

## Thanks for the Memory



2003: An amateur theatre in Eltham, South London, is mourning the death of its namesake, Bob Hope. The legendary American actor-comedian has died just a few weeks after his 100th birthday. Bob Hope was born in Eltham but his family moved to Ohio, USA when he was just four years old. He trained in vaudeville, and became increasingly well-known through his film, television and radio work. With Bing Crosby, he created one of the big screen's most memorable partnerships, with such classic comedies as "Road to Singapore".

He was a close friend of many US presidents, including Kennedy, Nixon, Ford and Reagan, and was especially known for his tireless work entertaining American troops wherever they were stationed around the world. He was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honour in 1962 and received an honorary knighthood from the Queen in 1998. He never forgot his birth-place and in response to a call for help, he rescued the Eltham Little Theatre from closure. When its church landlords raised the rent, he raised £58,000 through a series of charity golf games. It was renamed the Bob Hope Theatre in 1982. Two certificates hang in the bar of the theatre bearing his name and that of the former US president Gerald Ford, proclaiming them honorary co-presidents of the place.

## Dame Helen Mirren

2003: Helen Mirren, much praised actress with the RSC, has been made a Dame of the British Empire.

The Theatres Trust has carried out an in-depth survey of all forty-two central West End Theatres and has produced a Report with some disturbing results. Of all the theatres surveyed:

- 60% have seats with restricted viewing
- 48% have inadequate bars and foyers
- 40% need major restoration to achieve basic safety standards
- 26% have insufficient legroom

The Report concentrates on front-of-house and public services, but, in passing, makes some shocking observations on the state of backstage facilities. The Trust estimates that some £250 million will be needed over next 15 years to make West End theatres safe, usable and attractive.

When it pours with rain, the stage of the Old Vic gets wet. Although the auditorium underwent a big cosmetic facelift under Ed Mirvish in 1984, backstage has never been refurbished in its 189 years and the roof still leaks from the damage caused by a Second World War bomb. It would all take an estimated £25 million to fix. The Garrick Theatre has not been technically updated since it was built in 1889 and all the West End venues built before the use of steel and the introduction of "cantilever" balconies in around 1890 have views obscured by pillars. Even the most modern-looking venues are anything but. The Adelphi looks like a 1930s building but is essentially a re-modelling of a 1901 re-modelling of buildings dating back to 1858 when bars were not intended for female use - hence the shortage of lavatories.

Sir Cameron Mackintosh, owner of seven West End venues, and the Ambassador Theatre Group, owners of 10, have started to act. Sir Cameron is instituting a 75p per ticket renovation surcharge, initially at the Prince of Wales and the Prince Edward, and eventually at all his theatres. This levy will be used for improvements. However, the money this will raise in the foreseeable future will only begin to address the most urgent needs. Fortunately Sir Cameron's separate success as a producer has enabled him to donate around £20 million of his own money back into his theatre stock. Major improvements are planned for the Strand and the Prince of Wales—but this leaves many West End theatres in serious need.

## Dame Thora on a Stairlift to Heaven

2003: Dame Thora Hird, one of the best-loved actresses of British Theatre, has died at the age of 91. Born into a theatrical family in Morecambe, she made her debut at eight weeks old, carried onstage in the arms of her actress mother. She started performing at the age of three, singing for wounded First World War soldiers, and often appeared at Morecambe's Royalty Theatre where her father worked as a stage manager.

Throughout her long career, she appeared in hundreds of stage performances, but first came to prominence in a series of 1940s films, playing feisty working class women - such as maids, landladies, clerks and the like - and adopting a wide range of regional accents. Her many films included "The Courtneys of Curzon Street", "The Galloping Major", "Sailor Beware", "The Entertainer" and "A Kind of Loving".

In the 1980s her friendship with playwright Alan Bennett led to him writing numerous television plays especially for her, and in 1987 she won the BAFTA Best Actress Award for "A Cream Cracker Under the Settee" - one of Bennett's "Talking Heads" series. Other TV roles included most famously her 19 years as Edie Pengden in "Last of the Summer Wine" and the series of religious programmes which she hosted. She was created a Dame in 1993. She is always associated in the public mind with Stannah chair-lifts, following a series of TV commercials she made - except the commercials were for Churchill stairlifts, not Stannah - to the chagrin of the Churchill and delight of the Stannah people.



Clare Brooks

## New artistic regime at the National

2003: Sir Trevor Nunn is leaving the National Theatre after six years at its head—prior to which he was artistic director of the RSC for 18 years. His many successes at the RNT have been eclipsed by his successes in the commercial West End Theatre—"Les Miserables", "Cats" and "My Fair Lady" among them. However, the National has earned considerable sums from its West End transfers, and his resignation is a great loss to the South Bank venue. His successor, Nicholas Hytner, has opened his reign with a modern dress "Henry V" with a black actor, Adrian Lester, in the lead role. Emphasising some parallels with the Iraq War, which ended just three months ago, this has been a much-praised, exciting and challenging start to the new regime.