How did the pop-up theatre venues at CFT compare to others around the country between the years 1980 and 2010?

By Josh Brooke

Made possible with Heritage Fund

chichester festival theatre

Comparisons to other pop-up venues at CFT and around the country between 1980-2010

Introduction

Pop up venues at the Chichester Festival Theatre (CFT) started in 1983 with the creation of the Tent, before taking a 20-year break between 1988 and 2012 with the construction of Theatre on the Fly. Throughout this period, British theatre as a whole went through several changes, highs and lows, government cutbacks and government spending. Throughout this time period interest in pop up/ temporary theatre venues grew rapidly. From increased inclusion to a perhaps more liberal approach in society, this report will explore why pop-up venues increased in popularity whilst providing examples of other venues to support the fact that temporary venues could be seen as a trend. At the end, I will compare these other venues to CFT's and hope to explain why there was a fairly quick rise in the popularity of temporary theatre venues.

The Tent: Prelude

This section is just to give a bit more context on the Tent and its intentions. The Tent was Chichester Festival Theatre's original pop-up venue. Starting in 1983, with the aim of "attracting younger audiences and offering starring roles to young or ensemble actors from the Main House"[1]. shows that Chichester Festival Theatre is a company that sticks to its roots of supporting the local community, as written in its 'About us' page, online.

As well as this, the timing coincides with a large factor of why there was so much growth in interest, in temporary theatre venues, the diversification of a theatre's audience, but that's something to be discussed later.

Furthermore, the Tent is one of the most prominent examples of a pop-up theatre venue from Britain in the 80's and can be seen as almost ahead of its time, if not one of the first of the new age, temporary theatre venues that became very popular. As a matter of fact, the Tent was so popular that its success led to the creation of the Minerva Theatre.

Overall, it is clear that although a fairly small operation, the success of the tent led to the expansion of Chichester Festival Theatre as well as the expansion of the

[1] "1988: The Tent." Chichester Festival Theatre, 2025.

popularity of temporary theatrical venues, and from the 80's onwards, the popularity of these venues only kept increasing.

Why the growth

One of the more important questions this essay is set out to answer is why there was such a huge amount of growth in the popularity of temporary theatrical venues, this can be boiled down to the following key points: financial incentives, changing audiences and an escape from capitalist control on arts. This section will look at each of these key areas, explain what type of impact these areas had on theatre, specifically pop-up theatre, in Britain.

Financial

It is clear that in terms of finances, this played a major role in the growth and use of temporary theatre venues. In the early 1980's Britain was in a recession, but by 1983 the economy had somewhat recovered, with the GDP growth being at around 4.2% in 1983[2]. This meant that although audiences were starting to go back to watching theatre and people started going out more again, they still didn't necessarily want to pay the price for a proper theatre ticket (which was seen as a upper class experience but more on that later).

In the 80's, particularly under Thatcher, British arts and Theatre saw massive cutbacks in terms of funding from the government and were instead being pushed towards a much more capitalistic approach by involving private investors.

Furthermore, in terms of financial aspects, another major event that happened for British arts and theatre between 1980 and 2010 was the introduction of national lottery funding in 1994. According to a report from 2014, the amount raised between 1994 and then through the National Lottery was '£31 billion', with 40 towns across the UK receiving more than £1 million in funding[3]. This contributed to the increase in the popularity of temporary theatre by allowing companies more finances to build and operate these venues and facilities.

[2] Weston, Thomas. "The UK Economy in the 1980s." House of Lords Library, 29 May 2024.

[3] Achosion Da'r Loteri Genedlaethol. "National Lottery Funding Takes Centre Stage for British Theatres - Newyddion - Achosion Da'r Loteri Genedlaethol." Achosion Da'r Loteri Genedlaethol, 2025.

Comparisons to other pop-up venues at CFT and around the country between 1980-2010

This is where one contradiction between many other theatres and Chichester Festival Theatre takes place. Whilst many (especially regional) theatres rely on government funding, CFT does not and instead relies on private donations, mainly from the community. With one example being the £1.75 million raised for the construction and first season of the Nest[4].

Overall, it is clear that financial aspects played a huge role in the growth of popularity in temporary theatrical venues in several ways. Firstly it is clear that the economic situation in the UK came at the perfect time for temporary venues, as people were starting to go back to the theatre however they still didn't want to spend as much money. As well as this, the split from mainstream theatre, which started focusing on more capitalist ways of growing and then regional theatres kept growing. This pushed regional theatres to come up with unique ways to show small productions.

