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Twenty Theatres to See  
Before You Die  
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Penned in the Margins  
LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS  
Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB  
[www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk](http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk)

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International

ISBN  
978-1-908058-45-4

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*For Ros, who loved the world.*



There is something about empty theatres...  
yes, they're full!

JOHN BERGER

*Here is Where We Meet*



Twenty  
Theatres  
to See  
Before  
You Die

MULL THEATRE ISLE OF MULL

GRAND OPERA HOUSE BELFAST

MORECAMBE WINTER GARDENS THEATRE

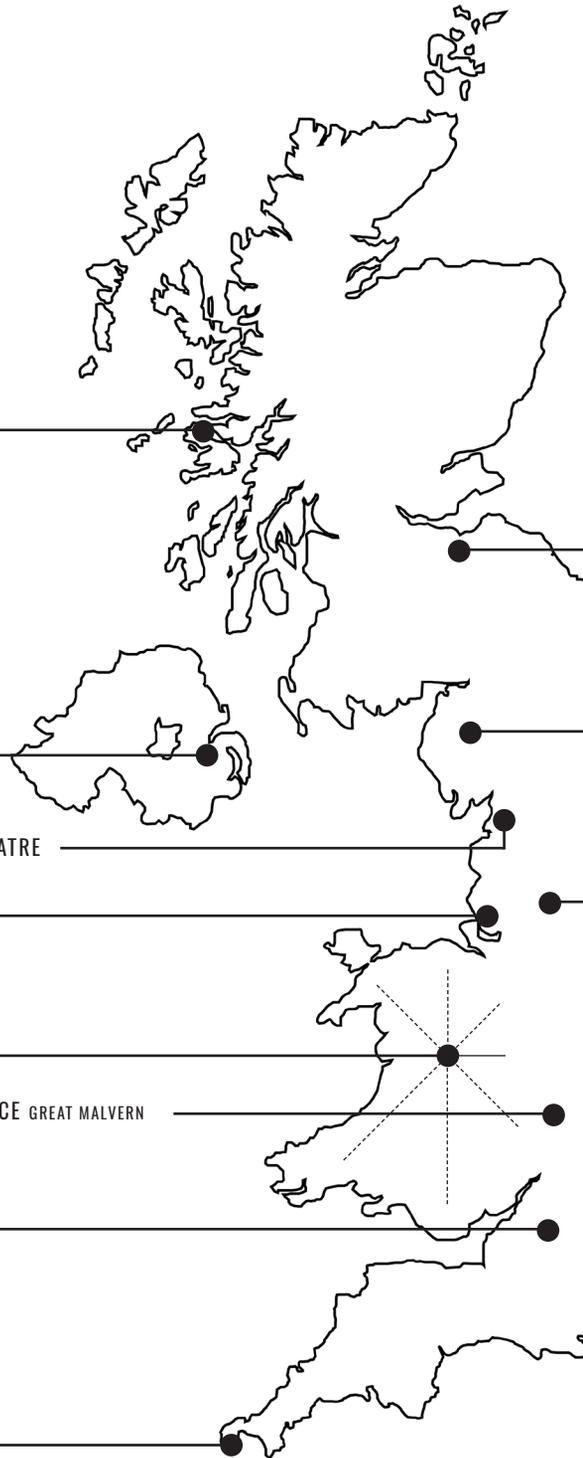
LIVERPOOL EVERYMAN

NATIONAL THEATRE WALES

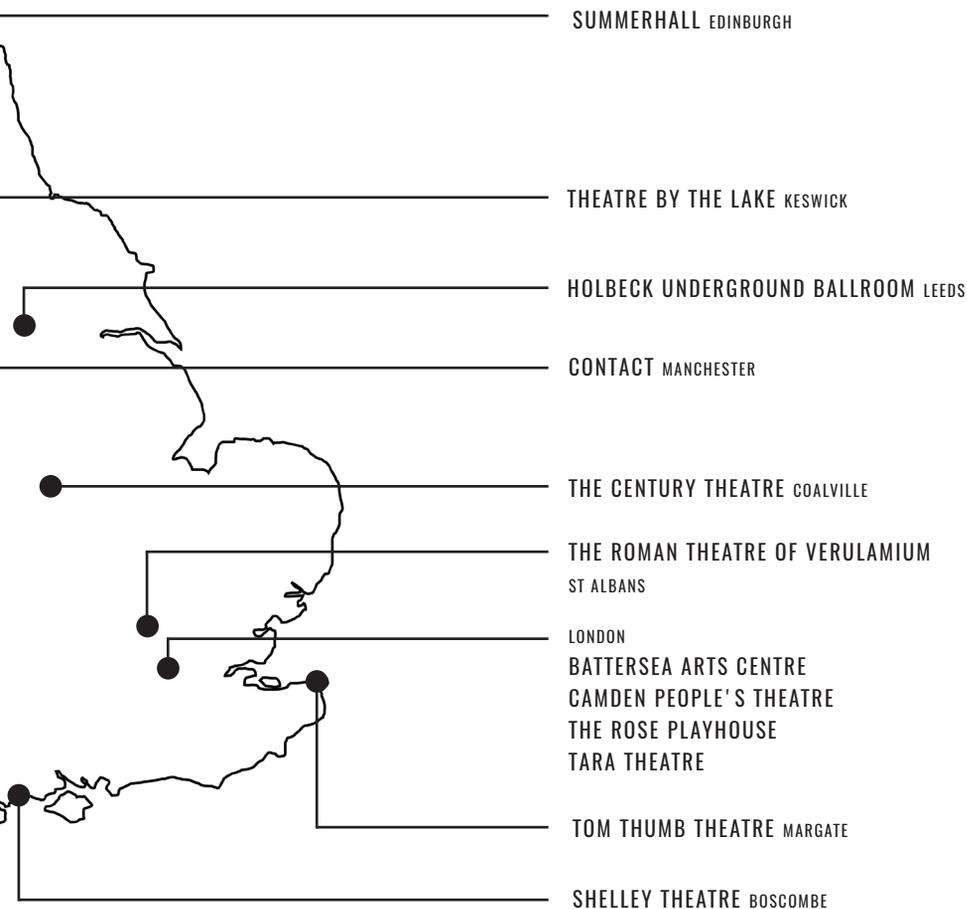
THE THEATRE OF SMALL CONVENIENCE GREAT MALVERN

THEATRE ROYAL BATH

THE MINACK THEATRE PORTHCUENO



# Twenty Theatres to See Before You Die





## INTRODUCTION

*Red velvet curtains. A chandelier. Golden plasterwork.  
Tip-up seating. Followspots. The rain. Celtic carvings.  
An earth floor. An eighties tower block. A country.  
A cow byre. The smell of formaldehyde. The ghost of  
Jack the Ripper. A bomb site. A sanctum. A Victorian  
gentleman's toilet. Soot stains. A golden telephone box.  
Four army surplus trailers.*



LET ME TELL YOU about this place.

The roof sprang leaks and the air conditioner broke down and the voices of passers-by disturbed the performances, penetrating the fire doors that opened directly from the stage to the street. In the foyer there was a beaten-up old piano no one could play, a wonky hatstand no one ever used and wobbly tables you couldn't set a drink on in confidence. Once, a ladies' community choir got trapped in the lift, moments before they were due on; the artistic director jimmed the door open and delivered them to the stage, breathless and giggling, just in time.

I was deeply in love. For all its shortcomings, this was a place of possibility. I watched Don Quijote stoke a revolution in makeshift cardboard armour here, and the minotaur reclaim their story as a glittery drag king cabaret. That it was rough around the edges was not, for me, incidental to its charm. It was, quite deliberately, set apart from the shiny façades of the surrounding high-rise office blocks and the exhausting commerce of central London. A clearing in the heart of the city.

The word for theatre comes from the Greek 'theáomai', meaning *to watch*. Or, better, *to behold*, which implies an exchange of sorts — as if theatre doesn't exist on the stage with the performers, but in the act of the audience taking possession of it. 'Theatre' is the word both for this movement of air and

for the site where it happens. The art is live, indivisible from its place.

