**The Belgrade Theatre**

**Guide to records**

**Coventry Archives** is located in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, CV1 5QP. Admission to both the Reading Room and Research Room is free. Documents and books can be consulted without charge, but a charge is made for photocopying or the taking of digital images. Visitors are required to make an appointment to view original documents in the Research Room. Material in the Reading Room is available without the need of an appointment.

**Opening hours:** The Coventry Archives Reading and Research Rooms are open, 10.30 am – 3.30pm, Wednesdays – Fridays; the Reading Room is open on alternate Saturdays, 10.30 am – 3.30pm. Please refer to the Coventry collections online catalogue at <http://coventrycollections.org/> or further details, or telephone on 02476 237583.

**Introduction**

The Belgrade Theatre, which opened in March 1958, was the first full-scale professional theatre to be built in Britain after World War Two. It was also the only theatre with its construction entirely funded by Municipal Authorities. Coventry previously had its own Repertory Theatre, and the Midland Theatre Company made the city its home between 1946-57, but plans were conceived for an even bigger establishment. The Coventry City Council agreed to the idea of a civic theatre in March 1953, and by July 1955 the playhouse designs were approved.

The theatre was designed by architect Arthur Ling, and constructed by George Wimpey & Co Ltd. The building incorporated flats and a parade of shops into its design. It was named the Belgrade due to Coventry's close relationship with the capital city of Yugoslavia - another area devastated by World War Two bombing. The city of Belgrade made a gift of timber to be used in construction of the theatre.

In 1957, the not-for-profit group of the Belgrade Theatre Trust was established to accept the theatre lease from the council. One of its central policies was to promote and encourage new work, in line with the concept of a repertory theatre. It initially aimed to change productions every fortnight, showcasing British plays and work in translation from Yugoslav, Polish and Spanish authors.

On the 27th of March 1958, the Duchess of Kent officially opened the theatre, where the Belgrade Theatre Company gave their first performance of *Half in Earnest*. This was a musical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Vivian Ellis, and the programme reported that ‘the first production in this new theatre reflects the music, the laughter, colour and gaiety that has always been and will remain the true heart of the theatre’.

The theatre aimed to honour and extend its dramatic legacy, with a commemorative stone in the foyer dedicated to Ellen Terry. The nineteenth-century Shakespearean actress was born a few yards from the theatre site, in a house destroyed by an air raid in November 1940. The stone included a quote from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'there was born a Star danced, and under that I was born'.

The first director of the Belgrade was Bryan Bailey from 1958-1960, who kickstarted the "new work" policy. Several notable actors rose to fame as part of this rep company, including Patsy Byrne, Patricia Routledge and Charles Kay. The group performed their first Shakespeare production in March 1959 with *Julius Caesar*, and took on an adaptation of Dickens' *Great Expectations* in December of the same year. Our collections contain bound volumes of programmes from the Belgrade's opening in 1958, up to the early 2000s.

Bailey was succeeded by Anthony Richardson, who was director from 1960-67, and started the Theatre-in-Education Company for local schools and young people. The next director, Warren Jenkins, introduced the first of many popular Christmas pantomimes - starting with *Aladdin* in 1968. During his run he opened the new Studio Theatre, a smaller space for more intimate original plays.

In 1983, the theatre celebrated its 25th anniversary with performances of *West Side Story*. The following year, the company revived the *Coventry Mystery Plays*, which were originally performed in 1978 in the Cathedral Ruins. The theatre was refurbished in 1983, including the heating system and front-of-house design, and again in 2006, to reflect the changing styles of a modern city.

**Archival Materials**

PA2313 - Belgrade Theatre Collection (including programmes from 1958 – 2004)

PA2262/3 - Order of service in memory of Bryan Bailey, director of the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry at Coventry Cathedral, 1960

PA3031/3/4 - Press Cuttings, Belgrade Capital Development, Jan-Dec 2006

CCA/3/1/13926 - File relating to Anthony John, Belgrade Theatre, 1955-1958 - Correspondence between Anthony John, Director of the Midland Theatre Company and Charles Barratt, the Town Clerk, relating to The Belgrade Theatre. Most of the correspondence concerns John's work in advising the Corporation in the planning and financing of the Belgrade Theatre, and his subsequent attempts to get paid by the Corporation for the work he had undertaken.

CCA/3/1/14023 - File relating to the Belgrade Theatre, 1951-1958. Includes correspondence relating to the Corporation's proposals to build the Belgrade Theatre

CCA/3/1/14705 - File relating to Belgrade Theatre Flats, Corporation Street, 1957-1969

CCA/3/1/14708 - Correspondence relating to the possibility of inaugurating Coventry Festival Week and how a proposed Festival of Music planned for April 1958 might affect the opening of the Belgrade Theatre, 1957

CCA/3/1/14910 - File relating to the Belgrade Theatre, 1959-1960

CCD/1/9/4/1 - Brochure "Belgrade Theatre: Coventry's Civic Theatre", Includes text of speech made by Duchess of Kent prior to the first public performance on 27 Mar 1958

CCG/CG/1/97/14 - Photograph of Proposed Civic Theatre and Square, (Belgrade Theatre & Square), Corporation Street, mid 1950s

**Pamphlets – all JN792**

Belgrade Theatre Trust: Memorandum & Articles of Association, 1948

Belgrade Theatre: Coventry’s Civic Theatre (includes plans), 1958

The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, reprinted from *The Architect*, 18th June 1958 (includes plans, materials, interior design)

*Architects Journal*: Criticism of the Belgrade Theatre, 1958

 ‘A Theatre Glows in Coventry’ in *The Sketch*, 9th April 1958 (includes an account of the opening night and public reaction to the new theatre)

Opening Performance in the Presence of H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent, 1958 (*Half in Earnest,* by Vivian Ellis)

Belgrade Theatre Trust Annual Report & Accounts, 1962-3

*Architects Journal*, Belgrade Theatre: Building Revisited, 1964

Belgrade 7 – Popularity. 1965 (magazine marking 7 years since theatre opening)

Belgrade Theatre: A Brief History (theatre staff handbook – box office copy)

Belgrade Theatre Accounts 1957/8, 1970/1, 1972/3, 1974/5, 1975/6, 1988/9

Belgrade Theatre in Education – Reports from 1969-70 and 1970-71

Box C5(b):

Curtain’s Up at the Belgrade (supplement in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 25/8/2007)

40 Years of the Belgrade (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 7/3/98)

 Belgrade Theatre – Coventry's Classic Theatre, 1994

**Newspaper Articles (on microfilm, or the British Newspaper Archive)**

Name chosen – *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 9/1/57, p.9, c.1

Discussions on use - CET, 6/3/57, p.9, c.6

Plan discussed by council - CET, 3/4/57, p.3, c.2,3

Amateur groups' views, CET, 17/5/57, p.11, c.3,4

Help from Arts Council - CET, 27/6/57, p.12, c.6

Director appointed - CET, 19/7/57, p.15, c.12

Flats occupied - CET, 1/11/57, p.15, c.2

Criticism – *Coventry Standard*, 31/1/58, p.1, c.2-3

Statistics - CS, 7/2/58, p.6, c.5

Details of first production - CET, 28/2/58, p.1, c.1-2

Defence of theatre - CS, 7/3/58, p.6, c.2-5

Mural for entrance - CET, 8/3/58, p.9, c.2-5

Praised in national press - CET, 31/3/58, p.9, c.3-4

Visit of Yugoslav envoy - CET, 21/10/58, p.4, c.4-5

Drama course for schoolchildren - CET, 28/11/58, p.16, c.5-6