Audience

Audience factors also played a crucial role in the emergence of temporary theatre venues, from what type of audience was viewing the shows to what type of show audiences were looking for. As previously mentioned, during the 1980's there was a huge shift in the way theatre was viewed by social classes. Before this point in time, theatre was mainly seen as something only accessible/ meant for upper classes and high society, it wasn't until around this period that middle and lower classes of society started appearing at the theatre more frequently. This would have led to a rise in temporary venues as (again previously mentioned) tickets for these kids of shows tended to be cheaper. Another factor that influenced the rise of temporary theatre venues that stems from the audience is that audiences started to prefer more engaging performances, rather than that of traditional theatre. According to 'Fair Play' by Jen Harvie, this isn't just a trend we can see in theatre: "This trend has been growing exponentially since the 1990s in, for example, much public art, immersive theatre, one-to-one theatre, and relational and delegated art. In performance and theatre, practices of immersing audiences within theatrical worlds and inviting them to participate there are no longer principally confined to their usual manifestations in applied performance contexts such as theatre-in-

[4] Watkins, Dan. "NEST TALK". Chichester Festival Theatre, 10 April 2025.

education."[5] The fact that this growing trend of audience engaging art isn't just found in theatre means that it wasn't theatre that 'forced' this change, but rather audiences themselves. Overall, it is clear that audience factors played a clear and crucial role in the development and promotion of temporary theatre venues across the country. Due to the increase in lower classes going to view theatre and the increase in demand for more personal theatre, this is without a doubt a major factor.

Neoliberalism

Although not as big a factor as the previously mentioned examples, the rise of neoliberalism helped the rise of temporary theatrical venues.

Firstly, what is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is a political ideology that's main policies include government deregulation and a completely free market.

With this said, it is fairly clear how neoliberalism affected the increase in popularity of temporary venues. As quickly touched upon in a previous section, during Thatcher's reign, many (particularly mainstream) theatre companies were pushed to have a more capitalist approach (e.g. gaining private investment) in their business practices, instead of relying upon government funding.

Another way you can look at this through a neoliberal lens is that the use of these temporary venues is, itself, a form of neoliberalism. This claim can be supported when looking at the definition of neoliberalism without looking at it from a governmental perspective.

What I mean by this is that neoliberalism is all about deregulation, and is that not what these temporary venues represent? Deregulation from the Main Stage, from the writer of plays. Temporary theatre venues tend to promote audience participation and inclusion, therefore meaning, "the artist is no longer the central agent in his or her own work, but operates through a range of individuals, communities, and surrogates"[6].

Therefore, it is clear that neoliberalism also helped play an integral role in the promotion of temporary venues.

---

[5] Harvie, Jen. Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

[6] Idem.

Summary

Overall, the reasons for the rise in popularity of temporary theatre venues is evident. Firstly, the economic situation at the time in which these venues started to grow in popularity is no coincidence. Although people were starting to trust in the economy again there still wasn't a load of confidence and so people were spending money, but not as much. As well as this, the growing split between regional and national theatres increased the need for more temporary venues. Furthermore, audience factors such as the aforementioned increased number of members from lower social classes going to the theatre and the fact that audiences were more interested in engaging productions led to more growth of temporary venues. Finally, neoliberalism played a major factor in the emergence and expansion of temporary venues as, temporary venues themselves can be seen as a symbol of neoliberalism.

Other venues

In this section of the report, I will be looking at 3 venues (including the CFT) that have incorporated temporary venues. After giving a quick description of each, I will then go on to briefly mention any similarities and differences they may have had to Chichester Festival Theatre.

Chichester Festival Theatre

Since its establishment in 1962, Chichester Festival Theatre has been a pioneer in the industry. When it comes to temporary venues, it is no stranger. Starting in 1983 with the construction of The Tent, then moving to nearly 30 years later with the construction of Theatre on the Fly, the CFT has prided itself on supporting the community, with these temporary venues it has been able to do so. CFT has never forgotten its original temporary venues' reasoning for being built, to help local talent emerge and flourish in conditions that are sustainable for both the Theatre and the artists working in temporary venues. Unlike many other temporary venues, as CFT is an established theatre, its venues do not travel, but rather get used seasonally, like the next theatre mentioned in this section.

Comparisons to other pop-up venues at CFT and around the country between 1980-2010

The Temporary Theatre

This Temporary venue was originally called ‘The Shed’ and could be found on the South Bank of London. This venue was built in part by the national theatre whilst there was ongoing construction to the Cottesloe auditorium, in order to maintain 3 auditoriums[7].

