

# The Glory of the Garden



The Glory of the Garden:  
English Regional Theatre  
and the Arts Council 1984-2009

Edited by

Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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Particular thanks to Revinder Chahal for designing such a cover that so eloquently sums up the challenges of writing, researching and working in regional theatre.



## FOREWORD

This book is the result of two Arts and Humanities Research Council funded projects. The first, was a resource enhancement grant which enabled Ros to salvage the archive of the Liverpool Everyman, re-house them at Liverpool John Moores University, employ an archivist to catalogue it, and then an interviewer (Kate) to create an oral history of the theatre. From the stories told to us over the course of the project, it became clear that there were many other stories to be told and we decided to organise a conference, 'The Glory of the Garden? Regional Theatre Since 1980' at Liverpool John Moores University to explore them. That was back in September 2006. Since then regional theatre has seen a number of highs and lows, the Arts Council has been through two restructurings, and a second AHRC funded project began, this time on the relationship between subsidy, policy and practice in British theatre. This project focuses on the archive of the Arts Council of Great Britain housed in the V&A, and is a joint venture between the University of Reading and the V&A. We have been lucky in our colleagues and contributors, both to the book and to the conference, and extend our thanks to them all.

This book however, is dedicated to those who work in regional theatre, and strive to support it.



# INTRODUCTION

## KATE DORNEY AND ROS MERKIN

Asked to sum up their perceptions of the history of regional producing theatres in England since 1984, most people would characterise it as an era of crisis. Unquestionably, crises run like a sore through the period, and inevitably through this book. From William Rees-Mogg warning in 1984 that many of the Arts Council's clients would "find their existence jeopardised" to Dominic Cavendish's 2008 assertion that "uncertainty hangs over some of the country's biggest regional houses", the sense of impending doom, destruction and devastation runs deep.<sup>1</sup> During this time other voices have clamoured to confirm this. In 1990, Philip Hedley, artistic director of Theatre Royal, Stratford East, had become so weary of reading scare-stories and signing petitions for endangered theatres that he established a national campaign to save them. Journalists rushed to confirm this view: "Curtains Up for the Last Act", announced John Davison in *The Times* in 1986. By 1997, *The Observer* proclaimed that the litany of troubled companies was "as lengthy as some Wagnerian operas" and ten years later, Philip Hensher could start an article on yet another regional theatre facing a crisis by saying:

When the same old story seems to be wearily repeating itself, it's tempting to put the whole thing in a box marked "Dog bites man" and ignore it. "Doubts over regional theatre's future" is just one of these stories; type the four key words into Google and it effortlessly produces nearly 2 million results.<sup>2</sup>

As Hedley pointed out in a letter to the *Guardian*, it was like working in a hotel in Scarborough, poised to fall over the cliff and into the sea.<sup>3</sup>

One of the dangers of categorising the period in this way is that we quickly become immune to the crises and the closures. We forget that each of these stories is, as Hensher argues, a very individual story of "tragedy and neglect". We don't just become immune to so many crises, we also forget that "regional theatre is not a unified thing. Each theatre will have its own flavour, its own history and its own place in the community".<sup>4</sup>

This book, then, tells some of those stories and some of those tragedies. This introduction and the chapters that follow aim to fill in the gaps between the cracks that the crises inevitably produced and to argue that the picture is a complex one (as well as, at times, a bleak and confusing one).

This book also serves to argue that the local matters. Paul Kingsnorth recently made an impassioned plea for the local and the destruction being wrought by globalisation. We are, he argues, discovering:

that a global market requires global tastes – that it needs us to want the same things, feel the same things, like or dislike the same things, see in the same way. Only that way can demand cross, and break down, cultural boundaries. And we are discovering that an advanced post-industrial economy is symbiotic with mass production, the smoothing out of edges, uniform and characterless development – the standardised manufacture of places as well as things.<sup>5</sup>

In order for this global economy to progress, we must, he continues:

cease to be people who belong to neighbourhoods, communities, localities. We must cease to value the distinctiveness of where we are. We must become consumers, bargain-hunters, dealers on a faceless, placeless international trading floor. We must cease to identify with our neighbourhood, our landscape and our locality, or to care much about it. We must become citizens of nowhere.<sup>6</sup>