During the two years I had been working at Camden People's Theatre, the truth of this had become apparent. No matter the care a director might give to the tilt of an actor's face or the timbre of a line, an audience's experience of the evening's entertainment was as much framed by how easily they had found the theatre, how comfortable the seats were, their memory of what had happened here before, or the stories they had heard about this oddball corner of Euston. The fabric of the theatre contained something distinctive: whatever happened could only happen right here. And if this was the case of our venue, I thought, wasn't every theatre crowded with its own influencing forces — each with a unique story to tell? As John Berger said of empty theatres: *yes, they are full.*

In 2016, I began plotting an adventure. It was the wake of the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, and in the fractious atmosphere of that summer I found myself thinking not only about the stories of Britain's theatres but also their purpose. 'Theatre is the most complacent place in the world,' one friend had written on Facebook, despondently, in the days following the referendum. The issue, it was true, had barely broken the surface of the nation's stages. Still, I could not be dissuaded of the idea that there was something that

theatres — only theatres — could offer us now. You can take any empty space and call it a bare stage, but it seemed to me extraordinary that up and down the country there are so many places designated for this purpose, citadels to self-expression, to big ideas and imagination and the electrifying power of people getting together in real time, in a real place to think about what it means to be human. But how, I wondered, do so many continue to thrive, despite the ongoing threat from funding cuts, reduced education in the arts, and a culture of instant online gratification?

There was only one way to be certain. I had to get on the road and find out for myself. What I had in mind was a freewheeling trip around Britain's most remarkable — and unusual — theatres. I wanted to get off the beaten track, finding the venues with a story worth the telling: theatres in unique settings and with fascinating histories; theatres that have thrived in unlikely circumstances or where people have, in one way or another, reimagined what a theatre might be.

I started planning my route by writing to 100 friends and colleagues with a simple question: what is your favourite theatre in this country? The responses proved revealing. In the emails, tweets and letters I received in the weeks that followed, certain venues appeared time and again: Cornwall's Minack; The Tom Thumb Theatre in Margate; The Watermill, Newbury; Mull Theatre and Keswick's Theatre by the Lake —

a catalogue defined by distinctive settings and which represents some of the best-loved playhouses in the country.

Many people suggested the places where they had hung out in their youth. For Theodore Bass it was the Playbox Theatre in Warwick. Eleanor Turney nominated Theatre Peckham and David Lockwood the Playhouse in Cheltenham. Matt Trueman wished to take me to ‘Grecker’ at Bradfield College — a replica Greek theatre carved from a disused chalk pit in the grounds of the school he had attended. They could not have meant so much to those of us who hadn’t snuck crafty fags in the fire escape or participated in ‘the Michaelmas Term tradition of Handshaking’. But no matter: these were first-love theatres and the passions they inspired were private and unconditional.

I took delight in discovering theatres I had never heard of before. The Shelley Theatre in Boscombe, for instance, which Danielle Rose told me was ‘built by a family of writers and activists’, or The Ashcroft in Fareham. ‘It’s a converted school with an ancient plane tree which grows up, over, and under the building,’ wrote Hannah Ashwell in her email to me. ‘The bricks of the building are covered in engraved initials. We’ve been an arts centre since Dame Peggy Ashcroft opened the building in 1989, but it’s much older than that.’

I received nominations for performance spaces that are not theatres at all. ‘A random village hall in Devon,’ suggested

David Lockwood. Laura Barnett proposed the recently formed National Theatre of Wales, which has made a virtue of being itinerant, creating a roving programme of Welsh productions that consider the entire nation their potential stage. Kate Cross suggested a roaming theatre in a caravan. Chris Goode suggested a theatre in the palm of his hand. These contrary nominations pointed to an uncomfortable truth that I would have to tackle: the deep associations theatres carry in their brickwork are not always entirely positive, and sometimes it is necessary to step outside in order to be free of them.

Theatres that are no longer there or are on the cusp of disappearing. The subterranean vaults of the Arches in Glasgow. The Broadway in Peterborough, which Rosie Curtis told me I must visit ‘before it is turned into luxury flats’ — a common refrain. Chester’s Roman amphitheatre, now little more than a stretch of parkland. I mourned, with Andy Field, ‘the delirious and utopian space that the Shunt Vaults once occupied in London Bridge — an impossible place behind a tiny hidden door from which many other spaces stole so much superficially whilst ignoring that it was not the exposed brickwork that made it special.’ That impossible place where we stayed up until dawn on Easter Sunday, where a bouncer found my boyfriend passed out in a tuk-tuk, and where I once mistook someone receiving a blowjob for performance art. We could never go back.

