



LONDON THEATRE AND THEATRE BREAKS

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF
YOUR NEXT THEATRE TRIP

SIMON HARDING



THEATRE**BREAKS**

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Theatre Breaks

London

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Introduction

How do you make sure that your trip to London's Theatreland 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?

Read On!



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 would 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!

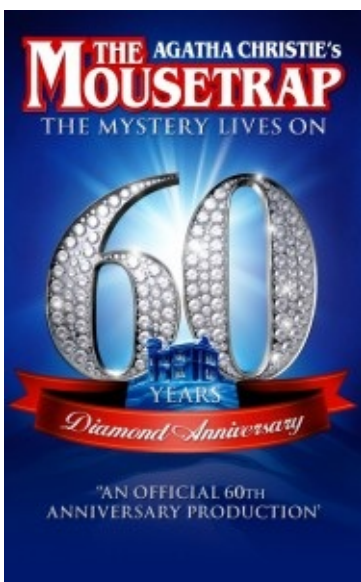
Whilst this state of affairs was not great for regular London theatre-goer this did help the irregular West End theatre-goer as they were able to plan their theatre-going often years ahead!

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 Govnors*, *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 Royal Opera House charge that is an expensive mistake to make: either way!

Top Operatic Hint: *The Coli is the home of English National Opera, so all operas there are sung in English, where as at the Royal Opera House they are generally sung in the original language – might be worth considering.*

At regular points throughout the year, the Royal Albert Hall, with the help of impresario Raymond Gubbay, also becomes home to a bit of opera. These spectacular events generally present popular operas in a lively way and are excellent for an introduction to the artform.

Ballet & Dance

In addition to the Royal Opera House and the London Coliseum ballet seasons, London is lucky enough to boast the Sadler's Wells Theatre: a venue *dedicated* to international dance – which has become so successful that the Peacock Theatre, in the West End, is often used for shows that otherwise may tend to dominate the season at Sadler's Wells.

Just as with other forms of live theatre there are many smaller companies presenting dance in London: look out for The Place, home of London Contemporary Dance School.

Music Hall, Burlesque, Stand Up, Rock Concerts, Classical Concerts etc...

I'm getting a little off track here. This book is about theatre and going to the theatre. Just as these other forms of entertainment are similar, they are completely different. They take place in different venues (although sometimes the same) in different areas of London (although sometimes the same) at different times, (though sometimes the same) and attract different audiences (although sometimes the same).

However my main reason for not going into detail about them in this book is that, if you saw a book called "London Theatre and Theatre Breaks" you would not pick it up expecting to find out where the next Phil Collins gig is or how to get tickets for the *Des O'Connor One Man Show* – if there is such a thing!

Of course London produces all manner of entertainment, or, to clarify: London produces *every* manner of entertainment, but you don't need to read about it here.

Music Hall and Burlesque

I will however just mention the contrasting fates of Music Hall and Burlesque and how you can easily see one (even learn how to do it) whereas the other is not even talked about!

At the hands of its more risqué cousin, Music Hall has suffered a decline over the past few years and that means that your work is cut out for you if you want to take a trip down that memory lane.

Burlesque, on the other hand, is enjoying a bit of a purple patch. It is not just “*stripping without the bit at the end*” as David Walliams once said. Skilled dancers, singers, musicians, acrobats, magicians and comedians will make sure that you come away from a show entertained, impressed and wanting to go again. Check out the Wam Bam Club at the Cafe De Paris or Madame JoJo’s. You can even learn the art at CellarDoor! And 2012 saw the first Burlesque show in the West End as The Hurly Burly show came to the Duchess. But beware: sometimes you do get the bit at the end!



London Theatre Tickets

Most seats in most theatres in London command great views of the stage and are priced accordingly. Even though the theatres are old, the idea of getting the most buck for your bang has been the driving factor for all theatre designers since they built the amphitheatres of antiquity. So the stories of poor views from expensive seats and being unknowingly stuck behind pillars are vastly over-exaggerated. Yes they do exist, but unless you buy your seat from “Honest Ron” on the street corner you should be made well aware of any potential shortcomings to your impending evening of delectation.



The theatres are made up of several layers of seats: usually Orchestra Stalls, Royal or Dress Circle, Upper or Grand Circle and Balcony. The number of seats in each area dwindling, as you get closer to the gods! The seats considered to be the best are in the Stalls and Dress Circle although as you get towards the back of these areas your view can be hampered by the overhang of the seating above or, indeed, by the pillars that hold up the afore-mentioned seating! Consequently the further you go back the more likely those seats will be cheaper than

those at the front.

The other reason for cheaper seats is a side view. Dependent on the individual production, seats on the end of a row may be marked as semi restricted view as the nearside upstage areas of the stage may be concealed from view by the proscenium arch. This is in no way a regular occurrence and different shows at the same theatre will be affected differently. Again, if it is an issue for your show of choice the reputable agents will advise you.

The Royal Box

Oddly the worst view is often from the Royal Box, designed, as the seats were, to be seen in rather than to be watched from. Consequently the best deal in the house, if you don't mind leaning forward – which is something Royalty never did – can often be found by being seated, if not treated, like royalty!

The Gods

There are several theories as to why the upper levels are called “the gods” but whatever the truth is, the fact is that the worst seating in any theatre seems to be reserved for gods and kings! These cheap seats however are priceless.

Whilst the gentry scramble around below, the working classes live it up – literally. We still get our own bar and toilets, our own ice cream seller and purveyors of programmes, sweets and souvenirs but the seats are a fraction of the price.

OK we might have to splash out for opera glasses, down a stiff drink to quell the vertigo and frantically fan ourselves with whatever comes to hand to combat the rising temperatures, but here, surrounded by the starving actors of the future and the booze-sodden has-beens of the past, we can witness the stand- out performances of the present and say – “*we were there!*”



Theatre Ticket Prices



Over the last 30 years the headline cost of top price theatre ticket prices has more than quadrupled! 55 per cent of theatre-goers considering the cost prohibitive. This has led to some interesting headlines, but are they fair?

More recently the average price for a top price ticket has only risen by 8.5% in 5 years! And the average price paid to watch a West End hit show last year was under 30p per minute – that’s not bad considering you are paying for the actors, the stage crew, the orchestra, the front of house staff... not to mention all the work that went on even before the show opened.

The range of ticket prices in London’s West End is huge. “Face value” ranges from £15 to £67.50 but on top of that there are VIP seats costing up to £25 more... and bookings fees and delivery costs and restoration levies and postage and...

