Adeline Genee Theatre
East Grinstead
Surrey

Historic Building Recording and Investigation

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The Adeline Genee Theatre. East Grinstead

Summary

Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Town House Investments Ltd. to undertake a programme of historic building recording of the Adeline Genee Theatre at Charter Towers near East Grinstead, West Sussex. The theatre is to be demolished to enable the redevelopment of the site as a Continuing Care Retirement Community, and a recording condition has been placed to mitigate against the loss and to create a record for posterity.

The theatre, which was constructed in 1967 was named after the celebrated dancer Dame Adeline Genee and it was used by the adjacent Bush Davies School for its in-house shows. Although the school had a very high reputation, being among the best ballet schools in the country, it closed in 1989 together with the theatre, which had been financially insecure from its original construction. The theatre and the remaining site were purchased and used by a security firm, Sabrewatch. The building remains in good condition with minimal changes from its original function and has been well maintained.

The focus of the recording work was to complete a photographic record of the building internally and externally prior to the commencement of works. Historic plans were also obtained from the Tanbridge Council archives which were useful in illustrating the functions of areas and rooms. The structure is not protected under statutory designation, nor is it one of the best examples of post-war architecture, it is however of general interest in the history of theatre design.

The initial recording was undertaken in October 2010 but part of the basement was inaccessible at this time due to flooding so further recording of this area was undertaken in March 2011.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) were commissioned by Town House Investments Ltd. to carry out a programme of building recording on the Adeline Genee Theatre, East Grinstead. The theatre, which was part of the Bush Theatre Dance School, is due to be demolished as part of the redevelopment of the complex as a Continuing Care Retirement Community. Other buildings within the site will be retained including the impressive Victorian Manor House.

1.1.2 The Bush Theatre Dance School which opened in 1967 is located 1.2 miles to the north of East Grinstead, West Sussex (NGR – TQ 386 403) (Fig. 1). The site includes the impressive Victorian building, Charters Towers, which was the head of the school and a range of other buildings including a modern office and warehouse facility, a 1970s accommodation block, two residential dwellings (with associated outbuildings), a converted Lodge House, a modern warehouse, machinery store and a range of dilapidated former classroom blocks.

1.1.3 The theatre is not protected under statutory legislation (listing or scheduling). The building is however of interest in the history of theatre architecture, and because it will be lost the Theatres Trust and Tanbridge Council have requested that a recording condition is attached to the planning permission prior to redevelopment. The condition required a ‘full photographic internal record (including later technical installations) of the Adeline Genee Dance Theatre in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (English Heritage Level 3)’.

1.1.4 The main recording work was undertaken in October 2010 and a report detailing the results of this work was issued to the curators (Theatres Trust and Tanbridge Council) in November 2010 for their comments. When the recording was undertaken a basement (orchestra pit and Band Room) was inaccessible due to flooding and due to this the Theatres Trust requested that further recording be undertaken on this area prior to demolition. The Theatres Trust also requested that additional historical research be undertaken. The further site recording and research was undertaken in March 2011 and the current report forms a revised version of the November 2011 document to incorporate the additional information.

1.2 Aims and objectives

1.2.1 The overall aim of the project was to investigate and record for posterity the Adeline Genee Theatre in East Grinstead. The focus of this work was to complete a photographic record of the building internally and externally prior to the commencement of works. The other main aim was to create an ordered archive of the work which will be deposited at the appropriate local archive.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 The archaeological recording of the theatre comprised three main elements: a photographic record, a drawn record and a written record.

1.3.2 The photographic record was undertaken using 35 mm film (black and white prints) and digital photography. It included both general views of the structure and specific details. Digital images were used to provide illustrations to the final report.
1.3.3 The drawn record comprised existing plans provided by the client. Descriptive annotation was added to indicate construction, evidence relating to the structure’s use and any features of historical interest. Historic elevations and plans were also obtained from Tanbridge District Council which have been used in illustrating this report. The recording followed IFA standards and guidelines using conventions outlined in Understanding Historic Buildings: A Guide to Good Recording Practice (English Heritage 2006).