The danger of this in theatrical terms is self-evident – as citizens of nowhere with “the same chains in every high street; the same bricks in every new housing estate...the same menu in every pub” we are also to have the same shows in all our theatres.<sup>7</sup> This tide of McDonaldisation is something that regional theatres can stand out against. For Michael Billington theatres are “as much part of a city’s identity as the local soccer team”, and there is a strong social case for keeping them:

wander around our increasingly desolate city centres at night and they are often the only real source of communal life. Kill them off and you might as well shut up shop.<sup>8</sup>

These theatres then can, at their best, provide a sense of life, a sense of who we are in all its complexities and contradictions, a sense of our community. One example, from many, can be drawn from West Yorkshire Playhouse’s work in 1999/2000 on the Ebor Gardens Estate in which the theatre laid out its aspirations to become a hub in “a sophisticated set of relationships between institutions in the city” and in which it saw itself as

having responsibility for “providing the communities in its neighbourhood with ways into a wider world”.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, while staff at the National were involved in “soul-searching” about the age and whiteness of their audience, at West Yorkshire:

an over-55s debating society was sorting out media sex coverage, craft groups were making bobbin lace, and two Leeds accountants were investigating the Business Circle deal for corporate entertainments.<sup>10</sup>

There are numerous other examples that suggest a local theatre can forge links in the community, as Blackman’s chapter seeks to show in discussing the educational role of theatres, and can also provide a communal space in a city, something which is increasingly coming under attack with the privatisation of our public spaces. And this says nothing about the work on stage that can reflect and refract the community. At Liverpool Everyman, the arrival of Gemma Bodinetz and Deborah Aydon in 2003 led to a focus on plays “Made in Liverpool”. These have included: Tony Green’s *The Kindness of Strangers* (2004) which looked at the question of asylum seekers; Esther Wilson, John Fay and Lizzie Nunnery’s *Unprotected* (2006) a verbatim piece about street sex workers and the question of a safe zone; Jonathan Larkin’s *Paradise Bound* (2006) focused on a community that felt as though the Capital of Culture was shutting them out; and an updated version of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* by Diane Samuel and Tracy-Ann Oberman (2007), set on Hope Street, where the theatre is located.

But it is seen as being rather old fashioned, small-minded, politically reactionary and nostalgic to defend or champion the local, that somehow we want to “shore up the stockades of little England”<sup>11</sup> We are either global and urged to be less provincial (a word which itself has loaded connotations) or, more recently, cosmopolitan: all members of a single moral community.<sup>12</sup> This book seeks to argue that in our rush to abandon the local we are in danger both of missing its importance and missing the subtlety, complexity, diversity and colour it can bring to theatre, as Cochrane shows in her chapter on intercultural performance in Birmingham and Nottingham. The fractures between local and global or local and cosmopolitan are also refracted in the split that runs through the story between London and the regions, the local and the metropolitan. The two sides have often been at each other’s throats, quick to apportion blame for wrongs perceived to have been done. As Peter Hall points out:

If an actor in Wrexham rep cannot afford a new pair of tights, it is all the fault of Hall and his sybaritic cronies who spend their days lolling on beds of down puffing on opium pipes and making bonfires of public money.<sup>13</sup>

As Artistic Director of the National, Hall had his own axe to grind. And the grinding of axes dominates the discourses around regional theatre, exacerbated by decreasing amounts of cash and divisive policies that pit one organisation against another

We have tried to pinpoint here some of the key ideas and themes in the history of English Regional Producing Theatres (ERPTs) between 1984 and 2010 and to trace the troubled relationship between the Arts Council (the centre) and the regions. Inevitably it is partial and draws on existing work.<sup>14</sup> The theatres and companies examined here are just a small sample of England's regional producing theatres, and although some of them are the bedrock of the regional theatre ecology, there are some obvious omissions: the Festival Theatre in Chichester; Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, the Sheffield Crucible, and Manchester Royal Exchange included. There is also a ring of neighbourhood theatres that surrounds the West End including the Lyric Hammersmith, Hampstead Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, the Young Vic and the Tricycle who serve the same function as their regional counterparts. But their work is already documented: extensively in case of the Tricycle and Stratford, less so in case of the others, and their relationship to the centre is not the same as that of a regional theatre. For one thing, it's easier and cheaper to get actors to work in London ERPTs and, for another, it's far easier to get national critics to review the work there. What is also mostly absent from this book is any detailed account of the work produced. But that is a story that will have to wait for another day. This story starts in 1956 with the Arts Council closure of its regional offices.

