
University of Southampton Network

Nuffield Theatre

Members of the University of Southampton's AUA branch were treated to a fascinating backstage tour of the Nuffield Theatre on Thursday 9th July. Kindly organised by Anne Edwards and hosted by the Nuffield's Connect Manager, Tracey Cruickshank, the group got a chance to see the inner workings of the venue, which last year won The Stage award for Regional Theatre of the Year.

We are incredibly lucky to have such a wonderful venue on campus and the opportunity to enjoy top-notch productions without needing to trek to the capital. I would encourage (and I hope I speak for the rest of the group!) everyone to go along and support the Nuffield in some way – go see a comedy gig, go see a play, or just go and have lunch in the Kitchen.

Back to the tour and we started off in the main auditorium learning about some theatrical superstitions; namely why you should never mention a 'Scottish play' to an actor or whistle anywhere near a stage, unless you're particularly keen to engage with falling scenery. We also heard about the new theatre space currently in development at the city's Arts Complex in Guildhall Square, which the Nuffield will run from next year.

Climbing onto the stage, it was hard work, but we all resisted the urge to break into theatrical monologue for the absent audience. Looking up, the vertigo-inducing walkways for the technicians were visible running in various directions around the lighting rigs. Behind the curtains was an Aladdin's Cave of wires, lights, ropes, pulleys, ladders and switches. Unseen by the audience and among this hubbub of things, sits the deputy stage manager who along with the stage manager, ensures that a performance runs without a hitch. Hooked up to a pair of headphones (or 'can' to use the correct theatre-speak) and TV monitors, and glued to 'the book', which contains all the cues for the production, the deputy stage manager monitors the whole operation.

It is not, however, the deputy stage manager's job to cue an actor if they forget their lines. To paraphrase Tracey, if they dig themselves a hole it's their job as professionals to get themselves out of it! There was little sympathy for Lenny Henry who recently walked off stage in Chichester when he forgot his lines during the press night of *Educating Rita*.

One of the highlights of the tour was getting to look at and handle the animal puppets that were being used in the Nuffield's Youth Theatre production of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The Nuffield was lucky enough to have had input from Jimmy Grimes, Assistant Puppetry Director on *War Horse* in their design. The puppets were beautiful; it takes many years to master the art of puppetry, where the puppeteer disappears and the prop takes on a life and personality of its own, but the artistry evident in these creations would certainly have made the young actors' jobs easier. I think we were all a bit entranced!

We saw and learned much more that I can write here and are incredibly grateful to Tracey for her time in taking us round. We overran by twenty minutes as it was, and I'm sure we could have stayed for another hour asking questions. Walking past the theatre a few days later, I could hear the chatter of the *Dark Materials* cast getting ready for their final performance. We'd always wondered what was behind those windows looking onto the Staff Club – now we know!