

The theatrical comfort factor

By Mark Shenton on July 12, 2011 6:40 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(17\)](#)

What's the single thing that would improve my professional life more than anything else, but also (since I don't want to be entirely selfish about things here!) the theatregoing experience more generally?

No, not more nights in the week, before you suggest it; to be honest, I go to the theatre far too much as it is, and even though there's always one more request from one more PR or theatre director to see their show, I really don't need to see more than I already do, and probably need to see a whole lot less. (I've been chasing my tail playing catch up for the last fortnight since returning from the US, and I finally officially see the last two of the shows I missed while I was away - and still want to see — today, with the National's *Emperor and Galilean* this afternoon and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* tonight).

But since I do spend so many of my waking hours in theatres, what I crave more than anything are comfortable theatre seats. While you can make sure that you have the right mattress at home and the right office chair to work from for yourself, it's one thing you have absolutely no control over. But visiting theatres as regularly as I do, it does mean that I look forward to going to some venues and dread others: the National's Olivier and Lyttelton, for instance, are in the former category, while the Cottesloe is often in the latter, especially when it is reconfigured and their fixed seating is replaced by moveable chairs that are fixed together.

I also love going to the Barbican, of course (though am always wary of getting the seats on the curve of the rows which are mysteriously cut short), but the post-refurb London Coliseum and Hampstead Theatre have both managed to install seating that looks comfortable to the eye but quickly becomes uncomfortable when you sit in them for any length of time.

It was [recently reported](#) in the pages of *The Stage* that ATG — now Britain's largest theatre chain, with nearly 40,000 seats in its West End and countrywide portfolio - is set to replace all of them, using the new ProBax seat technology that uses a new seat cushion to provide greater support and silently encourage us to adopt a better posture.

And yesterday I was summonsed to the Fortune Theatre, where the seating is being first introduced, to try them out, along with a BBC TV breakfast news crew for an item that is apparently going out tomorrow morning at ten minutes to the hour from 6.50am onwards. For purposes of comparison, we began the story in the upper circle, where deadly old velvet bucket seats are still in place, and it really is another world up there.

Though I began my theatregoing career sitting in the further reaches of every London theatre, it's a long time since I ventured to the top level of an old theatre like the Fortune, and although this is one of the smallest theatres in London, I was surprised at how steep it was and how remote the stage felt from there.

That's an architectural fact, of course, that's impossible to change now, but the seating is another story, and though not quite as bad as some theatres I've been in, they're still fairly unspeakable. It's not just the tight squeeze, width wise, but the fact that the cushion is so close to the floor, forcing you to sit in a crouch-like position with your knees thrust upwards towards the seat in front, which is so close that you would likely touch the head of the person in front of you with them if you were not careful.

But downstairs in the stalls, the new ProBax seating has been introduced; and though there's a conference hall formality to the rows of neat, upright seats, they were — at least on first sitting — immediately more comfortable. I hesitate to pass full judgment on them until I've road-tested them on a three-and-a-half hour Shakespeare, but there's definitely more support behind and below, if no more space offered sideways so that'll still be a struggle. I was also surprised that the seats have been installed with no offset between the rows, so that the seats are all directly behind each other; one of the key factors of discomfort in theatres is where, whatever the posture encouraged by the seats themselves, you have to improvise your own way around them to actually see between the heads of the people in front of you.

That's not an issue, at least with the current Fortune tenant of *The Woman in Black*, where a high, raked stage means audiences can see over each other's heads. But there's also a welcome improvement in legroom, too; with the seats now straight-backed and not as deeply cushioned, audiences here gain space in front of them.

It's high time that theatres more generally addressed this issue, and not just ATG who are finally showing audiences first-hand where that niggly compulsory "restoration levy" is going. Of course the audiences in the Fortune Theatre's upper circle pay them, too, so it's a shame that they are not benefiting from the upgrade yet.

But visiting the Shaftesbury Theatre last week — not an ATG theatre — I was shocked at the state of the seating, which doesn't feel like it has been renewed for as long as I've been going there. There's no excuse; the theatre had a highly profitable run with *Hairspray*, and surely some of those profits could have been ploughed back into the theatre itself?

What are your own favourite theatres, from a comfort point of view? And which do you hate most?