From its outset, the Arts Council always had an eye to the regions with Maynard Keynes seeing nothing more damaging than "the excessive prestige of metropolitan standards" and delighting in a vision of every part of Merry England being "merry in its own way."<sup>15</sup> But despite taking over the 14 regional offices of CEMA in 1946, in 1951-2 these became six regional offices and between 1952 and 1956 all regional offices were closed, despite a Select Committee suggesting that the provinces "where the Arts are not so readily available to the public" provided a more "valuable field than the metropolitan area for the activities of the Council."<sup>16</sup>

In response the regions started to organise, with a deputation from the South West arriving at the Arts Council's headquarters in January 1956 and leaving with funding and the agreement to set up an association. Other associations appeared somewhat haphazardly between 1956 and 1973,

receiving support from Labour's 1965 White Paper *A Policy for the Arts*, until the entire country (with the exception of Buckinghamshire) was covered by 12 associations.<sup>17</sup> Since then, the relationship between the centre (Arts Council in London) and the regions has been vexed, fraught and often poisonously reductive. As Jackson, Merkin and Brown discuss, the 1984 report *The Glory of the Garden* was designed to change this relationship by devolving responsibility for regional theatres to the RAAs. Ever since, the Arts Council and government have been commissioning new reports, reorganising and ushering in new policies to manage this relationship and vowing to ensure greater equality between London and the regions in terms of funding allocated and critical esteem.

But it's not just structural reorganisation that has rung the changes in the regional theatres since 1984. A series of significant shifts in ways of working, expectations and language also shaped the life of these theatres and they have been faced with a barrage of new possibilities. Commercial terminology overwhelmed the subsidised theatre: plural funding, product, marketing, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, business incentives, performance indicators, challenge funding, sponsorship, private sector partnerships, enhancement funding, challenge funding, parity funding, incentive funding and a constant push for plurality in funding sources. Plural funding is not in and of itself a new feature. Rowell and Jackson noted its growth in 1984, but the distinctive development since that date has been the emphasis placed on it and the speed with which theatres have had to turn this policy into practice.<sup>18</sup> Local authority funding was one pot to be plundered but there were other sources to be tapped – and, fundamentally, new ways to define what theatre was about. Although the incentive for this clearly comes from Thatcherism and the desire to wean everyone from what was seen as an over dependence on the welfare state, in terms of theatre funding the key shift was made through the Policy Studies Institute (PSI). In 1985, Myerscough and the PSI were commissioned to undertake the first rigorous research into the economic benefits of the arts. Starting with a pilot study in Merseyside, they followed this with a more detailed study of Glasgow and of Ipswich and Suffolk (for rural comparison) culminating in a survey of the entire country. Published in 1988, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* estimated that £10.5 million was spent on the “cultural leisure market” between 1974 and 1984, about 5.4% of total consumer spending, that it gave direct employment to some half a million people and that the arts were fourth “among the top invisible export earners”.<sup>19</sup>

His work was presaged and accompanied by a series of arguments, booklets, pamphlets and speeches made by the ACGB itself which

highlighted the benefits of a mixed economy. At the Fortune Theatre in September 1985, and complete with steel band and string quartet, it launched *A Great British Success Story*. It was a clear attempt to appeal to the business sense of the government. Described by Rittner as “a change in presentation but not of policy” (and complete with a glossy cover featuring torn up tickets), it was the brainchild of the council’s new finance director Anthony Blackstock, a 35-year-old accountant. It arrived complete with tables and statistics which made the point that the arts in Britain were not only thriving but economically successful and putting money back into the government’s pocket to the tune of £75 million in taxes from its £106 million grant – or investment. They were also attracting tourists, Luke Rittner observing that the arts “are to Britain what the sun is to Spain” and creating jobs. An accompanying briefing paper concluded that:

The money spent from the public purse on the arts is a first-rate investment, since it buys not only the cultural and educational elements, but also a product with which we compete on equal or superior terms with the rest of the world. To provide job opportunities, invest in business expansion and stimulate production and exports, the government could do no better than to put our money into the arts.<sup>20</sup>

