

Temporary and portable venues can help make theater more accessible, flexible and varied

The Rose Theatre in York is a temporary theater intended as the centerpiece for a Shakespeare festival



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“It makes everything more DIY, opening up theater to more people”

James Grieve, Paines Plough



LANDING ANYWHERE

Using a 22m (72ft) diameter circular venue, UK theater company HighTide says it can stage theater anywhere from densely populated cities to remote seaside towns. Previous sites include on the beach in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, and between the high street and underground station in Walthamstow, London. The structure, known as The Mix, has flexible, multicolored seating designed by Felix de Pass and holds 267 people. The group has described its otherworldly look as “like a spaceship”.

There is a trend to stage shows in pop-up theaters, which often attract younger audiences to watch innovative performances in unconventional venues. The pop-up concept encompasses a wide range of spaces, although there’s a common desire to create a sense of excitement about theater and involve local communities.

Pop-up theaters in 2018 include a 950-seat replica of Shakespeare’s Rose Theatre, which will stage four of the Bard’s plays in York, UK. On a more bijou scale, the touring company Paines Plough’s 168-seat Roundabout Theatre will travel as flat-packed furniture and be erected in a day in eight remote venues in the UK.

Food and music festivals

James Grieve, joint artistic director of Paines Plough, connects the enthusiasm for pop-up venues to wider trends. “Food has led the way,” he says. “You can’t move in London for pop-up markets or street food vendors. It makes everything more DIY, opening up theater to more people. The pop-up spirit is

also connected to music festival culture. You see theater tents, poetry tents and temporary stages built in forests. There’s a realization that a play performed in sacks in a clearing can be as good as one costing £50 (US\$66) a ticket at the National Theatre.”

Paines Plough’s idea was to visit areas currently unserved by touring companies. To create the portable venue, in 2014, it commissioned theater designer Lucy Osborne and lighting expert Howard Eaton to collaborate on the project. The price tag of £500,000 (US\$666,000) was considerable for a charitable organization, but Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber stepped in to provide a lot of the funding. Grieve expects the Roundabout to be in use for 10 years and reckons that £50,000 (US\$66,000) per year is “great value” for a theatrical venue.

Easy assembly

Grieve says the Roundabout can be put together by two people. The roof is hand-winchd onto three goalposts, and the auditorium is pieced together underneath. Inside, panels contain 627