1.3.4 The written record (the final report) complements the photographic record and includes a brief description of the fabric and features and an analysis of the buildings construction, function and development and relationship.

1.3.5 Historical research was also undertaken at the Tanbridge District Council Planning Archives and at the East Grinstead Library. Material held within the planning archives was particularly useful because it included a series of primary architects drawings showing plans and elevations of the theatre.

2 Historical Background

2.1.1 The information below is largely taken from a variety of newspaper clippings held in files at the East Grinstead Library.

2.1.2 The Adeline Genee Theatre was designed by W Kemp of W B Starr architects, and the construction was undertaken by John Wyckham of Clifford & Carmen. Its opening in January 1967 was a star-studded event with a Royal Gala performance attended by the Earl of Snowdon, Dame Margot Fonteyn and HRH Princess Margaret (www.theargus.co.uk).

2.1.3 The theatre was named after the celebrated dancer Dame Adeline Genee who died three years after its opening in 1970 aged 92. Dame Adeline had a long and industrious career as a dancer, starring at the Empire Palace of Varieties in Leicester Square for more than 13 years. Throughout the war she remained the head of the Royal Academy of Dance, and in 1950 was honoured with a DBE (www.rad.org.uk).

2.1.4 The theatre was used by the adjacent Bush Davies school for their in-house shows although it was in separate ownership. The Bush Davies School was the largest residential school specialising in classical ballet in the western world. Its origins lay in the establishment of a small dance studio in Nottingham, in 1914, by Pauline and Noreen Bush and in 1939 it amalgamated with a day school that Marjorie Davies had formed in Romford in 1932. The new school had premises in Oxford Street in London but in 1945 they moved to Charters Towers (East Grinstead Courier, Nov 3 1988).

2.1.5 It appears that from its outset maintaining the financial viability of the Adeline Genee Theatre was a major difficulty, partly caused by its small size (330 seats) which made its too small for many potential sources of grants. Another issue was the fact that it was not owned by the school which meant that although at times the school did subsidise the theatre it was not principally responsible for its maintenance. The theatre was run largely using voluntary staff and although this must have reduced running costs a financial crisis had developed by 1979 which threatened its survival. At this time the school spent £250,000 on the theatre and took control of its operations in an attempt to attempt to make it viable.

2.1.6 Various newspaper clippings from the mid 1980s suggest that the theatre was well used and to some extent successful during this period. In 1986 it had a very full programme but it was decided that this had been too demanding for the volunteer staff and the programme was drastically reduced in the following year. There was another busy year in
1988 but the fact that the theatre was still unable to cover its costs, even in successful periods, perhaps showed how unsustainable the situation was. One of the principal difficulties appears to have been the inability to maintain the very high standards of the school.

2.1.7 In 1989 the Bush Davies school closed and although the theatre was a separate concern, owned by the Brighton impresario Myles Byrne, there was clearly little future for the theatre without the school.

2.1.8 There were attempts by parent groups to save the theatre as well as by East Grinstead Council but the site was instead purchased by the security firm, Sabrewatch, and remained in their ownership until the recent purchase of the site by Town House Investments.

2.1.9 East Grinstead Council instead developed a new theatre in East Grinstead, the Chequer Mead.

3 SIGNIFICANCE

3.1.1 The theatre is not protected under statutory designation (listing or scheduling). It is not considered to be one of the best post-war examples of theatre architecture, but it has been well maintained and remains in good condition.

4 DESCRIPTION

4.1.1 General

4.1.2 The Adeline Genee Theatre is of the style and construction typical of the 1960s, although it is not a particularly significant example of architecture of this period (Plate 1). It has a rectilinear exterior in stretcher bond brick with white concrete bands providing architectural embellishment to the exterior, and an asphalt roof. The tall fly tower above the stage clad in corrugated metal adds considerable height (c. 12m) and volume to the building commensurate with its former function (Fig. 2) (Plate 2). The audience accessed the building through the glass and brick fronted north-west elevation, which provided access to a staircase leading to the upper foyer and the auditorium. This has seating for 330 in a single rake with a wide proscenium and stage to the south-east, surrounding this are the dressing rooms and offices of the performers and staff at ground and first floor levels. A band room and orchestra pit were located within the basement (Fig. 3).