But there are also special offers, 2 for 1 deals, meal deals, group discounts, preview prices, school group discounts, early bird deals, accelerator rates, OAP rates, student rates, day rates, there was even a special £20.12 Olympic rate at one of the theatres to celebrate the arrival of the Olympic Games in 2012!

In a recent poll, London theatres were hauled up for a variety of sins – expensive drinks, lack of toilets, the behaviour of other members of the audience, uncomfortable seats... yet the biggest gripe was price.

Did you know that you could spend over £100 to see a West End show and that not 20 feet away from you will be someone who has only spent £30?

It is generally the producers of a show who decide on the seat prices. Of course they are guided by the theatre and their marketing company and ultimately by market forces, but initially it is their call.

A couple of years ago certain producers came up with the plan to ring fence the very best seats and sell them as VIP seats. The package sometimes included a programme and a drink but often just included the fabric on your seat. This meant that around £20 was magically added to the price of the top price tickets. Not a lot but, if you bought a pair of tickets through an authorised STAR ticket agent, with an ice cream, a programme and a small glass of wine at the interval you've just spent £250 on a night out and you may not even like the show!

So here are some tips to make buying your theatre ticket as easy on your pocket as possible and to make sure that your London theatre trip is as perfect as you can make it.

First don't believe just one person – even me. Do your research! There's the internet and you can always be old-fashioned and pick up the phone! The most important thing is to be flexible – the date, the show, the seats and the package all have an effect on the price. Of course sometimes there is nothing for it but to pay the man. Hopefully, by reading this book, you will know when that is likely to be the case and when it might just be worth that extra phone call!

The Show

If you just want to come to London and experience the magic of a West End show pick one of the older productions. The reason they have been going for a long time is that they are popular, the reason they are popular is that they are good, and even the most popular shows have deals available after a while. Don't be drawn to see the latest big thing. If it really is that good it will be around for a while. The only exception to this is if it is a vehicle for a star. They will be on a specific contract and that will be that. For these shows get in quick, things will only get worse (unless of course they end up being rubbish which is another reason for not bothering with the latest "thing").

The Date

If you can be flexible on date then try to avoid a Saturday. Everyone wants to go on a Saturday so the only way to get a discount on a Saturday is to book on the day (see Ticket Booths) and then you are not guaranteed to get anything!

The Package

Some shows would rather increase the value of the ticket rather than reduce the price to its patrons. So they get together with agents or restaurants or hotels or holiday companies to offer a package. These packages can cost no more than the ticket price but include extras – a pre-theatre meal, a programme, a tour or even overnight accommodation.

The Seats

It is lovely to sit at the front of the theatre but the view can often be just as good from the cheaper seats further back. Do you really need to be so close that you can see the nostril hair of the young actor

playing the lead quiver as he gets more and more emotional? This is where you need some knowledge. Yes, as you get further back some seats are “restricted view”, but by no means all are. YOU MUST ASK.

If you are talking to a reputable agent or the box office they must tell you before you buy the ticket if there are any viewing restrictions from the seat you are buying, but ultimately it is you who is going to sit there, so it is up to you to for the details.

Ask about the seats, the pros and cons of each place to sit – think about whether you need easy access or extra leg room? There are some great deals in the cheaper seats, but it is true – by going for the cheaper seats you could find yourself behind a pillar and closer to the toilets than the stage.

You can get your theatre tickets from several sources. Each have their own benefit.

The Theatre Box Office

The Box Office is always worth contacting for the proper cost of the tickets and an unbiased view of the tickets. They are not on commission and they know their theatre best. The people you end up talking to may not actually be at the theatre – they may be a ticket agent acting as the box office, but as long as you phoned them as the box office that is how they have to act.

Interestingly, apart from “day seats”, which some, but by no means all theatres offer, “deals” are not usually available from the theatre direct, but on the plus side, any fees they charge will be minimal. So even though you are getting the correct price it still may not be the cheapest. For Day Seats use google or twitter (#dayseats) to find out who is offering what and how early you have to get in line.

Online Agents

These come in all shapes and sizes. Agents can provide you with some of the best offers – but remember, check how “special” the deal is, price and position – it’s all about price and position! (See Exclusive Deals). Look out for the Society of Ticket Sellers and Retailers’ (STAR) badge which will help you find a trustworthy one, but even amongst their members there is a wide variety of bookings fees.

Holiday Companies for Short Breaks

A holiday company will help you book your tickets, accommodation, travel, pre-theatre meal and other tourist attractions. If you are short of time or you are not sure what you are doing then companies selling theatre packages (or theatre breaks) are a great way to get things organised. They will also have access to discounts (where they exist) on tickets, hotels and travel so if there is a saving to be had they will be able to pass that on to you

Again, look for the STAR badge on their booking pages. This will tell you that when they say “top price seats” they mean good seats, not just expensive seats and you will know that you are not getting a second rate ticket in its place.

Ticket Booths

Do you know how many Official Half Price Ticket Booths there are in Leicester Square? NONE! The famous Leicester Square half-price ticket booth run by the venerable Society of London Theatres (SOLT) which is what people are referring to when they speak of “the Official Half Price Ticket Booth” is actually called TKTS. It is a one story building set on its own in the pedestrian part of the south side of Leicester Square. It offers half price tickets and other discounts for shows on the day so if you don’t want to plan ahead, just turn up and see what they have available.

There are many other booths around Leicester Square, some claiming some form of official status. They may be lovely, honest, legal, people who really do have some great deals (I know several, personally, and they are and they do) but “Official”? Whilst travelling, I once worked for a company that claimed to sell 100% Australian orange juice – it was 100% Australian but it wasn’t 100% Orange juice!

Concierge

That nice smiling man (or woman) in the hotel will also sell you tickets. He will use one or more of the afore-mentioned agents and take 10% from them (not from you). Yes you can tip him if you like but don’t imagine he is doing it out of the kindness of his heart!

Touts

This is the man standing by the box office in a dark mac: no he isn’t the producer, no he isn’t a poor jilted lover, no he isn’t an actor from the chorus line whose proud parents can’t now make it, he is a con man and he is wanting nothing more than to rip you off! **Do not even own up to having a wallet!**



Some Interesting Bits of Knowledge

Exclusive Deals

There are not really any proper exclusive deals in London anymore. Every agent, holiday company, booth and concierge has access to the same prices – it is just up to them what they do with them -within reason! So if you find a deal it is probably that you have asked the right question rather than you have found the right agent!

It is not important to know that, *per se*, but any knowledge is helpful! In general, deals will be Monday to Thursdays and outside school holidays. Some shows will discount through-out the year and some may include Fridays and Saturday matinees. You can also get some great deals for groups. If you really want to get a deal for yourself organise 10 other friends to come along too, you may even get your ticket for free: Now that is what I call an exclusive deal!