Alongside making the case for the economic worth of the arts, theatres were also increasingly expected to look to business for sponsorship. The Association of Business Sponsorship (ABSA) had been founded in 1976 but received a twofold boost in the early eighties when its chairman, Luke Rittner, moved across to become Secretary General of the Arts Council and when Gowrie introduced the Business Sponsorship Incentive scheme in 1984, with the government offering to match selected new sponsorship in the arts (later to be succeeded by challenge funding). Richard Luce, Minister for the Arts, maintained that in 1986 business was contributing some £20 million which by 2007 had become £153.4m.<sup>21</sup> But sponsorship could lead to a variety of problems, as Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre found out in 1986 when ABSA withdrew £3000 of match-funding for a production. The original funding had come from the council workers union NALGO which was sponsoring the production and using the foyer to mount an attack on Government cuts. ABSA wrote to the theatre arguing that NALGO’s support “goes beyond the proper boundaries of business sponsorship” and ABSA were backed up by Richard Luce who agreed it “would be quite unacceptable for taxpayers’ money to be used to support party political purposes in this way.”<sup>22</sup> This is a one off example, but sponsorship has raised continuing problems not least in its reach. In 2007, it was shown that 3% of the arts received 75% of the sponsorship

money and, as Turnbull points out, the bulk of sponsorship went to more 'prestigious' companies (she cites the RSC's £3.3 million deal with Royal Insurance between 1988 and 1994) and to the more commercial activities. In 1994-5, Equity claimed that business sponsorship was worth, on average, about £7,500 per theatre and questioned whether the investment of time and scarce resources justified the sums raised. They too were concerned about the problems regional theatres found in attracting sponsorship, citing the Swan Theatre in Worcester where it only accounted for 2% of their overall income.<sup>23</sup> On top of this, as Andrew Sinclair notes:

Commercial sponsorship was also fickle and impermanent, usually for a single event; and it tended to play safe, putting its money on the known and the fashionable rather than the new and the experimental. It paid for good and cheap publicity.<sup>24</sup>

But, the biggest problem was that it was "not serving as the icing on the cake for many companies, but as the necessary bread and butter". At the Theatre Royal in Plymouth, where, in 1990, the artistic director Roger Redfarm could claim they had been "the very model of a Thatcherite theatre", raising £4.25 million the previous year from box office, sponsorship, catering and other sales, they were still facing a deficit of £384,000 and considering the closure of the studio. Given commercial investment of over £431,000 (making its turnover third only to that of the RSC and the National), it did not bode well for other ERPTs.<sup>25</sup>

If *A Great British Success Story* argued for the economic value of the arts, then *Partnership: Making Arts Money Work Harder* (1986) argued for the use value of them as well. The partnerships in question were working to bring new life to the inner cities, to expand and develop cultural industries (and consequently the number of jobs) and to improve the quality of arts provision outside of London. *An Urban Renaissance* (1989), subtitled "Sixteen case studies showing the role of the arts in urban regeneration" set out to demonstrate how the arts were making a substantial contribution to the revitalisation of cities and to urban renewal. The case studies, none of which directly included an ERPT, showed how arts development could not only attract tourists and business to an area but also act as a catalyst for regeneration, enhance the quality of the built environment, help build self-confidence in individuals and provide a focal point for community pride and identity.

But if all these publications attempted to speak the language demanded by government, it didn't follow that the Council were not above pointing the finger at the government or demanding higher subsidy. They were quite often a lever to apportion blame or demand more. In *Partnership*, the

finger was pointed at the lack of central resources which had “sadly” brought the Housing the Arts programme to a halt and at the fact that further progress could be achieved with devolution if there was “renewed commitment from central Government”.<sup>26</sup> It also warned quite starkly what might happen to sponsorship if the Government’s expenditure plans raised fear rather than hope:

Insufficient funding directly affects the quality and number of events which an arts organisation can produce. This in turn, threatens box office targets and deters sponsor; it leaves companies with idle assets and surplus capacity, limiting the range of products which can be offered for partnership and leading to disillusion and distrust. There is a quick and modest antidote to this spectre of waste and failure: a proper uplift in basic funding.<sup>27</sup>

It seemed that Myerscough had spawned a new industry though he was widely criticised on a number of counts for both his wide definition of what constituted culture and what constituted a benefit. As Sir Alan Peacock pointed out, if one city were to attract business through its arts policy, another city would logically be the loser, warning as well, that the economist “might become a hired gun for the cultural establishment”.<sup>28</sup> The Arts Council seemed not to want to heed the warnings about hired guns and instigated their own economic impact survey in 2004 and their own social impact survey in 2006, both by Dominic Shellard.<sup>29</sup>

