**BUSH THEATRE TOUR**

The Bush Theatre’s back, after a year of building work, which has seen the former library transformed into a fully accessible space, with two performance areas, more space for community events, and a light bright entrance with a brand new terrace, which opens up the theatre to the surrounding area.

The architects, Haworth Tompkins, are well-known for their work in theatres, including the National, the Royal Court and Liverpool’s Everyman, for which they won the RIBA Stirling prize in 2014. Accessibility was high on the list when redeveloping the Bush, and the result makes it much easier to visit for everyone.

The Bush Theatre sits on the Uxbridge Road just a couple of minutes from Shepherds Bush Green: it’s next to the bustle of Shepherds Bush Market and the railway viaduct that carries tube trains rattling on their journey through west London.

It stands alone, with a side street on one side and the market on the other, a generously proportioned Victorian building of weathered brick, with substantial bay windows and an air of solidity, now enlivened by the bright and punchy banners of the Theatre

It is easily reached via the Overground, Underground and several bus routes, and we’ll give details of them at the end of the tour. For now though, imagine we have just arrived outside a pair of big black gates next to Shepherds Bush Market. They’re open, and we can step inside.

The area is freshly paved with light flagstones which form a terrace running down the right side of the theatre. Immediately in front of us four steps with a rail lead up to the main terrace, and to our right a long ramp provides an alternative way up. The ramp is at the edge of the property, and the brick boundary wall beside it is softened by planting in low raised beds.

The terrace at the top of the ramp is set out with metal tables and red plastic stools and chairs, providing an attractive social space.

Once up the ramp or stairs, the building rises on our left. We walk towards it and, as we reach it, turn left again, going back on ourselves for a couple of metres to reach the big black entrance doors. These double doors are power assisted, and they open outwards, so we’ll need to be ready for this.

Once through the doors, we are in a wide corridor stretching left to right. On the left, this corridor leads to the main theatre via the Box Office and Café bar, and on the right to the new studio theatre.

If we step forwards three or four paces then turn right, we come upon more seating – six rectangular metal tables are lined up along the right side of the corridor, with padded benches in cherry red or mushroom. The area is bright by day because the outside wall to our right is entirely made of glass. Beneath our feet are pale reclaimed floorboards, and the left hand wall is grey-brown London brick, inset with black panels. Fluorescent lights in primary colours run along the top of the wall, and the corridor is more generally lit by large bulbs close to the ceiling.

The corridor leads to the new studio space, which can be used as an intimate performance area seating just 60 people, or for community events. It’s almost square – perhaps eight metres wide and 10 long. The walls are faced with narrow wooden planks painted pale grey, except for the outside wall, opposite the door, which is the original brick. There are three windows high up in this wall, which will be covered for performance events. The ceiling, which is fairly low, bristles with stage lighting. As with the main theatre, the seating will be rearranged to fit each performance.

Retreating from the studio, we head back down the corridor towards the main doors. We pass them, carry on for a few steps to the end of the corridor, and then turn right, into the L-shaped main foyer.

The box office is immediately on our right, a dark wooden unit no more than a metre high, which will be staffed all day and into the early evening (10-8), and is accessible for wheelchair users. Beyond it is the cafe bar, in matching dark wood, with beer pumps, coffee makers and menu boards. It’s L-shaped, curving round to the right just beyond where we stand.

 At this point those who know the theatre may begin to recognise it, for this area has not been substantially altered. It’s the point where the Victorian building begins to reassert itself, with a generous semi-circular arch leading to a shallow bay with seating on our left.

If we keep walking, we pass the bar, and the space opens out: we’re standing in the old entrance hall. To our left is the original entrance from the street, a fairly narrow double door in a porch with four steps down to street level, with a rail on the left. This entrance will remain open. The hall feels full of character, from the old polished floorboards to the rich black or red panels in the ceiling, and the modern mural beyond them to the right, a swirl of abstract shapes in rich dark blues, cleverly designed to fool the eye into thinking the ceiling is a shallow dome.

Straight ahead of us are some double doors with curved tops, in a semicircular architrave. They lead through to a light and spacious room.

As we walk forward and stand in the doorway we discover that this large room owes much to the library it once was. The wall on our right is filled with books - playscripts, hardbacks and theatre reference books, there to be leafed through and explored by passing guests. The wooden floor is scattered with an eclectic mix of chairs and tables – one or two big solid tables in battered natural wood, like old kitchen tables, with several chairs around them, and a number of low tables with a couple of chairs, perhaps leather armchairs if you’re lucky, or wooden kitchen chairs. These are placed round the edges of the room and in the generous bay windows to our left and straight ahead. An upright piano, freshly tuned, stands against the wall opposite us. This is a room to linger in, perhaps with a drink or a snack before the theatre, perhaps for an informal meeting earlier in the day, or maybe alone.

We turn away and move back to the hall, standing with our back to the bar, and the old street door to our left. The wall at the end of the hall to our right is a solid panel of wine red. If we walk to it and turn right, the passage leads past some stairs to a lift on the right, and beyond it, also on the right, a disabled toilet.

If instead we turn left from the hall, a small lobby leads us through to the main theatre, which can seat up to 180 people. As Bush regulars will know, this auditorium has a chameleon-like ability to change from show to show, its padded bench seating facing the performance space on two, three or four sides, and on one occasion being jettisoned entirely in favour of small round tables as the whole place turned itself into a cabaret club.

One of the few constants here are the four tall concrete pillars that stand in a large square within the space, and are part of the structure of the building. The walls and floor are dark grey, except for one outer wall, opposite the entrance, which is plain greyish London stock brick, and the ceiling supports ranks of stage lights. This is an unpretentious working space, ready for action, and of course, it’s the heart of the theatre.

**Getting there**

The Bush Theatre is easy to reach by tube, bus or Overground.

If you’re coming from Shepherds Bush Overground, the theatre’s roughly a seven minute walk away. Cross the road in front of the station, then move left a few metres to the main road in front of Shepherds Bush Central line Tube station. Turn right, and walk the length of Shepherds Bush Green, crossing two minor roads on the way, till you reach Wood Lane. Cross the road (there’s a pedestrian crossing here), and walk on for a minute till you reach a crossing over the road on your left. This leads you directly to the theatre gates.

The alternative tube station, Shepherds Bush Market, serves the Hammersmith and City line and is very close to the theatre. Come out of the station, cross the road via the crossing a few metres to your left, and you’ll be standing at the theatre gates!

Finally, no fewer than 25 bus routes stop nearby, at Shepherds Bush Market, on the Green, or at the Central line station.

Routes 207, 260, 283 and 607 stop at Shepherd’s Bush Market

Routes 72, 94, 95, 148, 220, 237, 272, 283 and 295 stop at Shepherd’s Bush Green

and Routes 31, 49, 94, 148, 207, 228, 237, 260, 295, 316, 607 and C1 stop at Shepherd’s Bush Station.

If you can, do give the Bush Theatre a try. It is firmly established as one of the country’s foremost new writing theatres, and an interesting place to visit. What’s more, you’ll be assured of a warm welcome.