I realised that what I had in my possession was a kind of ‘anti-canon’ of theatres. Was I approaching, already, some fundamental truth about what defines a great theatre? As with the playhouse in the Victorian gentlemen’s public toilet, often it was its eccentricities that made a theatre special, rather than the plushness of its décor or the starriness of its line-up. Certainly it affirmed my impulse to be led, not by any attempt at a comprehensive overview of British theatres, but by my own curiosity.

Camden People’s Theatre even received a generous nomination, from Olly Hawes. ‘When I walk in, it always feels like I’m taking another step as part of some sort of crusade — here is a building that heroically supports the type of work I believe in,’ he wrote. Sometimes heroism really is as modest as sticking your hand down the back of a broken toilet, over and over again. Or is that insanity?

I put up a map on the drawing board above my desk and pinned little flags of torn white paper to it. Achieving a good geographical spread, I thought, was important. It would be easy to write only about theatres in London, but making the entire trip on my Oyster card would not have made for much of an adventure. I limited myself to four, sacrificing venues like Theatre Royal Stratford East and Shakespeare’s Globe after much deliberation, and eschewing the theatres of the West

End which, for all their beguiling glitter, would have felt at odds with the spirit of the nominations I'd received. I adopted three principles: firstly, the theatre should be in a building or location that was in some way unusual; secondly, that it must host public performances (albeit, in some instances, sporadically); and, thirdly, its story must speak to my sense of what theatres can mean to their communities.

Porthcurno to the Isle of Mull: a dot-to-dot journey across the country in a battered Morris Minor, alone and fancy-free. It didn't happen like that of course. Mostly, I crammed in my trips around running the theatre, sneaking off at weekends or claiming time off *in lieu*. One Friday evening, on a stuffy coach somewhere in the Midlands, as I gazed out at neat, semi-detached houses where someone had put a paddling pool out on a lawn, where school children strolled home licking ice lollies, their chins turning sticky in the sun, I questioned the ill-considered impulse that meant I was here, rather than sitting in a beer garden with my mates. But I was too far in. The only way out was through.

As I travelled around, the recommendations kept coming, and my list of theatres shifted. I received urgent tip-offs and pursued a breathless trail through Google. How could I have so nearly let this one slip through the net? Each recommendation was a gift, presented with care. Over a breakfast of salty bacon and eggs in a Keswick B&B, a dining room full of walkers

insisted I write down the names of the theatres they loved: Frank Matcham's Grand Opera House, Belfast; The Bush in west London; The Oldham Coliseum — everyone jostling to explain why their nominee was more deserving of being on the list than any other. A man at Caerleon Amphitheatre in Wales was adamant, when I spoke to him on the phone, that I shouldn't visit — 'It wasn't a theatre, really, they mainly killed animals here' — but told me about Verulamium, home to the oldest visible remains of a theatre in the country, and the next day I was on a train to St Albans. During a break in rehearsals, theatre-maker Caroline Horton casually mentioned an old 'theatre on wheels' that travelled around Britain in the 1950s, bringing performance to remote communities still reeling from the aftershock of war. It was a fantastical image, something out of post-apocalyptic literature. Only months later, while researching Theatre by the Lake in Keswick, did I join the dots. Soon afterwards I found myself in an abandoned industrial park in Leicestershire, performing the can-can to an empty auditorium.

There were so many theatres I couldn't fit in. I couldn't find purchase on the story of the much-loved Watermill Theatre in Berkshire, so I let it go. I became briefly obsessed with Plas Newydd in Anglesey, the country pile of Henry Cyril Paget, the 'dancing marquis' who converted his chapel into an ornate, 150-seater theatre and brought scandal to Victorian

society with his lavish lifestyle and extravagant theatrics. But through several telephone calls to the National Trust, I was persuaded that there was nothing to see — his successors had demolished the theatre.

What you hold in your hands, then, is the collection of theatres I arrived at through this slipshod approach. While I couldn't include all of the nominations, I hope the theatres I have chosen reflect the spirit of them. Undoubtedly, you will have your own views on the theatres I've included here: which I should have left out, which ones I've missed. Good. Start your own list. Have your own adventure. As much as this book is a love letter to the theatres contained in its pages, it is a celebration of all Britain's theatres. The Theatres Trust estimates there are over 1,300 of them.