Sold Out Shows

There are probably only three or four shows at the moment in London that have proper, regular, sold out performances and none of those sell out on every performance throughout the week – by the time you read this of course that may have changed one way or the other. Each outlet mentioned above has its own set of seats to sell from. So if they say a show is “sold out” they may just mean they are sold out as they can’t know what other agents have and haven’t got!

This applies just as much to the theatre as it does to the agents, especially for popular shows where some agents will have bought tickets “up front” in the knowledge that they will be able to sell them nearer the time. Also some agents just sell top price seats. If they say that such’n’such a seat is the cheapest, they may only mean it is their cheapest. Again, shop around. A few theatres offer Day Seats – the London Coliseum and the Donmar spring to mind – when they hold a few seats back – great if you decide to do something on the spur of the moment and you don’t mind queuing.

“I’ll check with the box office”

Each agent can get “extras” from the box office, or even swap seats amongst themselves. Of course if

you have read this article you will have already checked with the box office and so you will know exactly what is available there and for how much. If you are happy with the price that the agent is offering – after all they have taken the time to go and find your tickets for you – then by all means confirm those seats. But if you are asking for tickets for a family of 4 then that person could be just about to earn £65! Have they earned it, or is it worth doing a bit more work yourself?

When only the best will do

Sometimes though, we can't be flexible. We have to see a show on a particular night from the very best seats in the house and whilst a quick call to the theatre is always a good idea, agents (and concierges) are very good at their job.

The theatres depend on them for hundreds of thousands of pounds of ticket sales each month. The conversation that they can have with a theatre is different to the one you can have. The right agent with the right relationship with the right box office can get almost anything.



Top tricks for Having a Better Time AND Saving Money

So now you know that deals are out there and when those deals are likely to be available. So if it is important to you, you can avoid the prime complaint of London theatregoers.

To be honest if you avoid theatre ice creams, drinks and sweets I think you have gone along way to achieving a cheap night out – I’ve been nipping out to a nearby pub for years instead of paying the theatre bar prices and my auntie brings her G&T in to the theatre in a water bottle – slice included!

So apart from cost, the other complaints, in no particular order, are:

- Leg Room in theatres
- Steep Stairs in theatres
- Price of Refreshments/Programmes
- Queues at the theatre Bar
- Queues at the Ladies’ loo
- Others talking during the show
- Others eating loudly
- Others singing along with the show
- Drinking from plastic cups

So how can we make sure that other people’s complaints are not your complaints?

Simon’s Top Tip

Before you buy your ticket ask the theatre where to sit with the easiest access.

Do ask – don’t just assume it is on the aisle at the back of the stalls. Quite often the answer is surprising... for example, many theatres are partially underground, so “upstairs” in the dress circle or balcony may be on street level whilst the stalls is in the cellar – so the best access could be found at the front of the dress circle – nice seats!

So how does this help?

Well obviously there are no stairs to negotiate, so quick in and quick out, so you can be first to the toilets – which is especially important for the ladies (*it is always nicer to be the smug one coming out rather than the desperate one going in!*).

If you can get out quickly you can choose between whether you go to the theatre bar or the pub next door. The pub will be cheaper and if you drink wine or beer then it is almost certainly going to be nicer. Obviously the bar at the theatre is very handy but in 10 seconds it is just about to get very crowded!

Whichever one you choose, having got out of the auditorium quickly, you will now have enough time to finish your drink and therefore not have to resort to necking it or decanting it into a plastic cup.

Just remember that in the bar next door, you don't get a call for the second half, so don't get carried away and forget to go back! A good tip is to sit by the window and keep an eye on the smokers at the front of the theatre!

Also easy access seats are usually on an aisle and an aisle seat equals great leg room.

If you are sitting on the aisle then your best bet is to stand until the rest of the audience settle in. Use the time well and befrend the programme seller: in a lull, just ask if they would let you have a quick look! Or you could ask another audience member if you could borrow theirs (or just loiter in the interval and help yourself). Of course you could go halves with someone... but my favourite, and even my gin swigging auntie hasn't thought of this one yet: just visit the show website before you go and print off a couple of pages!

Regarding the behaviour of other members of the audience, you might ask your new ally the usher, but as you are on the aisle you've halved the chances of sitting next to someone who is eating, chatting or singing along and as most people go to the theatre with another person, then you probably brought the seat next to you!

Last Note: Do remember you are asking which seat has the best access, not which seat has the best view, but as long as the seat you are buying is “top price” then you should consider it has an acceptable view!



Getting To London

By Air

If you are coming to London by air and you are going to be seeing a show then 99 times out of 100 that means you are staying overnight. So the extra element to consider is the hotel. The easiest thing to do is buy the whole package from one place – flight, hotel, theatre tickets, insurance, entrance to attractions, pre-theatre meals. You can do it separately yourself but why not go online and book it all in one fell swoop!

Things to remember: There are five airports that service London: City, Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton and Stansted. City is the most central but Heathrow is the only one on the Underground network. From standing on the platform at Luton Airport Parkway you can be sitting in your theatre seat in 40 minutes – I've done it, but I wouldn't recommend it! Stansted, like Luton is the landing strip of choice for the cheap airlines so, like Luton, and like all other airports in Europe receiving EasyRyanBaby flights, it is not actually in London! However the links are good, just don't expect your journey to be over on touchdown.

The cheapest flights can arrive very early. If you are staying overnight, even if you spend half your morning getting to the hotel, you may not be allowed into your room for 3 more hours. You can pay for an early check-in but quite often this is equivalent to paying for an extra night! So we suggest having something planned for arrival. If your hotel has a pool why not head down there and sloosh away the trials of your trip before finding a local restaurant for lunch to really get into the weekend.

Of course you have just arrived in the greatest city on earth: most hotels will hold your luggage so you may want to explore, but there is always tomorrow!

Also beware: because check-in is from 2pm, if you plan to see a matinee that either means you are going to check-in and run like the clappers to the theatre or you are going to have to get into your room after the show: maybe an evening show might be a better bet on the first night of your break.

By Train

The mainline stations are St Pancras, Euston, Paddington, Waterloo, Charing Cross, Victoria, Liverpool

Street and Kings Cross.

As you would expect all stations have excellent connections into Theatreland. The West End is right in the heart of London and every mainline station is within 20 minutes journey by underground, taxi or bus on a good day.

Just as with theatre tickets there is a bewildering range of train tickets available. Plan ahead and commit to a certain train and tickets can be very cheap. Pop in to town at the drop of a hat and you will be glad you read the chapter above about saving money on theatre tickets.

Look out for Advance purchase tickets and Apex Tickets as well as saver Returns and Cheap day returns.