Like CFT, as the Temporary Theatre was linked to a stationary theatre, it didn’t tour and was itself stationary. Another similarly to CFT, specifically the Nest, the venue could be transformed from thrust configuration to in the round, meaning it could seat ‘225 to 275’[8] people respectively.

Although only meant to stand for one year, The Shed stood for 3, until its eventual demolition in 2017.

Clearly, this venue is similar in many ways to the several temporary venues that CFT has held throughout the years.

Royal Shakespeare Company

Whilst in the last section we looked at a similar style of venue/ company to the CFT, the Shakespeare Touring companies is again fairly similar in its purpose and function.

From 2007 to 2010, the Royal Shakespeare Company used a temporary venue titled “The Temporary Courtyard Theatre”. This theatre was an extension of another temporary venue called “the other place” and could seat up to 1,000 people[9].

Similarly to the Temporary Theatre mentioned above, it was constructed for use whilst the main theatre was undergoing maintenance and improvements, making it dissimilar to the reason CFT created their temporary theatres. Another notable difference is that this venue appears to have been untransformable, meaning its seating arrangement was static.

Summary

[7] Tompkins, Haworth. “The Shed.” Haworth Tompkins, 8 Jan. 2018.
[8] Idem.
[9] pete. “The Courtyard Theatre – the RSC’s Temporary Stratford Home * Ritchie Studio.” Ritchie.studio, 2019.

Overall, it is clear that although many temporary venues look similar, doesn't always mean they are. One way this is clearly shown in this section is the difference in reasons as to why temporary venues were built. With both the Temporary Theatre and the Temporary courtyard theatre being constructed in order to fill a gap created by remodelling or renovation on main stage theatre, meanwhile, CFT built temporary venues, not to fill a gap but to help support the community in sustainable ways. However there are some similarities, particularly in the ability to transform how audiences sit. This allows for more show specific seating and can allow for a wider range of shows to be performed. Overall, it is clear that although built for different purposes, there's always constants between temporary venues, whether that be the ability to move seating plans or the way the buildings are constructed. This being said, it doesn't stop there are major differences too, especially between smaller temporary venues (seen with CFT and the Shed) and larger temporary venues (seen with the Temporary Courtyard Theatre).

Conclusion/ How it links to the Nest

In conclusion, how does this link to the nest? Although it is obvious that temporary theatre venues are often built for varying reasons, such as to replace a auditorium currently under construction or to provide up and coming artists with a way to build their career sustainably, the rise in their popularity is linked to the three reasons of financial, audience driven and politically driven too. Chichester Festival Theatre stands out from the crowd here though as, from what I can tell, it is the only company to have built (several) temporary venues for the community rather than simply its own personal interests. Therefore, although there are many similarities between temporary venues, Chichester Festival Theatres are special, truly one of a kind, all thanks to their aims of supporting the community that has supported it for decades.

Comparisons to other pop-up venues at CFT and around the country between 1980-2010

Bibliography

1. Achosion Da’r Loteri Genedlaethol. “National Lottery Funding Takes Centre Stage for British
   Theatres - Newyddion - Achosion Da’r Loteri Genedlaethol.” Achosion Da’r Loteri Genedlaethol, 2025, www.lotterygoodcauses.org.uk/cy/news/national-lottery-funding-takes-centre-stage-british-th eatres. Accessed 23 Apr. 2025.
2. Harvie, Jen. Fair Play : Art, Performance and Neoliberalism. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
3. Pete. “The Courtyard Theatre – the RSC’s Temporary Stratford Home * Ritchie Studio.” Ritchie.studio, 2019, www.ritchie.studio/news/2005/the-courtyard-theatre-the-rscs-temporary-stratford-home/. Accessed 23 Apr. 2025.
4. Tompkins, Haworth. “The Shed.” Haworth Tompkins, 8 Jan. 2018, www.haworthtompkins.com/work/the-shed.
5. Weston, Thomas. “The UK Economy in the 1980s.” House of Lords Library, 29 May 2024, lordslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uk-economy-in-the-1980s/. Accessed 2025.
6. Watkins, Dan. “NEST TALK”. Chichester Festival Theatre, 10 April 2025.
7. “1988: The Tent.” Chichester Festival Theatre, 2025, www.cft.org.uk/about-us/our-history/1988. Accessed 2025.