I've arranged the chapters in an order that makes sense to me. Although *Twenty Theatres to See Before You Die* is not a comprehensive history, early on I've included five venues — the Roman Theatre at Verulamium in St Albans, The Rose Playhouse in Southwark, Theatre Royal Bath, the Grand Opera House, Belfast, and Liverpool's Everyman — that offer snapshots of distinctive periods in the development of British theatres.

Exploring my personal history with theatre leads me on to Battersea Arts Centre, where I found my footing after

moving to London aged 19. The fire that destroyed its Grand Hall in 2014 prompts wider reflection on the connections between theatres and the memories they contain.

Theatres, I began to discover, are often haunted places. I took a rather literal approach to exploring this notion when I joined an all-night ghost hunt in Morecambe's abandoned Winter Gardens. The themes of loss and mutability also resonate in my exploration of the theatre built by the son of Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley in Boscombe, Dorset.

The macabre setting of an old anatomy lecture hall in Edinburgh proves that theatres need not always be in venues specifically designed for the purpose. And if a theatre can be anywhere, why not in a disused Victorian gentlemen's toilet — as in the case of Malvern's Theatre of Small Convenience?

In chapters on Mull Theatre, Tara Theatre and Contact, I reflect on the bonds that form between theatres and the specific communities they serve. I then visit Slung Low's Holbeck Underground Ballroom in Leeds, Century Theatre, Theatre by the Lake, Margate's diminutive Tom Thumb Theatre and National Theatre Wales — each one an example of how people have, in one way or another, radically rethought what a theatre can be.

Finally, inevitably, I return to my own shambolic, lovely Camden People's Theatre, animated by a renewed belief in the importance of sustaining these buildings. Even, perhaps

especially, those theatres where the roof leaks and the lift breaks down. Where nothing seems to work but anything is possible.

But first, on the south-west tip of Great Britain: a story that epitomises the unwavering love for theatre that has motivated so many of the characters contained herein; indeed, the same love that motivates me.

An implausible tower. Seaspray. Barbed wire. Sorcery. An upturned wheelbarrow. Loved ones lost at sea.



1

## THE MINACK THEATRE

*Porthcurno, Cornwall*



*An implausible tower. Seaspray. Barbed wire. Sorcery.  
An upturned wheelbarrow. Loved ones lost at sea.*



ON THE BEACH AT ST IVES, a man is building implausible towers. He chooses the largest stones, great grey seals scattered across the shore that have been weathered smooth by time and motion, bending his knees beneath the heft of them. Then — with a pace that's either meditative or agonising depending on your disposition — he balances the stones on top of each other, moving with his breath to find the smallest contact point, a hair's width from tipping.

I join the audience that has gathered on the promenade. Together we watch him, momentarily captivated by his feat. We murmur into little ripples of applause after each balancing act. Some purchase postcards from his wife at a stand nearby. The towers begin their unlikely ascent to the sky.

We have long been infatuated with towers; the spectacle of them, the reminder of how far our grasp might stretch. A tower is a symbol of perseverance and defiance, a human disruption to the natural order. In *White Sands*, Geoff Dyer writes about the Nuestro Pueblo Towers: 17 strange, rocket-like structures that climb up to 30 metres into the skyline above Watts, Los Angeles. Crafted from cement, wire and a menagerie of found objects — broken bottles, porcelain, tiles, seashells — they were created by Sabato Rodia, an Italian construction worker who laboured alone over 33 years to bring this magnificent folly of his own invention into being.

'His purpose,' Dyer writes, 'was perhaps similar to that

of people who climb mountains. Maybe the only answer to the question of why Rodia built his monument is a negative version of Hillary's famous response about why he had climbed Everest: because it wasn't there.'