Executive directors began to appear alongside or above artistic directors (although Ian Brown warned they should be seen not as dry bureaucrats but as impresarios)<sup>30</sup> and theatres hired and had to find the money for fundraisers, a move which didn’t always pay off in financial terms. The scope of the changes and demands is well summed up in Equity’s 1996 report, designed as a look at subsidised theatre 10 years after the Cork Report. Not only did they find that any sense of overall strategy had been rejected in favour of a “collection of misdirected, uncoordinated, ill-defined and short term initiatives” but that the number and speed of these initiatives was truly “impressive”. There were seven different Ministers for the Arts and Secretaries of State for National Heritage between 1986 and 1996, each pursuing their own policy priorities. They go on to point out “the most startling development of the decade has been the sheer volume of administrative and legislative changes – numbering over 35 – that have been heaped upon the sector”.<sup>31</sup>

One example serves to illustrate the story – others are included in the chapters that follow. The Swan at Worcester, opened in 1968, had the dubious privilege of being one of the least well-funded producing theatres

throughout its entire 40-year history. It was one of the theatres moved in *Glory's* devolution drive of 1985/6, becoming the responsibility of West Midlands Arts (WMA). In 1998, WMA announced their intention to withdraw funding in April 1999, as Michael Foster, MP for Worcester, explained in a parliamentary debate in October 2002:

West Midland Arts announced its intention to remove completely its funding...because it was under funded and needed to make savings. The Swan was chosen as the sacrificial lamb because historically the local authority had funded the theatre poorly. West Midlands Arts took the view that if the local council did not value a theatre then there was no reason to put money into it.<sup>32</sup>

The council responded by agreeing an extra £83,000 a year, on top of their annual grant of £54,000, for three years. The theatre developed a three-year plan for 1999-2001 called *Creative Connections* and WMA agreed to three years worth of funding. In 2001, a city council working party recommended that the grant was maintained at the full level after the agreement expired but in the same year, the Swan discovered it was one of only four theatres not to benefit from the £25 million windfall.<sup>33</sup> WMA, through the lottery programme, funded a report by Andrew McKinnon. This concluded that the main problem faced by the theatre was under funding. The Swan urgently needed an extra £77,000 a year and work needed to start even more urgently on building a new arts centre for the city. It had already been identified in 1998 that vital work needed to be undertaken on the forty-year-old theatre and in investigating its relocation away from the flood plain on which it had been built. Whilst WMA and the county council were prepared to find the much needed £77,000 identified by McKinnon, at the same time the county council announced its decision to withdraw the 'top-up' money of £83,000. It had its own financial problems and was facing a £1.4 million shortfall. The Swan (along with youth services and the Museum of Local Life) was to be its sacrificial lamb, one councillor claiming, "it is highly expensive and labour intensive", and a "costly drain on resources". If they could remove the professionals and run the theatre through amateur groups and volunteers things looked much rosier. "It leaves us with an uneasy feeling that the Swan will be a glorified village hall" bemoaned one local paper.<sup>34</sup> No amount of petitioning (they collected over 13,000 signatures) or arguments about tourism and lost revenue (one study suggested the city stood to lose £2 million, including immediate loss from the pay and display car park by the theatre) or support from Alan Ayckbourn, who donated to the theatre's fighting fund, could change the councillors'

minds. They thought being asked for money, in the words of the theatre's artistic director, Jenny Stephens, was a sign of weakness, not an investment in the city and its people. They were:

that rare thing in today's Britain; a local authority which has not bought the idea that cultural investment is a cost-effective way of building a vibrant and prosperous town.<sup>35</sup>

Nor were they moved by the theatre's production of local work. Although the theatre had developed as a base for local amateur and writing groups, an integral part of their strategy had been new writing on local themes. In the recent years, commissions had included *The Worcester Century Plays*, Alex Jones' *River's Up* about flooding in Worcester and Lance Woodman's *Red Sky Over the Severn*, exploring the impact of the foot-and-mouth crisis on the area, which had attracted a large audience from the farming community and which was described as speaking urgently and directly to its audience.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, at the time of the crisis, Woodman was the recipient of the Pearson Group Scholarship as writer in residence for the Swan and had a second local play, *Growing Old Disgracefully*, ready for the autumn 2003 season.