From many stations on the UK mainland the cheapest tickets are those included in theatre and hotel packages to London or Theatre Breaks. The pricing system is not a straight discount on standard tickets but based on a series of zones splitting the country up. Consequently “the deal” is better from some stations than it is from others. For example at the time of writing (April 2012) it only costs an extra £15 to travel from York to London as it does from Peterborough to London. Not a Geography Major? Well take a look at google maps to see how much of a deal that is from York and how hard that is on the good citizens of Peterborough!

Theatre Deals with Rail Tickets

I know some may like me to point out that often you can get deals on theatre tickets when you buy your train tickets. Yes you can, but as I mentioned before under Ticket Prices there is no such thing as an exclusive theatre ticket deal: you can probably get deals on theatre tickets when you buy your detergent too!

Getting to London by Bus

Can I hold my hand up now and say, as much as I have travelled by bus: across islands and continents, to school and to work, with businessmen, snowboarders and chickens, I have never gone to the theatre by bus!?

After a show I like to be my own master. I like to have the choice of going for a drink or an explore. If I want to wander the streets and drink in the delicious atmosphere of London at night I am going to miss the bus, if I want to go home I want to get there as quickly as possible and the words “quickly” and “bus” do not go together: I get grumpy if I miss the fast train and have to catch the slow one.

There are companies that offer day trips and companies that offer overnight trips. The prices are great, the companies honest, the bus drivers friendly. Will I ever do it? No! But that is probably because I know my way round London and have people I can go to the theatre with.

Bus trips are great if you are unsure of London (which hopefully will not be the case after you have read this) or if you are a single traveler (which hopefully you will not be now that you can persuade your friends to come with all your new found knowledge).

Normally one day trips arrive early and people can do their own thing, have a meal prior to

performance etc . It may not be your thing but, without pigeon-holing too much – well OK a lot – it is perfect for the more mature person living within a certain distance of London who wants to see something but has no-one to go with.

But do remember the journey home after the show. Whilst it can be quite a party atmosphere, with everyone keen to share their thoughts on the production you have just seen, it can add an hour or two to your night and staying overnight with one of these companies is not necessarily going to solve that issue as, to keep the price down, your hotel may be an hour's bus ride away – not always, but it is worth checking.

Going to London by Car

It is very tempting to drive down to London. Your luggage in the boot, a space on the back seat for the shopping on the return journey. Whatever calculations you do, include the congestion charge and £35 per day parking charges. It may be less but best to be pleasantly surprised.

Evening parking charges are also being threatened so check before hand, nothing is worse than that moment when the car's clock clicks over to 19:30 and you still haven't found a parking space!

There is some good news though: look out for a deal between West End theatres and NCP that will allow you to get a 50% discount on evening parking if you show your ticket stubs. And driving in London is no worse than driving in any strange big city, or should that be no better? If you are a confident driver then you should be fine.

Hotels can arrange parking or point you in the direction of the nearest car park but even some of those hotels who used to have their own car parks have now handed them over to NCP type organisations to run as a separate concern. It is always best to talk to the Concierge about parking facilities prior to your arrival.

Many people driving in from the north of the country park at Brent Cross and then get the tube or bus in. That is quite a good idea and in many ways gets the best of all worlds.



Getting Around London

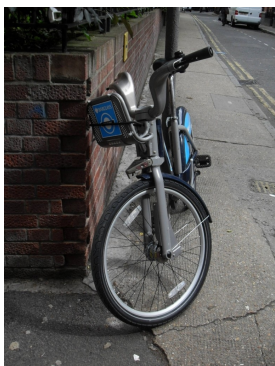


Walking Around London

As I mentioned before, London's Theatreland will take approximately 40 to 50 minutes to walk through (I am not including the theatres in the Victoria area as they are a couple of tube stops away in their own separate area). The main streets of The Strand, Charing Cross Road, Shaftesbury Avenue, Oxford Street and Regents Street will get you close enough to all West End theatres. It can get a bit complicated around Covent Garden or Soho but you really can ask a policeman if stuck. I do all the time, it makes them feel wanted!

The SOLT web site has a series of pictures showing the way to get to the major theatres. It is a

lovely idea but it is rather a work in progress. Personally I love walking round London at any time of day but do remember it is a big city with big city problems. Stay out of dark allies, especially late at night, keep your belongings close and don't flash the cash or your expensive camera.



Cycling Round London

Next on the evolutionary scale after walking, is cycling. This has become a much more enjoyable thing in the last few years. As more normal people take to the saddle so drivers of cars and lorries and taxis and buses have had to become more aware. Plus there are more cycle lanes to keep us safe.

Then in 2010 4,000 hire bikes were put into racks all over London for hire from as little as £2 for unlimited journeys of less than 30 minutes in a 24 hour period.

Even more are available now. They are heavy and cumbersome and they do not come with helmets, but they do have lights and are comfortable and a great way to discover a bit more of the city.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Even if you are staying in London for just a couple of days it should be worthwhile getting an Oyster card or a Visitor Oyster Card. There are a few differences but both give you cheap tickets on the bus, the underground, the ferries and the Docklands Light Railway (DLR).

The visitor Oyster card can only be bought online before you arrive or you can buy a standard Oyster Card at London Underground stations and a variety of shops and stalls around the capital once you arrive.

The differences are that the Visitors Oyster Card will give you discounts on shops and restaurants too whereas the standard card is only a travel card. The other main difference is that the activation fee for a Visitor Oyster Card is non-refundable whereas the fee for the standard card is a deposit and you get that back when you return it. Ultimately, if you think you are going to eat out or shop then get the Visitor card before you arrive!

Generally £10 worth of credit will do you for two days. You can always top it up as you go. To use it, just pass your card over the yellow disc on the bus or at the underground station gates at the beginning and the end of each journey.

Around London by Bus

The London double-decker bus, big and bright and red is one of London's greatest icons. A bus was even London's contribution to the closing ceremony at the Beijing Olympic Games. To come to London and not take the bus is like having cornflakes without milk. If you just want to "have a go" look out for a Number 15 and head up to the top deck. It will take you past all the major sites and is a lot cheaper than a Sightseeing Tour.

Around London by Tube

Much maligned but by gosh is it useful. Here are some top tips.

- Do avoid rush hour (08:00 to 09:00 and 17:00 to 18:30 Monday to Friday)
- Do have your Oyster card ready as you approach the barriers
- Don't stop just in front of, or just beyond, the barrier
- Do stand on the right of the escalator and tuck your bag in.
- Do look for the shiny patches on the platforms: that is where the doors will open
- Do let people off of the train first
- Don't take glares personally – riding on the tube maybe fun for a visitor but imagine doing it day in day out for the rest of your life!
- Do ask for help – after they get over the shock of being spoken to like a human being, Londoners can be very helpful!