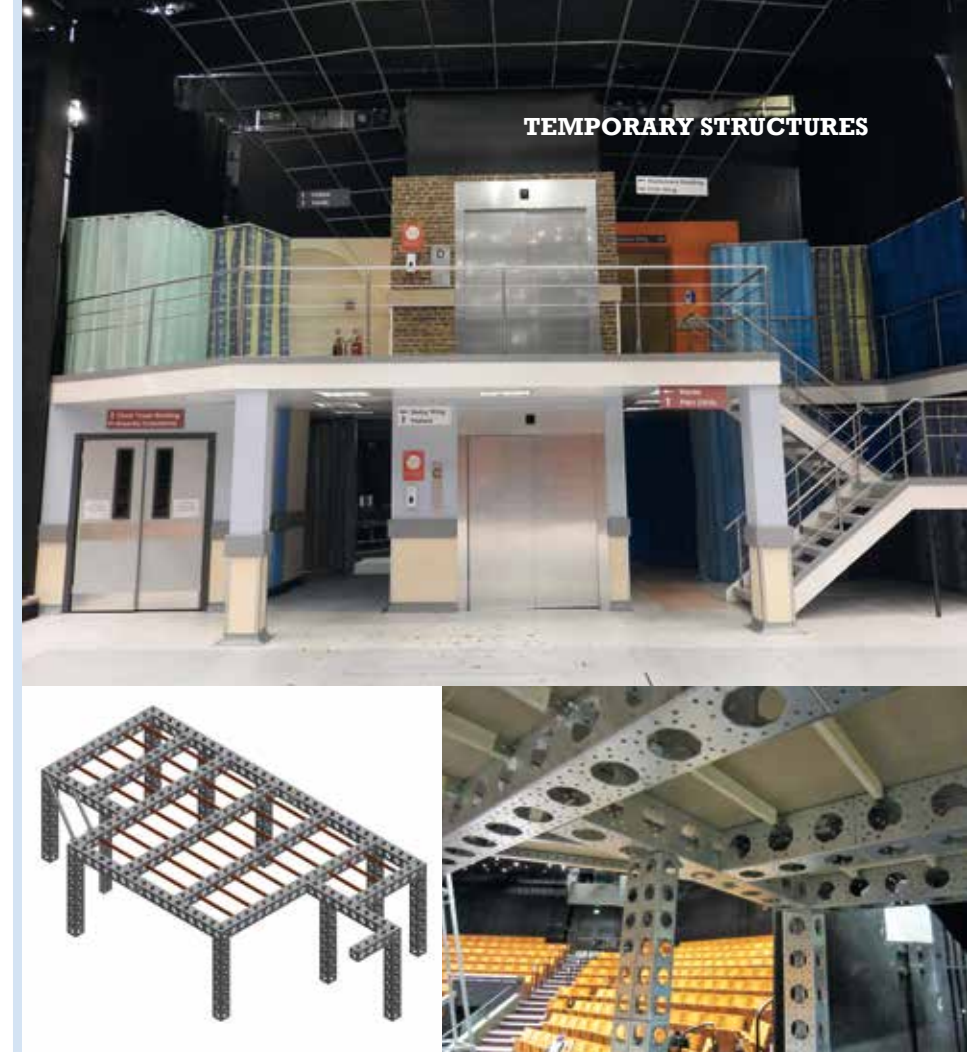


Opposite page and above: Paines Plough’s 168-seat Roundabout Theatre will travel, flat-packed, to eight remote UK venues
Right: Triple E’s ModTruss construction system is perhaps best thought of as “full-size Meccano”. Designed to create portable venues, it can also help create sets within fixed spaces

specially designed dimmable LED lights. “The lighting helps create a highly charged, intimate space,” says Grieve. “We strip productions right back, using no more than four actors. There’s a reliance on actor, text, lighting and sound because the space is just 4.6m (15ft) in diameter. We’ve performed plays in jeans and T-shirts. The advantage is that the audience is right on top of the actors. This year, we put on Duncan Macmillan’s play *Lungs*, about a couple trying to decide whether to have a baby, and it felt like the audience was involved in the conversation.”

The common element to Paines Plough’s projects is its ambition to involve local communities. “We are there for a week, so we ask people what they want from the space,” says Grieve. “We normally put on about 20

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MODULAR SET CONSTRUCTION

The same infrastructure that can create portable venues can also be used to create sets within fixed spaces. Triple E’s ModTruss construction system has been used for everything from installations at the Royal Opera House and Ballet Rambert, to a portable venue for Pleasance Beside – see page 98 for more details. In xxxx 2018, the system will be used to combine a rooftop bar with a fairground Helter Skelter on George Street in Edinburgh, UK. This installation is being created in partnership with Assembly Festival.

The system is best thought of as full-size Meccano. One notable project saw ModTruss used to build a theater set for a 2016 production at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, UK – its first use as a structural piece of scenery in the country.

The structure was a 37 x 19ft (11.3 x 5.7m) platform on 8ft (2.4m) uprights and used the three available sizes of ModTruss – 3in (7.6cm), 6in (15.2cm) and 12in (30.5cm). The front span of the set had to be 18ft (5.5m) and could only be supported between two points. According to Triple E, a 12in ModTruss beam was the only product available that could do the span without having a frontage deeper than 12in (30.5cm), as per the design brief.

The company reports that the lighting department appreciated the way the repeating hole pattern enabled it to quickly and easily install suspended scaffolding tubes on half couplers or suspend lighting fixtures directly from the beams at any point on the structure. The ModTruss also enabled certain fixtures to be hidden within the structure, leaving clean lines on the faux ceiling underside.

Cable management is always a big task on a set. With ModTruss, the cables can be run inside the beams, leaving no trip hazards. Installers need only cut a hole in the show floor to have a socket in exactly the right place.

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events, from history groups to pensioners' tea dances and children's dancing."

Pop-up Shakespeare

The Rose Theatre in York is on a much larger scale – it has 600 covered seats and 350 uncovered ones – but there are parallels with the spirit of the Roundabout. The stage has been designed so no spectator is more than 15m (49ft) from the actors, creating a “sense of immediacy”, according to James Cundall, whose ancestor Henry Condell edited and published Shakespeare's *First Folio*, and who is chief executive of Lunchbox Theatrical Productions, which is putting on the festival. “It's an open-air experience as in Shakespeare's day,” he says. “The actors can use audience entrances and perform in the groundling area. The audience can become props, increasing their involvement. We want to get back to how Elizabethans performed theater. It's about taking audiences into a different realm.”

An Elizabethan village will surround the stage, hosting free entertainments all day long, including storytelling. There will be a recreation of an Elizabethan garden and themed food. One ambition is inclusivity, and Cundall has invited 3,000 children from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend free performances.

