



Treading the boards

Soft planting gives new context to the famous concrete terraces of the National Theatre, London

Author: **Kendra Wilson**, a writer with an interest in garden style.

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Visiting London's National Theatre has always been a rewarding experience, though finding the entrance could be a challenge. Anonymous walkways and stairways refused to offer clues, and on arriving in the warm, carpeted interior, there would be little desire to go out again, except to stand on a concrete balcony during the interval.

Recently, the National Theatre has been reconfigured so that it is easily accessed from the riverfront, by people who may or may not be theatre-bound. In its midst is a remarkable terrace garden, open to everyone yet feeling almost secret. Large planters of richly hued perennials and bulbs mingle with

NATIONAL THEATRE GARDEN

Location: South Bank, London SE1 9PX.

Size: 750sq m (900sq yd).

Soil: blended sterilised loam.

Age: two years.

Summary: terrace with perennials, bulbs and grasses in raised beds.

Open: 9.30am - 11pm.

Designer: Sean Walter of The Plant Specialist.

grasses chosen by designer and owner of The Plant Specialist, Sean Walter. Every plant has a proven record against exposure and weather, yet there is nothing austere in their combined effect as they spill onto seating around raised beds. There are ladybirds everywhere, as well as bees from three rooftop hives.

Softening edges

The 1976 concrete building has had a mixed reception over the years, loathed by HRH the Prince of Wales yet loved by conservationist and Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman. As a backdrop to this lively garden (officially the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Terrace) the pale geometry shimmers, in a way that may have surprised even its architect, Sir Denys Lasdun.

As Sean says, 'The idea was to create something that was naturalistic, in contrast to the lines of the building'.

The project came about informally when Sean was talking to the former Executive Director of the National Theatre, Nick Starr. They discussed how the contentious building was in need of an injection of humanity, starting with a garden. Soon after, Sean was invited to contribute to the considerable turnaround of the National Theatre's fortunes.

The theatre's public spaces were originally conceived as another type of theatre: people interacting with the drama of architecture. In fact, visitors may have felt upstaged. Now, the newly planted terraces flatter the whole setting. While rustling grasses mitigate the sound



of traffic, the riverscape of London, from Whitehall to St Paul's Cathedral is visible all around. Tourists are not obtrusive here and theatre audiences come and go, deep in conversation. Those who really appreciate the garden are locals or those in-the-know, who come to enjoy the space in the day – just what this garden is intended for.

Dramatic planting

Grasses make up the core planting, with alluring fluffy flowerheads of *Pennisetum* providing a playful distraction. The plant list is fairly narrow, every group chosen for its drama and resilience, including three selections of *Pennisetum* and five types of *Allium*, from sculptural *Allium cristophii* to exceedingly tall

A. 'Summer Drummer' competing with *Stipa gigantea* for height. Preparing to add colour later are the tightly edited prairie plants, including *Monarda* 'Prärienacht', *Echinacea purpurea* 'Fatal Attraction' and *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune'.

The terrace, made by architects Haworth Tompkins, de-brutalises what was once an uncompromising space. Weathered wood decking marks the central seating area, while planters and black-stained benches are made from the same narrow planks – all referencing the National Theatre's board-marked concrete.

Flowers were chosen mainly to complement the grasses. 'Careful consideration was given to their vigour and compatibility,' says Sean. 'Plants such as *Agastache*, which

Agapanthus 'Midnight Star', *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' emerge from grasses, providing strong colour.

Visitors enjoy space to sit, with views of the Royal Festival Hall and London Eye, seen through *Stipa gigantea* and *Althaea cannabina*.

The red towers, now dismantled, were part of a temporary performance space in front of the theatre.

enjoy good drainage, take advantage of the conditions.' Raised beds are mulched with composted bark and cut back in stages between December and February, before the emergence of bulbs.

The greening of that other testament to brutalism, the Barbican (devised by Nigel Dunnett), happened to come about at the same time, an encouraging sign that the colonising of plants in unexpected places is becoming part of our zeitgeist.

There are plans for more planting at street level at the National Theatre, where Sean has already introduced avenues of birch running down each side of the building, underplanted with *Hakonechloa* and *Pittosporum*. The rest of the South Bank is a blank concrete canvas. ●