4.1.3 A series of plans and elevations of the theatre were obtained from Tanbridge District Council archives which largely date from 1965. These were useful in illustrating the external elevations as well as the functions of the rooms internally, and have been reproduced as figures in this report (Fig. 2-10). These also show that a linear extension was added to the south-east elevation at ground and first floor levels, directly to the rear of the fly-passage. Figure 3 shows the theatre prior to extension, whilst Figure 4 is a contemporary plan of the structure following the later addition.

4.1.4 External

4.1.5 The north-west elevation would have been the main public entrance to the theatre. It has a mainly glazed façade with a canopy over steps leading up to double doors at the entrance and a narrower set back upper storey (Fig. 5) (see Plate 1). The double entrance doors consist of two sets of doors with single glass rectangular panes, with further decorative static glass panes to each side. The elevation consists of six rectangular glazed
sections defined by concrete bands painted white. This detailing also runs along the top of the elevation and towards its base. Each of the six sections is subdivided into six smaller rectangular sections divided by timber frames, which are mainly decorative as the majority of the sections do not function as windows.

4.1.6 The south-west elevation provided access to the performers entrance at the south-east end of the elevation and this has 'The adventure begins' printed in black above the door (Fig. 6) (Plates 2 and 3). The elevation is dominated by a large white fly tower, which is clad in corrugated metal with twelve square windows at its height in three sections below the flat roof. This accommodates the internal stage, dwarfing the single storey brick projection at the south-west half of the elevation, which has a flat asphalt roof above seven small rectangular windows (Plate 4). Internally, this is used as sanitary areas and dressing rooms for the performers. At the south-east end of the elevation is a large rectangular steel roller shutter with a concrete lintel which provides access to the store (see Plate 3). This is an addition to the elevation which was constructed with the linear extension to the south-east elevation, at the rear of the fly passage. Figure 6 illustrates the elevation prior to this extension, whilst Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the later addition.

4.1.7 At the same alignment and adjacent to the tower is a large windowless section with a sloping asphalt roof which accommodates the auditorium (Plate 5). At the north-west end of the elevation, the entrance lobby wraps around the building in the same alignment as the single storey entrance/fitting room area described above. This is featureless with the exception of three concrete white horizontal bands.

4.1.8 The north-east elevation was not constructed to be seen as it did not provide access for performers or the audience, it therefore in some respects lacks the uniformity of the other elevations with for example a small boiler room projecting from the elevation (Fig. 9) (Plate 6). It does however have the white horizontal bands, which is the main decorative feature of the theatre. The south-east end of the elevation is similar to the south-west elevation in having an entrance door within a single storey projection, which also accommodates the toilets and dressing rooms (Plate 7). It is of the same form with seven windows over which looms the fly tower above. The north-west end of the building is also of the same form as the south-west elevation, with the projecting entrance lobby extending around the structure to the east elevation. The south-east end of the elevation has been extended to the rear of the fly passage; Figure 9 illustrates the elevation prior to the extension at ground and first floor levels, Figures 7 and 8 show the later addition (Plate 8).

4.1.9 The south-east elevation has six windows with a top opening at first and second floor levels, with concrete lintels and banding running between the windows. This is a later extension that was added to provide workshops and offices for the theatre staff (Plate 9). Drawings dated 1965 (Figs. 7 and 8) show this addition, whilst Figure 10 depicts the elevation prior to extension. Otherwise it is a largely featureless brick elevation with no distinguishing features, which was also not constructed to be on public view.

4.1.10 Internal

4.1.11 Internally, the theatre is dominated by the auditorium to the north-west and stage with fly tower to the south-east (Figs. 3 and 4). The audience would have had access to the north-west of the building only where they would have entered at ground floor level, in which the cloakrooms and sanitary areas are also located. Stairs provided access to the foyer at first floor level, and the auditorium with tiered seating slopes down to the south-east meeting the stage at ground floor level. To the south-east, situated around the stage, are
those areas used only by performers and staff including dressing rooms, a store and offices both at ground floor and first floor level.