Historic replica

The theater is a full-size replica of the Rose Theatre, which was built in 1587 on London's South Bank, and rediscovered in 1989. Recreating it using layered scaffolding was a challenge. Cundall approached specialist contractor Acorn Event Structures with sketches of the original theater.

Acorn's engineers had designed pop-up theaters before, but not on this scale. They calculated that it required 1,500m² (16,000ft²) of cladding and 30,000m (100,000ft) of tubes. In all,

“We want to get back to how Elizabethans performed theater; it's about taking audiences into a different realm”

James Cundall, Rose Theatre



Above: **The Rose Theatre is a replica of the 1587 original**
Right: **Although designed as a stop-gap solution, The Shed**
graced London's Southbank
for three years

Below: **The Chicago Shakespeare Theater has recreated the spirit of the pop-up in a permanent venue**

60 tons of equipment would have to be taken to the site and 50 workers hired for three weeks to erect it. “It's complex because the structure has 13 sides,” says Cundall. “Although the engineers could use CAD software, they couldn't be certain their calculations were right. To make sure everything was okay, we paid for Acorn to build it in their yard as a trial. Once they did, we lowered the whole structure by 0.5m (1.6ft).”



Chicago Shakespeare.



GAINING NEW AUDIENCES

The National Theatre in London, UK, helped fuel the country's enthusiasm for pop-up theater when it attached a temporary red box called The Shed to the outside of its main building in 2013. The Shed was intended as a stop-gap solution, but it ended up staging work for three years.

Theater at the National tends to appeal to a limited demographic, largely white, middle class and older audiences. But 34% of The Shed's audiences were under 35 and there was greater diversity among them than the main venue usually sees.

Staging the festival is a financial gamble, Cundall admits. To recoup the cost of more than £2.5m (US\$3.3m), the company must sell a lot of tickets for *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, Cundall believes the novelty will appeal and observes that York welcomes 7.5 million tourists a year. “If it works, I'll take the idea overseas and maybe come back to York next year,” he says.

An underused space

In the USA, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater (CST) has recreated the improvisational spirit of the pop-up concept in a permanent venue on Navy Pier, on Lake Michigan. The Yard Theatre has nine movable towers that can be endlessly reconfigured. Each has three stories of seating, weighs 16 tons and is as tall as a double-decker bus is long. Despite their size and weight, they are easy to move on a low-tech system of casters.

Chris Plevin, CST's director of production, says the outer layer of towers define the room's

volume. At its largest, the Yard has 850 seats, but the towers can be moved inwards away from the core walls to create a space with as few as 150 seats. “The flexibility of the tower arrangement is unprecedented,” he says. “We can put them in a circle and do theater-in-the-round or put half on each side and create a traverse configuration. Or we can arrange them in a horseshoe or a traditional proscenium.”

CST opened its first theater on Navy Pier in 1999, but soon outgrew the space. One idea was to house a new theater under a large white tent that covered an outdoor music venue next to the original CST theater. Moving to one of the pier's least used spaces would save millions of dollars compared with constructing a new theater.

Low maintenance

Four years ago, CST decided to make the move and turned to theatrical consultancy Charcoalblue to design the core and shell inside the tent. Show Canada, a theatrical scenery

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James Steinkamp Photography



Helen Maybanks



APPROPRIATE FOR THE WORK

In 2017, Underbelly Productions built a temporary theater at London's Marble Arch to stage *Five Guys Named Moe* (pictured), a play set in a New Orleans jazz bar. It was felt that traditional West End venues would have provided an inappropriate setting.

Underbelly designed a 607-seat wooden and canvas spiegel tent, creating an in-the-round performance space that was 26m (85ft) in diameter. The theater's dimensions enabled most of the audience to sit among the action, at cabaret tables.

Above: Nine movable towers mean that The Yard Theater in Chicago can be endlessly reconfigured

contractor, built the towers, each with its own electrical, sound, lighting and video systems. The price tag for the redesign was US\$35m, but Plevin says CST saves money in the long run. "Maintenance expenses are extraordinarily low as the failure rate is minimal and all parts are off-the-shelf so there's no costly customized equipment to maintain," he says. "If we want to add new towers to create new configurations in 10 years' time, we can build additional platforms to connect them to the core shell at low cost."

In its first season, The Yard Theatre has accommodated five productions – and five configurations. "For *The Tempest*, we used a large, traditional proscenium venue," says Plevin. "But we're also doing a hip-hop adaptation of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and the venue will be unrecognizable from the Shakespeare adaptations. We're pulling the towers closer together and removing the scaffold-deck risers to create a flat floor, reminiscent of the groundlings at The Globe. We've put in cabaret tables and it feels like a vibrant, intimate music venue." ■