Around London by Taxi Cab

To come to London and not take a ride in a taxi is like having cornflakes without sugar... it really is up to you. If you like to travel privately or if you really can't be bothered to find out where you are going, then by all means hop in a cab. Make sure it is big and black and has a license: don't ever get into an unmarked car offering services. And make sure that the meter is on – although they always are!

It can be quick but, if the traffic is against you then you just have to sit and watch the meter go round.

I've often had to get a taxi but, whilst they have always got me to my destination, I have never once got out thinking that the ride was worth it! It is not that they are ripping you off – there are no villains in Black Cabs these days – but I've always thought that a taxi should be ones last resort.

Around London by Rickshaw

As you leave the theatre you will no doubt be harangued by a crowd of three-wheeled centaurs, with the torso of a man and the body of a tricycle. There is a lot of contradictory information about whether you should take a ride in one and it is hard to make a positive recommendation here. There is a voluntary code of practice and the major companies adhere to this, however it is not clear that their riders do!

Those cycling for a company do have public liability insurance, do have lights provided, do have a code of conduct and a set price code (if not set prices) and their machines are checked regularly, but they do not all work for companies, they do not all use their lights, they are not CRB checked and, until their activities are properly legislated for and they are accepted by other road users in London, you are taking your own life in your hands if you step on board.

Yes it looks fun, well maybe not on a cold night, but my advice is don't risk it. I know I am being a kill-joy, but if I said "go for it" and then there was an incident I would never forgive myself.



Theatre Breaks - Staying Over Night

If you are lucky enough to be able to turn your night at the theatre into a short break then I greatly recommend it. London is a fabulous city and not having to go home after the show; being able to go and explore the next day, being able to see some of London's world-famous attractions, to do some shopping, to eat at one of its world-beating restaurants, to take a cruise on the Thames or to visit one of its world-class museums or galleries (many of which are free) is truly a very special treat.

As with all capital cities the range of hotels is vast. I won't talk about specific hotels here but for the purpose of a theatre break I would limit the choice in two ways: stay within Zone One of the travel map and don't stay at anything less than a three star hotel.

Zone One is basically anything on the Underground map within the compass of the Circle (yellow) Line. It takes in the West End (which is basically Covent Garden and Soho and Mayfair), Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia, Marylebone, Euston, Kings Cross, parts of the City (business district), Westminster, Victoria, Kensington, Knightsbridge, Paddington and Bayswater.



West End

Obviously the closest hotels to the theatres are in the West End but they do tend to be the most expensive. That is not to say they are not worth the extra money but the demand is greater here, which pushes up prices. Ultimately it is down to the individual as to what you want to spend your money on.

If the hotel is an important part of your stay then it is worth the extra. If you just want a place to rest your head then maybe you can cut a few corners.

Even a West End hotel could be 40 minutes walk from your theatre, so just check where you are and what you are near before you splash the cash!

Victoria

Victoria is a good place to stay – close to Buckingham Palace and both Victoria theatres but markedly cheaper than the Theatreland hotels and really quick into the West End on the Victoria Line.

If you fancy a walk after the show then it is a lovely stroll across Trafalgar Square, through Admiralty Arch, along The Mall, past the left hand side (as you look at it) of Buckingham Palace and down to Victoria, but that will take you the best part of an hour.

Kensington and Knightsbridge

Just beyond Victoria are Kensington and Knightsbridge. These areas cover a huge area of London with a great variety of neighbourhood. Again you will see the beneficial effect of that little extra distance between theatre and hotel on your wallet when you come to check-out, you'll see the negative effect when you pay the taxi man. If you've got your Oystercard it won't matter a jot! Lots of nice hotels at the end of your journey though and with the money you have saved it is worth upgrading to a four star hotel as there really are some super deals in the 4 star market.

Bayswater

Bayswater is the home of the cheap 3 star hotels. If you just need a place to lay your head then they are great. No airs and graces, clean and friendly and handy by bus, tube or hired bike – although unless you are going through Hyde Park the walk is not exactly inspiring. Check out the lines of artists selling their works of art along the roadside on Bayswater Road every Sunday.

I wasn't going to mention Trip Advisor but as I guess most people will use it at some point to check out their hotels I feel I must. I am not going to say the negative reviews on a lot of the Bayswater hotels are wrong, but I do think they should be taken for what they are: the squeaky wheels that get the grease!

OK Bayswater hotels do not do well on Trip Advisor, but if that was fair then every hotel in Bayswater would have closed down long ago. It is all about managing expectations. Negative reviewers tend to compare them with their best experiences, not with something a little more realistic! These are small, cheap, hotels in a city where nothing is truly cheap!

So if you look at the price of the four star hotels in Theatreland and decided to downgrade, don't still expect to get a four star hotel in the West End!

Bloomsbury

Bloomsbury is a good place to look. Some great little four star townhouse hotels and some pretty average 3 star hotels (and that's not meant as a criticism) all within a short stroll of the nearer edges of Theatreland. It is also half way between Theatreland and the mainline stations of Kings Cross, St Pancras and Euston. This is very handy if you are coming into London from the North of the country.

Southbank

South of the River is considered by many a different country, let alone the same city! But there are two

great reasons for staying south of the river. First the prices and secondly the absolutely jaw-droppingly wonderful view from any one of the bridges that cross the Thames on the return to your hotel after the show (unless it is raining of course). Life on the Southbank is pretty lively too: the National Theatre, the Royal Festival Hall, the London Eye, the London Aquarium, the Tate Modern, Shakespeare's Globe, The Old Vic, Vinopolis... it is actually worth a visit in itself!

London Hotel Stars

I've said to stick with 3 star hotels and above. Within the category of 3 star hotel the range is so large that if a particular hotel can't get a third star then I really don't want to find out why. Also the difference in price between a lower level three star hotel and a two star hotel is negligible anyway, so what are you gaining?

Recent years have been the best time to come to London, EVER. All hotels in London spent the 8 years leading up to 2012 gearing up for the Olympics. No-one wanted to have any rooms out-of-service and no-one wanted to be a three star hotel if a little extra work would get them that 4th star and a few extra quid on the room rate.

So there are now a lot of recently refurbished hotels in London with lovely rooms and pristine public areas. There has also been a lot of new builds and that could potentially mean a lot of surplus rooms and a lot of great deals now the games have finished. I don't have a crystal ball but 2013 was a bonanza year for the London visitor, in terms of great deals and 2014 could be the same: visitors will certainly not be stuck for reasons to come to London!

