

*London Theatre and Theatre
Breaks*

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*London Theatre and
Theatre Breaks*

Simon Harding

Theatre Breaks
London

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Introduction

How do you make sure that your trip to London's Theatre-land is the best that you could hope for?



London boasts a greater array of theatre than anywhere else in the world. From the world famous musicals in the West End to the public funded theatres of the Southbank and the Royal Opera House, via the pubs and clubs of the fringe theatre scene: offering everything from burlesque to Shakespeare – and sometimes burlesque Shakespeare!

On any given night, thousands of actors are entertaining hundreds of thousands of visitors and residents, in

hundreds of venues. Some are one-night stands, others have been going for ten, twenty, even sixty years! Whatever may come and go, for eight performances a week, fifty-two weeks a year, London's theatres collectively play host to the greatest show on earth!

Such a bewildering array of world-class events causes its own problems. At 7:15 every night, everyone wants to pay their bill at the restaurant, at 10:30 every night everyone wants a taxi, and at 10:30 on a Sunday morning everyone expects their breakfast!

So how do you make sure that your trip to London's Theatreland is the best that you could hope for?

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London Theatres

The West End is traditionally the heartland of London's private sector theatres. This is where the big crowds flock to see the big musicals and plays: Andrew Lloyd Webber's, *Phantom of the Opera*, Disney's *The Lion King*, Schonberg and Boubil's *Les Miserables*, ABBA's *Mamma Mia* and Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.



Most of the theatres are to be found between the Aldwych and Oxford Circus: an area that would take about 40 minutes to walk from one end to the other and takes in such famous landmarks as The Strand, Covent Garden, Leicester Square, Shaftesbury Avenue, Piccadilly Circus and Soho. In addition to this area theatres and concert halls are to be found in nearby Victoria and on the Southbank. Victoria is a few stops on the underground, the Southbank just a stroll across the Thames from Theatreland.

Of course, theatres are to be found in every nook and cranny of London: fringe theatres, pub theatres, Off West End Theatres and theatres that otherwise be known as Regional theatres but are now to be found within what has become Greater London (Wimbledon and Richmond for example). However for the purposes of this book, I will concentrate on the West End as described above.

Whilst many theatre-goers will have their favourite theatre, by far the most well known theatres are the London Palladium by Oxford Circus, the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Savoy just off the Strand. The two opera houses – the London Coliseum and the Royal Opera House – and the National Theatre on the Southbank are also worth a mention whilst the Palace on Cambridge Circus and the Theatre Royal Haymarket are arguably two of the most iconic.

Behind the pillars, billboards and neon signs the theatres range from small 500 seater playhouses up to arenas with a capacity of over 2000. Facilities also vary enormously from venue to venue, but at each you can expect the same basic list of amenities. Each will have a foyer, with a box office for walk up business and for ticket collections on the night.

Beyond the foyer the public seating areas are split into several sections – Orchestra Stalls on the lower level, the Royal or Dress Circle the next step up and then beyond that many theatres boast Grand Circles, Upper Circles and Balconies. Seating in these areas (“up in the gods”) is traditionally the cheapest seating.

Each seating area will be manned by stewards selling programmes and sweets beforehand and ice creams in the interval. Some theatres go about this business in a very proactive way with stewards walking up and down the aisle selling their wares. Other theatres will have a discrete box or station from which a steward can be seen servicing the hungry and the curious.

A bar and toilets are generally available for each level of seating – although they may not actually be on that level!

Famously London theatre toilets are too few and far

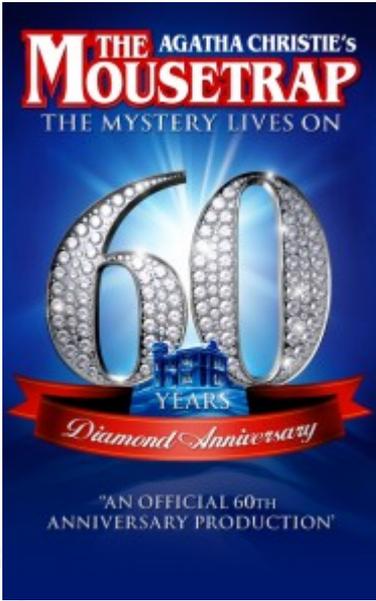
between – especially the ladies – so don't get caught short. The bars too can be quite small and often expensive. However they will take interval orders before the show and most will allow you back into the auditorium with your drink as long as you decant it into a plastic cup. For some this represents the biggest leap forward for humanity since Tull's invention of the seed drill, for others it is equal in bad manners to walking up to the actor in mid speech and slapping him or her in the face! But I digress

