predecessor. "Not only sponsorship, but also Business Services providing special facilities for corporate entertaining, conferences, etc., will be an important part of the brief", said Anamaria.

Mrs Wills approves of the joint campaign between business in the cities and the council, 'Bradford Bouncing Back'. She said: "I am responsible for both the Alhambra Theatre and the St George's Concert Hall and together they will make a substantial contribution to the cultural life of Bradford. That in turn has a major impact on the resurgence of this city. Along with an increasing number of cities in the UK, Bradford understands that support for the arts is, to quote Richard Eyre: 'A sign of confidence in our own culture and society'."

She continued: "Over the next few years I hope to develop certain areas of the programme: opera and contemporary dance, particularly, at the Alhambra. For the St George's, a major re-aim to re-establish it as one of the city's most successful concert halls."

Mrs Wills added: "I have a driving need to establish the creation of new work in the theatres and am talking to a number of producing companies. Another preoccupation is to develop our work in multi-cultural arts, and to create strong links with our varied communities through a pioneering programme of outreach work in which we hope Yorkshire Arts will also be involved."

I pressed her about pantomimes—an important feature of theatre here in West Yorkshire—as she has already discovered.

She said: "This is a new field for me. While 'Cinderella' has been running here, I have been dashing round the country, taking in almost every pantomime in sight. It has been highly educational...!"

The Lyceum Theatre in Sheffield undergoes a complete transformation as the builders get to work.

Steel City stakes its claim

PETER HEPPLER reports from Sheffield where a bold initiative aims to propel the city on to the centre stage of European culture

THE CLAIM of the Leeds West Yorkshire Playhouse for the title of "National Theatre of the North" is being disputed in Sheffield, for the same description is being applied to the developments taking place in the centre of the Steel City.

Actually there is plenty of justification in both cases, for whereas the West Riding Playhouse may have more surface similarities with the South Bank, the Sheffield project is possibly the more audacious, the creation of an "arts square", which is aimed to rival any in Europe, incorporating the 17-year-old Crucible, which has its own 200-seat studio, the Graves Art Gallery, the Library Complex, which has a theatre used mainly by amateurs, the award-winning Ruskin Museum and what its appeal director Peter Johnson describes as "a brand new Victorian theatre", the completely restored Lyceum Theatre, empty since 1968 after a period as a rock venue. With a new Novotel hotel adjacent to the square, craft galleries, bars and restaurants, space for street entertain-

ment and paved terraces at different levels. Tudor Square is intended as a magnet not only for the people of Sheffield, England's fourth city in population, but for the rest of Yorkshire and the North Midlands and British and overseas visitors.

It is due to be completed in time for the 1991 World Student Games. Universities, for which the city has been preparing for several years, constructing a new stadium and swimming pool, restoring existing facilities and getting ready to convert the massive blocks of sixties flats which are not one of Sheffield's beauty spots into accommodation for the contestants.

In all the scheme has made Sheffield the envy of several other Northern cities and will do much to upgrade its image as an industrial, cultural and sporting centre.

But in many ways the Lyceum will be the centrepiece, standing proud before the games are over and indeed aiming to open shortly before this Christmas, not with a pantomime, for which the theatre was formerly renowned, because the Crucible has now established its own highly profitable pantomime tradition.

The relationship with the Crucible, which will be under the same management when Stephen Barry arrives to

take up his appointment at both theatres in May, will be intriguing, but speculation is fruitless. Despite the fact that both Clare Venables, the artistic director, and administrator Geoffrey Rowe, who has been heavily involved in the restoration of the Lyceum, are leaving, there is little likelihood of the Crucible moving downmarket, destroying the reputation for innovative and exciting theatre which Clare Venables has brought to it over the past ten years.

But there is no doubt that the two theatres will have to be complementary. The Lyceum, which was an old-style touring theatre, taking in musicals, West End successes and drawing crowds from miles around to its pantomime, has been substantially upgraded.

Sheffield people, who for years have had to travel 40 or 50 miles to see opera, ballet and big musicals, will now have them brought to their doorstep. Opera North has already pencilled in the dates, and so probably have the other major arts organisations.

As restorations go, the Lyceum is probably the most expensive yet carried out in this country, costing nearly £12 million, nearly £3 million more than the Theatre Royal, Newcastle, just over two years ago. But probably

more has to be done, for in addition to the internal work, under the supervision of leading theatre architect Nick Thompson of Renton Howard Wood Levin and his interior designer wife Clare Ferraby, considerable additions have been made.

The stage is being enlarged to 144 square metres, a new fly tower is being constructed, and there are larger and better dressing rooms, scenery stores and orchestra pit.

The exterior will, however, preserve the Victorian appearance of the theatre, which was designed by W. G. R. Sprague. The Lyceum is in fact his only surviving work outside London, though in the West End he is represented by Wyndham's, the Strand, the Albery, the Aldwych and the Ambassadors.

Like some of Sprague's London theatres, the Lyceum is notable for its corner entrance under a doomed tower, which was formerly topped by a gilded Mercury, this too being replaced. It is designed in conventional style with stalls, circle and gallery (into which a thousand people were crammed in the old days), and one of its features are the bow-fronted boxes which will be used again, save for those at gallery level which will house lighting equipment.

One pleasant part of Peter Johnson's fund-raising task has been the alacrity with which many local businesses and industries have responded to his pleas for sponsorship, including providing a handsome hospitality room, the theatre boxes and individual or rows of seats.

One major windfall has been a grant of £4 million from the European Community, the largest given so far to a theatre in the UK. The rest is being provided chiefly by Sheffield City Council and is administered by the Lyceum Theatre Trust.

What Sheffield has taken on board to its fullest extent is the idea that the arts have the ability to generate interest in the city. Conscious of the fact that Sheffield lacked a city centre of stature, the arts complex is also seen as actively creating jobs, both in the 1,200-seater Lyceum itself but also in the ancillary activities in Tudor Square, not forgetting the nearby hotel.

It is hoped that at least 300,000 people will purchase tickets each year for the Lyceum alone, and there are another 1,200 seats to fill each night in the Crucible's two auditoria. A daunting task indeed, but one which is being faced up to with the optimism.

Sheffield thinks it has conceived the boldest plan for the performing arts since the building of the South Bank. By the end of the year it is hoped that the rest of Britain will agree.