Hotel Facilities

A surprising number of hotels boast small gyms, swimming pools, saunas... very few have car parks. Most have a concierge. Three star hotels will at least have a bar and a breakfast room and some, like the St Giles, will have bars, cafe and restaurants all under the same roof – you see: a great variety in just one category!

All four star hotels will have a restaurant and, mundanely, a lift to all floors (in London it can be the only deciding factor between a three and a four star hotel!). Rooms can be bigger but very few standard rooms in London are generous.

Fact: you would need the combined floor space of Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle just to give each London hotel room one extra square metre!

It is in the four star category where the best deals can be found – certainly in London.

I've never stayed in a hotel long enough to get the value out of five stars and for me a four star hotel is perfect. However if you have got a deal on the ticket you can afford a little luxury and often you don't have to pay that much more for a 5 star hotel. Check out the Le Meridien, The Courthouse or the Hempel and if you really want to push the boat out, the iconic Ritz and Savoy Hotels: all great five star hotels.

The Hotel Year

Prices in London are seasonal. There are two low periods for the UK visitor: Mid December to the end of February and Mid July to the end of August. If you want to come to London, come then.

The difference is especially noticeable in the middle of the week as corporate business drops off during these two periods – outside of these two periods corporate demands can make it quite expensive to stay overnight during the middle of the week. Your company may be able to afford it, but can you?

The expensive months are September to early December with November and December being the worst because of events like the World Travel Market and European Bank holidays boosting the pre-Christmas shopping numbers.

Prices also rise in the Spring and early Summer. In spring it all depends on when Easter falls but contracts get renewed in April so if Easter has already been and gone in March, hold onto your wallet in April!



Pre-Theatre Dinner

If you are like me you normally eat at 7 o'clock. Not so good if you are supposed to be in the theatre by 7:30. And if, like me, when you don't eat until 10:30, your stomach lets you and anyone around you, know about it, then that is not an option either. So the early pre-theatre meal is almost obligatory. And it is here that we find the most perfect symbiosis in London.

Most London restaurants will say that their main business hours are from 8 till 10. This means that if they can get a few people in and out before 7:30 then that is a bit of a bonus! What does your average theatre-goer want to do? Get in and out by 7:30 Oh happy days!

All we want is a quick but enjoyable meal, all restaurant owners want to give us is a quick but enjoyable meal, maybe with a bottle of wine thrown in. Perfect!

But wait, it gets better! When the crowds leave at 10, the restaurants are left kicking their heels a bit... what do we want? Coffee and dessert and maybe to finish that bottle of wine off. What do restaurant owners want to give us? Coffee and desert and that old bottle of wine that was hanging around since earlier! Double Perfect.

If you are going to the theatre in London make sure you arrive 2 hours early, find your theatre and pick a nearby restaurant. They will probably know what you want before you sit down... they may even ask, without bidding, "which show is sir and madam seeing tonight?" They don't ask what time, by asking the show they will already know what time and how long it will take you to get there and working back, when they need to be presenting you with the bill!

The theatre-goer and the restaurant owner should be best of friends because they are perfect for each other. Needless to say, every theatre in London is surrounded by a variety of restaurants offering a wide variety of foods at a wide variety of prices.

So perfect is this that many agents will be able to book your pre-theatre dinner at the same time as your ticket and even at the same time as your hotel room if you don't want to leave it until you arrive.

Hotel Restaurants

Do you want to be walking across London on a full stomach, with just 5 minutes to go before curtain

up, having just eaten at an empty hotel restaurant?



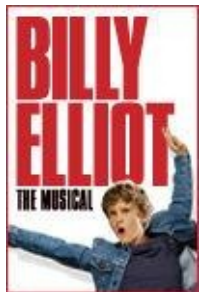
What's On in London Now



London Theatre and Theatre Breaks has been written to last as long as possible – to be relevant at least to the end of 2015. I should imagine that *this* chapter will be out of date with 6 weeks.

If you have signed up for **London Theatre Updates** we will send you monthly updates with new show and cast information as it comes to light. If not, maybe you should consider doing so: **Quote 'LTTB'** and send an email to simon.harding@theatrebreaks.com

West End Shows A- Z



Billy Elliot – Victoria Palace Theatre,

You will be blown away by one of Britain's most successful films adapted superbly for stage. Billy Elliot is the story of a young boy from the North East of England who is determined to dance at the Royal Ballet School, London – despite all the odds stacked against him. With award winning music by Elton John.

Cats - London Palladium

Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical based on Old Possum's Book of Practical *Cats* by T. S. Eliot has been brought back too London by Cameron Mackintosh. Opens December 2014

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory – Theatre Royal Drury Lane,

All time family favourite Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is now brought to life on stage at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane having earlier been pencilled in at the London Palladium. Directed by multi Award winner Sam Menzies and with choreography by Olivier Award winning Peter Darling (*Matilda*) this is going to be the family event of the year!

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time – Gielgud Theatre

15 year old Christopher Boone, a young maths genius with behavioural problems sets off on a

mission to solve the mystery after the unexpected death of his neighbour's dog. Opens June 2014

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels – the Savoy Theatre

Rufus Hound and Robert Lindsay and Samantha Bond in a rather fun musical based on the film about two fraudsters who decide that a French seaside resort is not big enough for the both of them.

Evita – Dominion

Marti Pellow stars in Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's iconic musical, set in Argentina and portraying the life of Eva Peron.

Forbidden Broadway – Vaudeville Theatre

The excellent musical satire that lovingly pokes fun at the productions, stars and personalities of the West End and Broadway. Almost as much an institution as Theatreland itself!

Great Britain – Theatre Royal Haymarket

The National Theatre's hilarious satire tells the story of Paige Britain, the determined News Editor of the Free Press, a fictional tabloid newspaper in an endless war to get more readers.



Jersey Boys – Piccadilly Theatre,

Jersey Boys Theatre Breaks, The Story of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons has moved to the Piccadilly Theatre, London. Discover the rags-to-rock-to riches tale of four boys working their way from the streets of New Jersey to the heights on international pop-stardom.

King Charles III – Wyndham's Theatre

Mike Bartlett's acclaimed new future history play transfers to the West End for a limited season.

Les Miserables – Queen's Theatre,

Whether you're revisiting an old favourite or enjoying this great story afresh, Les Miserables is a truly epic spectacle. A powerful story gently told, of one man and the effect he has on a host of vivid characters as 19th century France plunges toward revolution.

Lord of the Dance – Dangerous Games – London Palladium

Michael Flatley is back with his most spectacular dance show for an 8 week season.

