

Monday February 9th 2026

Buxton Opera House

Jonathan Thompson

Reviewer: Janette Sykes

Sheer passion and enthusiasm brought genuine warmth and sunshine to light up a dull February day during this riveting resumé focusing on the past, present and future of Buxton's popular Edwardian Opera House.

Jonathan Thompson - Head of Operations and Deputy Chief Executive at the much-loved theatre - began his wide-ranging and engaging talk by explaining that he had joined the team just after Covid: "It has been an incredible five years, filled with lots of interesting experiences and fun times."

Prior to moving to Buxton to be closer to his mother and the family home in the Staffordshire Moorlands, Jonathan worked in a similar role at the Birmingham Hippodrome for 19 years. He also went through a three-year 'midlife crisis' working as a holiday rep in Ibiza before heading for the High Peak: "I had a really good time there, but don't remember very much about it!"

Grade II* listed Buxton Opera House was designed by famous British theatre architect Frank Matcham and was built at a cost of £25,000 in 1903, which Jonathan estimated would be nearer to £3 to £4 million today. It is one of just 19 Matcham masterpieces of the original 92 to survive today – but the High Peak Theatre Trust, the charity that runs the theatre on behalf of High Peak Borough Council (HPBC) – has the good fortune to be working with Matcham expert David Wilmore to secure its long-term future.

Jonathan explained that respected theatre consultant Wilmore is working closely with the Trust and HPBC as part of National Heritage Lottery funded investigation work into how the Opera House can be further improved and enhanced to bring its facilities into the 21st century and beyond for the benefit of theatre-goers, performers, staff and volunteers alike.

The findings – which also include consultation with audiences to glean their views – will inform a major capital programme in the coming years to, in Jonathan's words, 'ensure that the theatre is still there and thriving in another 120 years' time. We have to come into the 21st century'. Areas

currently being explored include better wheelchair access and facilities for disabled people, better and more efficient bar provision and more toilets. Others encompass automated techniques to fly in scenery and bring in bigger productions, altering the stage so that its 'rake' or slope is not as pronounced, modifying the first five rows of seats in the stalls to boost sightlines and improving backstage facilities and access for performers. The traditional method of flying in scenery with hemp ropes will be retained to preserve the theatre's historical integrity, with the automated system added on – but because that will increase its weight, contractors will have to assess if existing foundations will need to be strengthened to bear the extra load. Another historical bonus – the original framework once used to paint scenery will also be preserved at the back of the theatre.

No exact costings or timescale have as yet been drawn up for the capital work – but before any of it starts, essential repairs to make the roof watertight are scheduled in 2027. Jonathan and the BOH team are hoping that, by working closely with contractors both before and during the capital work, they will be able 'to keep the theatre open as far as is possible' throughout the improvement programme.

Jonathan added that the Opera House is a 'receiving' theatre, which means that most of its productions are bought in, rather than created and staged by the theatre itself. Notable exceptions are its annual pantomime, which this year broke box office records and played to near capacity audiences, and in-house productions such as the forthcoming *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

Visiting companies bring their own equipment, sets and sound systems, and sometimes sets have to be cut because the stage isn't big enough to accommodate them, but Jonathan said the BOH team is skilled at adapting to accommodate what needs to be done to ensure that particular shows can go ahead.

"We are a charity but also a business, and have to make money to keep the theatre open," he added, pointing out that, generally, the theatre generally receives only around a tenth of box office receipts – so if a ticket costs £30, the Opera House usually gains just £3, though this can vary from production to production. Unsurprisingly, a dedicated team of 120-plus volunteers play a crucial role: "We rely heavily on their hard work – we wouldn't be able to open the front doors without them," said Jonathan. "We're also very grateful to theatregoers who buy

programmes, drinks and refreshments for their support in keeping the theatre going.”

As well as generating its own income, the Opera House brings in tourists from a wide catchment area to boost the town’s economy, added Jonathan. “The theatre is such a draw in supporting local hotels, B&Bs, bars, restaurants, taxi and train services. When it is booked out, local businesses really notice the difference, and staff their premises accordingly. We aren’t the full draw to the town, but we do have a positive impact.”

The Pavilion Arts Centre (PAC) offers a complementary venue and has developed over time to accommodate Buxton Film, ‘blockbuster’ films and streamed National Theatre productions, as well as more live performances, such as the recent Buxton Faun, produced in-house, penned by a local author and featuring local actors. Such initiatives also give participants in the Opera House’s work experience programme the opportunity to try out ‘behind the scenes’ jobs in theatres, such as lighting, sound and technical roles and to move on to paid employment.

“We try to spread the message among 14- to 16-year-olds that there are lots of jobs in theatres other than performing on stage, and we’ve had some success stories,” said Jonathan. “One ex-member of the housekeeping team started as a cleaner, went on to be a housekeeper and is now studying stage management at Guildford. Another who gained experience as a volunteer has just started a costume design course in London.” Similarly, the theatre’s Young Company provides invaluable experience for young people with their sights set firmly on the footlights – four of its members have gone on to secure paid work as dancers in the annual pantomime.

Jonathan is also justifiably proud of the Opera House’s current status as an Arts Council England-supported National Portfolio Organisation, receiving a total of £900,000 from 2023 – 26 to support its artistic and community work and to bring high-quality, diverse and collaborative productions to the area. Outreach work done by the Learning and Engagement Team is particularly important – for example, the pre-Christmas, home-produced show *The Elves and the Shoemaker* was not only performed at the PAC, but also in local schools and care homes.

Another, perhaps smaller, success, much appreciated by theatregoers, has been scored by the VIP Lounge, a former storeroom between the

Upper Circle and the Gallery that has been transformed into a serviced space where up to 12 people who pay extra can enjoy pre-show and interval drinks and ice creams. “When I first suggested it, some people thought I’d lost the plot, but it now sells out for most performances,” said Jonathan.

He concluded by urging u3a members to support Buxton Opera House in whatever way they can – by putting ‘bums on seats’, offering their services as a valued volunteer or making a much-needed donation to contribute to its work. Further information about the various ways you can help – plus details of a forthcoming, free talk by David Wilmore, ‘Buxton Opera House – Past Present and Future’ on Thursday March 12 – can be found on the theatre’s website: buxtonoperahouse.org.uk.