I am thinking about Rodia's towers the next day. Standing at the furthest tip of Cornwall, I gaze from the cliff down at a sprawling structure that appears to have been hewn from the rock. The Minack looks like something out of time, an open-air theatre from a forgotten race, so unlikely on this remote outcrop of south west Britain that it must be the product of an alien culture. An avalanche of terraced seating falls away down a steep gully, sporadic outbuildings tipping slate rooves forward as if at any moment they might tumble over and come crashing down on the sharp ridges of granite that jut into the Atlantic below. Haphazard paths and precarious stairways snake across the steep terrain, bending themselves to the contours of the land. Great lichen-dappled boulders shrug up through the earth. The auditorium is pockmarked with splashes of colour, violent oranges and pinks, tropical flowers and succulents clinging tight to the cliff.

The stage, far below, is a wide, odd-shaped strip of stone, scattered with columns and archways, a raised round dais and a sweeping stairway befitting grand entrances. Beyond it, I can make out a strand of bleached sand along the coast; the ocean,

cyan spilling into ink; and the sky, bright and clear today. A summer holiday sky. It's the kind of view people come to gaze at and to post on Instagram. The theatre could easily be upstaged by this landscape, but in fact, in their unlikely union, the theatre and its surroundings amplify each another. Later, I will become obsessed with the theatre's webcam, returning often to take in the landscape, glitchy and low res through the rain-splattered lens, on smeeching winter mornings with the sea fizzing and angry, or at night, when all I can make out is the faint outline of granite, an electric glaze of moon on water. In the early 1930s, Rowena Cade stood here, perhaps on this very spot, looked out at a scrubby, inhospitable patch of cliff, and imagined a theatre. How she realised her remarkable vision through decades of arduous labour and sheer bloody-mindedness is, for me, one of the most inspiring stories of holding faith in theatre.

Rowena was born in Derbyshire in 1893 and spent much of her childhood in Cheltenham before moving to Cornwall with her mother in the 1920s. While living in rented accommodation in Lamorna, six miles up the coast, she came across the Minack headland overlooking Porthcurno beach and bought it for £100. The pair built a house on the site and moved in soon after.

Rowena joined the local amateur dramatics group, and in 1929 she designed and made costumes for an open-air

production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to be performed in meadows nearby — all gauzy fairy wings and lopsided pixies' hats. The Great Depression was bringing its blunt fist down on the nation, a black and white newsprint collage of grim-faced men with flat caps and placards, tired children in worn clothing. It must have seemed a long way from Rowena's idyllic Cornish outpost, her days spent swimming in the sea, conjuring Oberon and Titania in countryside 'quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk-roses and eglantine'.

But her life had been touched by the turbulent history of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The First World War brought an end to a genteel upbringing. She found herself in a job breaking horses for the army in Elsenham and living in an old shepherd's caravan. Her two brothers went away to fight; the younger never fully recovered from the mental impact of 'shellshock'.

In 1917, her father died of natural causes, and after the war, her mother sold their home in Cheltenham. She and Rowena set off on the road, spending a nomadic couple of years travelling the country, trying to find purchase in an unsettled world. They came to rest here in western Cornwall, a place that still feels remote, far removed from the traffic of human life. In 1931, *The Tempest* was proposed as the next show to be staged by the local amateur dramatics group. It's easy to see why these cliffs overlooking the Atlantic so readily

suggested themselves as a setting for Shakespeare's tale of turbulent storms, shipwrecks and loved ones lost at sea.

That winter, with the help of her gardener, Billy Rawlings, Rowena set to work. Together they blasted the site and used the granite they extracted to craft the first, green-cuticled terraces of seating, the grassy patch of stage. Rowena would harvest sand from Porthcurno beach below the site and climbing the headland, goat-like, with the sack of sand slung over her narrow back. She mixed the sand into cement, forged it into stairs and rows of hard seating, carved with Celtic designs of her own invention. Slowly, through a momentous effort of physical labour, the wild gully began to resolve into a theatre, ready for its first audience on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1932.

The theatre was Rowena's life's work. For more than half a century she kept at it, spending harsh Cornish winters hauling timber and ballast up from the beach, working tirelessly, late into the evenings, often alone. It was an epic undertaking and her tools were no more sophisticated than a wheelbarrow, a hammer and chisel. She would make improvements ready for the next summer's shows, adding a throne for *Anthony and Cleopatra* or a new dressing room. The seating rake began to spread outwards and upwards, sightlines determined not by design but by the contours of the landscape. Eventually the auditorium was capable of holding up to 750 people. She