Made In Dagenham – Adelphi Theatre

Set to be one of the most popular productions of the year, Made in Dagenham makes its West End debut in October 2014. The uplifting new West End musical comedy is an inspiring true story based on the hit movie of the same name.



Mamma Mia – Novello Theatre

The Mamma Mia! Theatre Breaks musical, based around the songs of 80s super group Abba, about a lass who's getting married on a Greek Island and her search for her real dad – Super Duper! Now in its 13th year!

Matilda The Musical – Cambridge Theatre,

Winner of a record 7 Olivier Awards, the RSC's production of MATILDA THE MUSICAL has set its feet firmly in London's West End.

Memphis - Shaftesbury Theatre

Memphis tells the incredible story of Huey Calhoun, an ambitious up-and-coming disc jockey who falls for Felicia Farrell and hopes to make her a star. Stars Beverley Knight.

Miss Saigon – Prince Edward Theatre

Miss Saigon returns to London for its 25th anniversary. An American soldier falls in love with a local girl in Vietnam but has to leave before he finds out that he is to become a father.

Once – Phoenix Theatre,

The love of music brings together an Irish singer and a Czech immigrant to a stunning gaelic sound track. Another Broadway import that has taken London by storm.



The Phantom of the Opera – Her Majesty's Theatre,

See Phantom of the Opera and become a part of the story of the haunted Paris Opera stage. When an unknown singer is tutored to become the leading lady by a mysterious masked man, there are bound to be fireworks and even murder.

Shakespeare in Love – Noel Coward Theatre

A stage adaptation of the hugely successful film making its premier just in time to celebrate the 450th year after Shakespeare's birthday. Shakespeare needs a muse if he is to write a hit play and pay off his debts!

Stomp – Ambassadors Theatre,

The British theatrical sensation Stomp makes music from the mundane in this unique, award winning show which has thrilled theatre audiences all over the world.

Sunny Afternoon – Harold Pinter Theatre

The Kinks' musical, telling of the rise to fame of one of Britain's most iconic bands, featuring the music that influenced a generation.



The 39 Steps – Criterion Theatre,

After a sensational sell-out run at the Tricycle Theatre, John Buchan's gripping whodunnit, with four actors playing a minimum of 139 roles, is an astonishing theatrical tour de force – come and join the fun and frivolity.

The Book of Mormon – Prince of Wales Theatre

The creators of South Park turn their lamp on organised religion in this musical about two mormons who try to take God to a small Ugandan village in this smash hit musical from Broadway.

The Commitments – Palace Theatre,

Roddy Doyle's tale of a dublin band and its attempt to save soul music! With great old music performed by a talented young cast.

The Lion King – Lyceum Theatre,

Disney's magnificent stage adaptation of The Lion King features inspired puppetry and technical wizardry, brought to life by a cast of over 40 actors, singers and dancers. A spectacular visual feast, The Lion King transports audiences to a dazzling world that explodes with glorious colours, stunning effects and enchanting music.



The Mousetrap – St Martin's Theatre,

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS IN THE WEST END

Probably the most famous of all the West End plays, and its famous secret is still surprisingly well kept. Who did it?

The Play That goes Wrong - Duchess Theatre

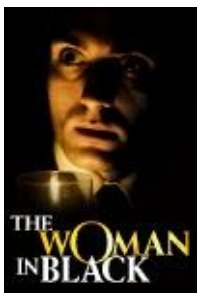
A laugh out loud comedy as a small theatre company attempts to put on their production hoping that everything will go right... of course it doesn't!

The Scottsboro Boys – Garrick Theatre

From the award winning musical duo of Kander and Ebb comes a story about nine teenage boys who changed the world, for ever.

The Woman In Black – Fortune Theatre,

Unanimously acclaimed by the critics, Stephen Mallatratt's adaptation of Susan Hill's best selling novel combines the power and intensity of live theatre with a cinematic quality inspired by the world of film noir. It is a formula that provides theatre audiences with an evening of unremitting drama as they are transported into a terrifying and ghostly world.



Thriller – Live – Lyric Theatre,

Thriller – Live is a spectacular, high octane show celebrating the career of the world's undisputed King of Pop – Michael Jackson, and the Jackson 5. Fully backed by Sony BMG Music Entertainment UK, Thriller – Live marks the first Jackson's dedicated live theatrical experience ever!

Urinetown - Apollo Theatre

When a global water shortage forces governments to ration water, big corporations see a chance to make money. But one price rise too many forces the good folk who use Public Facility 19 to take a stand.

War Horse – New London Theatre,

Following two sold-out seasons at the National Theatre, War Horse is now at the New London Theatre. World War One is the backdrop for this gripping and emotionally charged play based on the original novel by Michael Morpurgo.

White Christmas – Dominion Theatre

Based on the heart-warming Paramount Pictures film and starring Aled Jones and Tom Chambers, White Christmas is guaranteed to get you and your family into the festive spirit this Christmas.

Wicked – Apollo Victoria Theatre,

There has never been a better time to experience Wicked “the hit musical with brains, heart and courage” (The Sunday Telegraph) as it flies into its sixth spellbinding year at the Apollo Victoria Theatre.





Taking the Family to the Theatre

SARA BENN



As my children are still too young I've asked Sara Benn to write this chapter. With over thirty years of experience in the theatre world (she was a child prodigy!) – from actor to actor's agent, from audience member to group bookings specialist – not to mention a dozen or so years experience as a mum, she can cover this subject better than most.

Family Theatre Trips

Taking children to the theatre should not be a daunting experience. As with most things it all comes down to planning and making the visit enjoyable for everyone involved.

I have been taking my two children to the theatre since they were five years old. That was over nine years ago and since then with many shows “under their belt” my children view travelling into London to see a West End production as something very normal.

I must admit I do have a few friends who seem amazed (aghast?) that I take my children so regularly to the theatre – certainly in the early days – but like all things if you start introducing children at a young age to something then they will learn what is expected of them and behave accordingly.

So here, in just a few paragraphs, are some tips that have taken me years to learn and will hopefully make your family trip to the theatre much more relaxing.

Getting to London

We are lucky that our journey into London is quick and direct – getting us into St Pancras International within 25 minutes. When the kids were younger I always made sure I had either books to entertain them on the train or a pack of ‘Trump’ cards which we all enjoyed playing. If there was a larger group of us travelling together, we'd all play ‘Wink Murder’ which was always successful and left everyone in fits of giggles.

Arriving at a busy London station may be a bit overwhelming for some, but it needn't be. Make sure you hold onto smaller children – they are allowed to go through the ticket barriers with you. Slightly older children will enjoy being able to slot their train tickets into the machines or touch their Oyster cards as they pass through the barriers. Getting from the over ground station to the underground is usually a quick walk and always well signposted.