4.1.12

4.1.13 **Basement/orchestra pit**

4.1.14 In front of the stage is a sunken area which would have formed the orchestra pit. A rough floor has been constructed over this pit, presumably since the closure of the theatre and therefore this is now essentially a basement. The basement also has a second, adjacent main room (The Band Room) which would have been used by the orchestra for ancillary functions. The basement is reached via a staircase at the south-western end and adjacent to this are two further small rooms. The basement now suffers from flooding which has caused the condition of this area to deteriorate. A plan of the basement is included in Figure 4.

4.1.15 The main orchestra pit (Room A) is c.11.75 m long by 2.37 m wide and although it is broadly rectangular the plan tapers slightly at each end. The room is c.2.1 m tall up to the underside of the secondary floor joists which must have been added in recent years and which greatly alter the character and understanding of this space as a part of the auditorium. These secondary joists are of unpainted softwood while the floor of the pit is a concrete slab, covered in floor tiles which have partially peeled away due to the damp. The walls are of unplastered English bond brick, painted green, and at the top of the two long walls there is a band of concrete. The concrete at the top of the south-east wall would have formed the edge of the stage and it cantilevers over the wall between orchestra pit and band room by c.30 cm.

4.1.16 The room has very few primary features relating to the use of the area although there are two vents or heating ducts in the north-west wall. At the north-eastern end of the orchestra pit is a low wooden platform c.15 cm tall.

4.1.17 The Band Room (Room B) is in the south-eastern half of the basement and is either reached from the stairs to the south-west or through the interconnecting door in the wall adjoining the orchestra pit. The main body of the Band Room is 7.75 m long by 2.77 wide although at the south-western end there is also a narrower corridor. The floor of the Band Room is c.15 cm below that of the orchestra pit and the room has therefore suffered more than the Orchestra Pit from flooding. It has a concrete slab ceiling (the underside of the stage) which is supported by brick walls painted white and there are traces of floor tiles on the concrete floor.

4.1.18 This room appears to have been used in recent years for some form of pseudo-military 'war games'. There are seven notice boards with signs for 'small arms USA', 'Small arms; edged weapons', 'protected weapons' etc written on. There is also a long work bench with a camouflage design material over it and there are various pamphlets in the room relating to ammo reloading. There is also a reloading machine fixed to the bench.

4.1.19 At the south-western end of the Band Room are two smaller rooms adjacent to the narrow corridor which provides access from the foot of the stairs. The larger room appears to have been an electrical power or choke room while the other room was a small store.

4.1.20 **Ground Floor**

4.1.21 The **stage** is situated centrally within the building with the service areas such as dressing rooms, toilets and foyer situated around these two substantial areas (Plate 10). The stage is a basic open space with bare brick walls painted green/grey. A balcony extends mid-height on the east and west elevations which are accessed by two metal ladders along the north-east elevation (Plate 11). A circular ladder in the east corner extends the full height
of the elevation, whilst a shorter ladder in the north corner is situated next to the curtain pulley (Plate 12). A balcony running along the north-east elevation holds the ropes used to manoeuvre the fly gallery, which would have been lowered/highened as necessary for performances. Along the rear (south-east) wall is a black projection curtain above three fans at the north-east end, otherwise the elevation is of bare bricks painted green/grey (Plate 13).

4.1.22 The wood stage floor projects from the red and white stage curtain at the south-east end. There are two exit lobbies to the north-east and south-west of the curtain, aswell as a further two exits at seating level (Plate 14). In the south corner of the stage is a double entrance which is the main point of access for performers and staff entering the theatre. As described previously, above the external entrance door the words ‘The Adventure Begins’ are printed (see Plate 5). This door leads to an entrance lobby also providing access to the south-west dressing room and sanitary area which are described below. Opposite this on the north-east internal elevation a further door provides access to the north-east dressing rooms and sanitary areas. Two further doors along the south-east wall provide access to the corridor leading to the rear office rooms and store, also described below. The access doors are not of particular architectural merit but are standard functional plain wood doors of the period.