Depending on the layout of the theatre one of these areas will have access for wheelchair users. Some theatres have seats that can be removed by prior arrangement, in others the wheelchair user will have to transfer to a fixed seat. Most theatres have facilities for those who are hard of hearing – an infrared system or hearing aid loop. Guide dogs are also catered for by prior arrangement. It does have to be said that access is not great in most London theatres, but remember these are old protected buildings and in many cases the owners have already done all that they can. What they lack in structure they do try to make up for in service, so if you have a potential problem, do ask beforehand.



London Shows

Most theatres in London's West End will only host one production at a time, although family shows and one-off specials often come in for daytime and Sunday performances. A new show will traditionally open with a three to nine month initial booking period and then extend depending on ticket sales and contracts. So whilst a small number come and go, the successful ones can stay around for a long time.



At the beginning of 2012, over a quarter of shows on in the West End had been in London for longer than five years and another quarter for more than one year. So only half of all London's theatres were available to host new shows and half of those were either hosting shows that expected to last for some time or were earmarked to host long running shows in the near future!

Whilst this state of affairs was not great for regular London theatre-goer this did help the irregular West End theatre-goer as they were able to plan their theatre-going often years ahead!

However 2012 was a watershed. Many old shows closed and others that were expected to run and run, just ran out! So since then London has had a rather fresh feel to its West End shows!

Outside of the West End however, variety is very definitely the spice of life. The main repertory companies: National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and Regent's Park Open Air (and I suppose you could include the Royal Opera House) keep audiences on their toes with a constantly changing programme, whilst the fringe theatre scene in London, with its short runs and one night stands, is as healthy as it is anywhere.

Performances normally take place in the evenings from

Monday to Saturday with one matinee (afternoon performance) during the week and another on the Saturday. However, following the New York trend, a few shows have stopped performing on a Monday and replaced it with a Sunday matinee.

Musicals



When most people think of a West End show they think of the musical: The lavish production values, the music, the stars, the orchestra, the song and dance numbers. These are the flagships of London's Theatreland. Some celebrated their world premieres here; others came from Broadway or from successful regional tours.

The names behind the musical are as famous as the shows themselves: Andrew Lloyd Webber, Stephen Sondheim, Schonberg and Boubil, George and Ira Gershwin, Elton John, Walt Disney, Queen, Franki Valli and Abba. The long runners include *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les*

Miserables, which have both recently celebrated 25th anniversaries whilst *Disney's The Lion King* and *Mamma Mia!* have both been playing to London audiences for 15 years. See the Show listing later in the book for the full run-down.

Plays and Comedies

Depending on the season, plays in London can be as rare as hen's teeth or as plentiful as the taxicabs. In the last few years the balance has been very good, with some good long runners and some excellent limited-run gems. Benefiting from the fashion for stars of the Silver Screen to come over and "Do" a stage play, a trend helped by the arrival of Hollywood actor, Kevin Spacey as Artistic Director at the Old Vic, London has seen some unforgettable visiting productions. This in turn has prompted homegrown producers and actors to up their game.

Recent successes include *One Man, Two Gowns*, *Warhorse* and *Jerusalem*. Some of the older shows are as famous as their musical counterparts, none less so than Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*: this year it celebrates its 60th birthday. Other long running productions include *39 Steps* at the Criterion Theatre and *The Woman in Black* at the Fortune Theatre.

Opera

The Royal Opera House and the London Coliseum make sure that Londoners get their fair share of earth-shatteringly great music sung by many of the worlds best singers. But do check: these opera houses are also home to the Royal Ballet and English National Ballet – at the prices the

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