The alternatives to catching the tube are both cheap options and great fun, those being the bus or walking. We tend to use the underground system as it's such a quick and efficient way to get from A to B but the top floor of the bus will be as exciting to your children as it was to you when you were their age (still is for me!).

When the weather is good we have often walked from St Pancras mainline station to the West End which takes about 45 minutes. I try to combine a theatre trip with something else – perhaps a visit to the world famous Hamleys toy emporium, a museum (the British Museum is on our way) or just a quick bite to eat, maybe even a Hagen Daas ice cream in Leicester Square just before the show begins.

There are lots of places to have a picnic in Theatreland and if it's a warm day we might pack a picnic to take with us. I always make sure that the food is in disposable wrapping, so as I'm not lugging around empty containers with me.

There's a number of places not too far from the West End in which are great to have a picnic:

- Coram Field's in Bloomsbury
- Green Park and St James Park in Piccadilly
- Golden Square in Soho
- Or Leicester Square itself – right slap bang in the centre of it all!

What show to choose

For a first time, I would choose a show with a story that your child is familiar with. For instance *Disney's The Lion King* or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The first show I took my children to see was *Disney's The Lion King* as it had been one of their favourite DVDs at home and although my youngest son fell asleep during the second half, he thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience wanting to go back as soon as possible to see another show. (We went back to see a Matinee show of *Disney's The Lion King* when they were a little bit older and no one fell asleep that time around!).

Other times, I've chosen shows because my children have been studying them at school – such as *Les Miserables* and *The Tempest* or if there is a tv celebrity starring in the show that I know my children particularly like as with tv presenters Dick 'n' Dom appearing in *Monty Python's Spamalot* over Christmas 2013.

Matinee or Evening performance?

Even though my children are now in their early teens I still tend to book Matinees where possible.

I'd say for the under 10s that Matinees are definitely the best performances to take them to –

whether it's on a Saturday or Sunday or, during the holidays, mid-week – and a trip to London is always a thrill! During the summer holidays and over the Christmas period, there are number of shows that are aimed specifically at the under 8s – in recent years these have included *The Gruffalo*, *Suessical* and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*.

These shows come into the West End for a limited period of time where they “share” a theatre space (such as *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* which shares the Lyric theatre with *Thriller-Live*) and will have family friendly performance times in the morning, afternoon and at the weekends when the theatre is not being used by the main show.

It is usual for a West End musical to be between 2hours 30 mins to 3 hours in length (including an interval). Evening performances will normally start at 7.30pm which can mean that you are not leaving the theatre until 10.30pm and then have to travel home (unless, of course, you've treated the family to an over-night stay in a London hotel as part of a Theatre Break package).

Plays can often be shorter around one and half hours long – unless it's *War Horse* which is 2 hours 20 mins, but then again, it does have a rather good story to tell.

What I would say about booking a Matinee performance is this... If you are going to the show to see a specific actor, then make sure at the time of booking tickets that they are contracted to appear in your chosen performance – some actors will only be contracted to do six shows a week which can mean that their understudy will perform on Matinees. Of course, there's no absolute guarantee that the advertised actor will appear because they could be ill or have a previous engagement that stops them from being in the show.

There are also a number of shows in the West End (*Disney's The Lion King*, *Matilda & Thriller – Live!*) that follow the Broadway tradition of Tuesday to Sunday performances with no show on Mondays. This is good for the family group as the Monday evening performance is usually swapped for a Sunday Matinee giving you time to get back home for a bath before school the next day.

At the theatre

We'll usually buy a bag of sweets beforehand (but not from the pricey theatre kiosks) to munch through. Don't tend to go for chocolate as it melts quickly and do consider those around you when you are rustling your bags.

The best thing to do is buy sweets without wrappers from your local supermarket and then transfer them to a plastic bag for the theatre trip giving you cheap sweets without the rustle!

If not sweets, then the children will enjoy an ice cream during the interval. Now whilst these frozen treats are above the norm when it comes to price, I must admit they tend to be a very good quality of ice cream and my children really do see them as something to look forward to during a theatre visit.

I would recommend you take a small bottle of water into the theatre with you whether this is bought from home or a local shop – either way it will definitely be cheaper than buying spring water at the theatre bar. Although some theatres provide plastic cups and a jug of water on the bar counter in order

for customers to help themselves free of charge, which is a step in the right direction. Plastic cups are allowed into the auditorium but do have a tendency to be kicked over during the middle of a show!

To make the occasion even more memorable, make sure you buy a programme and factor in time after the show to head round to the stage door to get some autographs. Sometimes the stage door can be tricky to find: just ask the front of house staff for directions.

Getting more adventurous

We started off with musicals where there was lots of visual stimulation and a simple story line that young brains could follow easily. From *Disney's The Lion King*, we moved on to *Shrek the Musical*, *We Will Rock You*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Mamma Mia*, *Les Miserables* and *Phantom of the Opera* to name but a few. After a few years of musical watching, we ventured onto plays with *The Adventures of Tin Tin*, *Treasure Island*, *One Man Two Guvnors* and *Mojo* being amongst the favourites so far.

Plays also tend to be in smaller theatres which may seem a little friendlier to your younger children.

Ticket Prices

Remember every seat has to be paid for – children will not be allowed in for free to sit on parent's laps.

Shows aimed at the young will be cheaper than the big musicals but otherwise West End theatres do not discount for children unless they are part of a school group where discounts can be as much as 60%.

Kids Week in August is a great time to book tickets. Big savings are available on all shows, but only for children: you will still have to pay full price.

Tickets up in the gods are cheaper for everyone and, for kids, the raked seating (the slope from back to front) will help them get a good view. Of course, you are further from the stage but, if your child is nervous about the visit, then the separation between you and the action may serve to calm your child as it can be a bit over-awing at the front of the stalls.



Anything Else

So what have I forgotten? Nothing

What have I missed out? Lots!

The plan with this book was to pass on some of the general knowledge I have picked up over 29 years of going to the theatre in London and helping others go to the theatre in London. It isn't a book of rules or a guide book with facts and figures – apart from the one about turning Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle into hotels.

I hope it just makes it easier for the reader to get to the theatre in London and enjoy their visit a little more.

If you have any more suggestions then by all means do get in touch. Otherwise thank you for reading and I hope we'll see each other at a London theatre soon!

Simon Harding

Note: The accuracy of information in this book is very important to me so, as best as I could manage, it was right when I wrote it – I even had several industry leaders cast an eye over it to make

sure too! I will do a second edition but if you are reading this months or even years after I was here, please forgive what may now have become misleading or down-right wrong: *it was right once!*



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