4.1.23 The performer’s dressing rooms and sanitary facilities are situated at the south-east end of the stage wrapping around the building to the north-east and south-west. At each side of the stage the plan and function of the rooms are identical, with two large dressing rooms to either side of the stage and further smaller ones to the south-east, these still contain the fixtures and fittings relating to their former use. The larger dressing rooms have six stations on each side with mirrors running above the benches and a small cupboard for each performer (Plate 15). Spot lights remain in situ giving the ambience of the room's former function, as does a rail running the length of the room for hanging costumes. Otherwise the fitting rooms are fairly basic, with brick walls painted green, a lino floor and a single shower, wash basin and water fountain. The smaller dressing rooms have the same characteristics but with places for two performers only. Basic male and female sanitary facilities are located to the east and west of the stage between the two sets of dressing rooms.

4.1.24 There is a fly passage running along the south-east end of the stage with a green concrete floor, white painted bricks walls and light bulbs hanging from the ceiling (Plate 16). This is accessed from the stage area by two doors with two additional doors to the rear of these providing access to a series of rooms at the south-east end of the building. The rooms to the rear (south-east) of the fly passage are a later addition as illustrated on Figures 7 and 8. These include offices at the north-east end of the building which are plain empty rooms used (north-east to south-west) as offices for the Stage Manager, Production Manager and Staff Room (Fig 8). These are basically decorated with white painted brick walls and carpeted floors.

4.1.25 A set of stairs situated roughly centrally between the offices and a workshop provide access to the first floor. The large workshop directly to the south-west was presumably used for storing and maintaining props and equipment for performances, it is a basic room with bare brick walls and a concrete floor containing tall shelving used for storage (Plate 17). The main entrance is at the south-west end which has large metal roller doors, which run the full height of the room through which large objects could easily be transported. There are a further two doors providing access to the room along the north-west and south-east walls. Light is provided by three roof lights.
4.1.26 At the north-west end of the theatre at ground floor level is the entrance foyer, which is typically 1960s in style, decorated in two tone grey with a grey lino floor and spot lights above (Plate 18). Steps lead up to the tiered seating at the north-east and south-west of the foyer, and an open cloaks areas is located further to the north-east and south-west. There is a pay desk to the south-west, and to the rear (south-east) of this is an office with a lino floor, internal brick painted light blue and steps leading up to meet the desk in the foyer (Plate 19).

4.1.27 Toilets are provided at the north-east and south-west which are accessed via a double set of doors, the first red door is of the same style as those in the upper foyer (described below), and the second wood panelled door has an ornate handle (Plate 20). The female toilets at the south-west of the foyer area has three W.Cs and three hand basins, and is decorated in two tone grey with numerous mirrors. The style is typically 1960s with consideration given to the aesthetics of the area, not afforded to the performer's sanitary area. The male W.Cs contain three urinals and a toilet.

4.1.28 Two sets of steps lead down to an open area from which access can be gained to plant rooms at the rear (south) of this area. The south-west plant room contains Dorma Smith isolators, and that to the north-east metal venting. Situated centrally between the plant rooms is a vaulted area which was not accessed at the time of investigation. It was also not possible to gain access to the basement due to flooding although drawings show this was used as Band Room and Orchestra Pit (Drawing no. 730/ 2A (June 1965).

4.1.29 The auditorium is separated into three sections of tiered seating divided by two galley ways with grey carpeted steps, the central area consists of 15 rows of 11 seats, and those to the north-east and south-west consist of 14 rows of 5 seats per row (Plate 21). The seats are red flip seats of standard design, however a number have been removed, as indicated by the resulting holes in the floor. To each side of the stage are fire exits separated by red curtains and a wide red proscenium arch above the stage (width 10.36m) (Plate 22). The rendered walls are painted grey and white which hold flood lights, whilst spot lights are evident in the ceiling. To the rear (north-west) of the seating area above the doors is the projection room. The steps rise to meet two doors providing access to the first floor upper foyer, through which the audience would have entered. Some architectural embellishment has been afforded to the doors which are clad in red fake leather with gold detailing and ornate handles (Plate 23). Within the foyer these are balanced on either side by single doors of the same style.

