

Will theatre company stand test of time?

The news that Richmond Theatre is to have its own production company is a reminder of its chequered past and the real life dramas and scandals it has seen - including a bitter political row involving the current Richmond upon Thames council leader Tony Arbour.

Richmond had a theatre on the Hill back in the 1700s - and one on the green since 1765. The present building is 167 years old and while most suburban Victorian ivals (Kingston, Chiswick, Hammersmith, Brentford) were consigned to the developer's ball and chain Matcham's architectural gem managed to fight off the proboscis.

The freehold has been held by the Butterworth family for many years, but in December 2000 the management passed into the safe keeping of the Ambassador Theatre Group and their new venture

illustrates their confidence in the enterprise and is the brave concept of the chief executive Karin Gartzke, who has kept a steady hand on the tiller.

However, the previous three decades had been telling, laden with crises and controversies. Back in the seventies, the Theatre on the Green was run by Louis Michaels, an entrepreneur who had made his money from a department store and turned to theatre management as a more challenging and stimulating enterprise.

He took over from Fredrik Piffel with connections dating back to the forties. Louis and his manager and companion Eric Channel, who had been in the rag trade, tried to find the right formula to ensure that bums reached the red plush. Huge sums were invested into converting the gallery and creating a separate entrance for the working class - it became an acceptable

venue for the middle class with chairs that boasted arms and springs.

The same pair enjoyed the challenge of trying to keep the books black but found it swallowed up much of the cash acquired in selling frocks - and involved more philanthropy than profits. It survived for around a decade or so under their tender loving care until Louis died in 1981.

A calamity arose in the nineties when the building fell below the technical standards required for staging modern plays and musicals. It was clear that the hefty refurbishment investment required could never offer a commercial return.

Enter stage left Sally Green - the socialite wife of a property millionaire, Robert Bourne, who had acquired the lease in the eighties - and who had the looks, charm, energy and vision to get the building upgraded.

She persuaded Richmond upon Thames Council - then under the Lib Dems - that with their backing she could raise the cash required through a charitable trust. The council was struggling to hold off predatory developers encircling the floundering Richmond Ice Rink and worried that the theatre might meet the same fate.

But it was not long before she was involved in an embarrassing row with the chairman of her fundraising committee, a former actor turned businessman who resigned amid a blaze of publicity, arguing that her ardour did not add up.

He was right of course and in the end beleaguered Lib Dems had to step in and underwrite the debt, which by this time were enormous.

They took a lot of stick from the present leader Tony Arbour and his cohorts, then in opposition, concerned about the way

council tax payers' money was being sucked in and the lack of transparency on the true cost.

Another controversy raged when it was decided to remove the distinctive cupola-topped canopy which crowned the front of the building under the misguided guise of restoring the listed building to its original facade. It cost £260,000 to take down and means there is no shelter when a fall horse overflows for an interval break!

But a decade is a long time in theatrical history and under Ambassador the theatre, paying its way generously and providing the kind of entertainment that meets the borough's taste, Richmond Theatre Productions, though, have yet to prove their worth - as it is one thing to stage the tried and tested but quite another to provide original fare. All eyes will be on them - and wishing them well.