4.1.30 First Floor

4.1.31 The Upper Foyer is typically 1960s in style with large windows extending the full height of the north-west elevation creating a light space also painted in two tone grey (Plate 24). Access to this first floor area is via steps from the ground floor entrance, and is defined by a balustrade of plain wood rails supported on metal posts, which continue down the flight of steps to the ground floor. The symmetry of the railings and the large rectangular windows which form the north-west elevation communicate a typically 1960s style with clean defined lines. At the north-east end of the building is a white tiled area separated by a plastic folding room divider that was used as a Coffee Bar (shown on drawing W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects drawings/ undated/ un-numbered) (Plate 25). In the south-east corner of the foyer area is a small tiled kitchen with two sinks used for serving refreshments during performances.

4.1.32 At the south-east end of the building at first floor level are a series of basic staff rooms, which are accessed by the stairs to the north-east of the store room at ground floor level. These include a staff rest room with a kitchen area along the north-east wall, decorated
simply with brick walls painted white and a green carpet. A further wood panelled room adjacent to this also has a kitchen area along its south-west wall and a green carpet (Plate 26). This room also provides access to the roof from which it is possible to get a view of the fly tower.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1.1 Although the Adeline Genee Theatre is a building of only modest historical and architectural significance it is of some interest both in the field of post-war theatre design and also for the personal meaning that it will have to the many students who have been taught at the school. The site is being redeveloped but an archive photographic record has been made for posterity of the theatre prior to its demolition.
APPENDIX A. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Key Plans and Elevations (Tanbridge Council Archive)

- Drawing no. 730 (September 1966) W.B Starr Clifford & Carmen Architects
- Foundation plan (W.B Starr Clifford & Carmen Architects, drg. no. 730/2A) (June 1965)
- Long section and side elevation (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects) (undated)
- Plan (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects) (undated)
- North-west elevation (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects, drg no.730/8) (January 1965)
- South-west elevation (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects, drg no.730/9) (January 1965)
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- South-east extension (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects, drg no.730/20) (September 1966)
- North-east elevation (W.B Starr Clifford & Carman Architects, drg no.730/10) (January 1965)
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Plate 11: Adeline Genee Theatre, internal north-east view showing balcony and fly gallery within stage area

Plate 12: Adeline Genee Theatre, north-west view of north corner of stage showing curtain pulley and exit

Plate 13: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-east view of stage area showing projection curtain, balcony and exits

Plate 14: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-west view of stage and exit

Plates 11, 12, 13 and 14
Plate 15: Adeline Genee Theatre, internal west view of north-east dressing room

Plate 16: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-west view of Fly Passage
Plate 17: Adeline Genee Theatre, north-east view of Workshop

Plate 18: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-west view of ground floor foyer

Plates 17 and 18
Plate 19: Adeline Genee Theatre, south view of pay desk in ground floor foyer

Plate 20: Adeline Genee Theatre, south view of entrance to ground floor female W.C

Plate 21: Adeline Genee Theatre, north-west view of auditorium

Plates 19, 20 and 21
Plate 22: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-east view of auditorium

Plate 23: Adeline Genee Theatre, double door providing access to auditorium within first floor foyer

Plates 22 and 23
Plate 24: Adeline Genee Theatre, south-west view of first floor foyer

Plate 25: Adeline Genee Theatre, north-east view of first floor coffee bar
Plate 26: Adeline Genée Theatre, south-west view of first floor staff room

Plate 27: Orchestra pit from north-east
Plate 28: Orchestra pit from south-west

Plate 29: Towards Band Room from south-west

Plates 28 and 29
Plate 30: Band Room general from south-west.