Without a production team and production budget, the Swan found itself in competition as a receiving house with the recently refurbished Malvern Theatre and The Courtyard Arts Centre in Hereford, which had opened in 1998 with lottery funding and which had received a massive 417% increase in the £25 million windfall.<sup>37</sup> The fact that The Courtyard had been such a large beneficiary in the handout suggested that the Arts Council were favouring what they saw as more 'go-ahead' venues, with more mixed programming, a point made by WMA's Kate Organ who claimed they were trying to bring the theatre more in line with contemporary life, not just spend £25 million "trying to bring the world back to 1970".<sup>38</sup> The Swan was seen as old-fashioned and in the end, closed its doors as a producing theatre at the end of January 2003, leaving no producing theatre in the country between Birmingham and Bristol.

The Swan was not the only theatre to close in the period covered by this book. As Turnbull has noted, during the Conservative's eighteen year period in government, the number of regional producing houses in Britain fell by a quarter – and more have gone since, either closing permanently or moving out of the subsidised or producing sector.<sup>39</sup> These include Chester Gateway, finally closed in January 2007 to make way for a shopping precinct (although the developers are promising to replace it with an arts centre). The Cheltenham Everyman closed as a producing house in 1993, to re-open as a receiving house. The Redgrave in Farnham closed in 1995

and the Thorndike in Leatherhead closed in 1997. Others closed for a short period, to reopen again; despite Glen Walford's ambitious response to *The Glory of the Garden* (reproduced in this book), in 1993 the Liverpool Everyman was closed for six months while the Arts Council attempted to save it by turning it into a receiving house. The story of Liverpool Playhouse (closed between 1998 and 2000) is explored by Merkin in this book and in 2007 both Derby and Bristol closed their doors mid-season, as discussed by Dorney in the conclusion.

But not everything has been doom and gloom. New theatres have opened including West Yorkshire Playhouse in 1990, one of the last theatres built as part of the Arts Council's Housing the Arts Policy, The Curve in Leicester, a £66 million ground-breaking design by Rafael Viñoly and Hull Truck who have finally moved from the converted church hall opposite the morgue which has been their home since 1983. Others have been refurbished - in part thanks to money from the other big development - the National Lottery. Some of the most recent of these include the Belgrade, Coventry, the Northcott, Exeter and the Sheffield Crucible and current projects include those at Liverpool Everyman and the Lyric Hammersmith, the latter building the country's first "teaching" theatre.

What is clear is the feeling that regional theatre is on the threshold of a new renaissance. Many would have been surprised to hear Stephen Daldry, interviewed on Radio 4's *Front Row*, responding to a question about running the National Theatre one day. He replied that what he really wanted to do was take on a regional theatre "because the relationship you have with a town can be so dynamic" The post-Boyden windfall has led many to feel that we are, as Kate Kellaway asserts, "on the brink of a new era" with the arrival of new artistic directors determined to reinvent regional theatre.<sup>40</sup>

Nor should we think that optimism about the health of the ERPTs is simply a current thing. There are also many reminders that theatres which looked to be on the brink of disaster over the last 25 years have found the artistic vision and the will to turn themselves around. Once again, one example must suffice - but there are many other bright sparks to be found. The Mercury Theatre, Colchester is one example at the beginning of this century, whose renaissance led Lyn Gardner to pronounce that, "the time has come to stop writing the obituary of regional theatre". It was "not renowned as a hotbed of theatrical innovation," but it was the place where "the greatest miracle has taken place". Two years previously the theatre was "teetering on the brink of closure and hardly seemed worth saving". While it was still not out of the woods, its fortunes had been turned round

by Dee Evans and Greg Floy, ditching *Shirley Valentine* in favour of the classics. They also reinstated the actor rather than the marketing manager at the heart of the theatre working with an 18 strong seasonal ensemble. Recognition of its new lease of life brought with it money, including the Arts Council's first ever recovery funding to the tune of £350,000. Gardner continues:

Underlying all this is a belief in the role of the artist in society. One of the desperate things about regional theatre in recent years is that it has crushed the artistic vision out of those involved. For many, meeting performance targets, balancing the books and justifying the subsidy have become a *raison d' être* rather than a by-product of a thriving theatre. Evans firmly believes that we need regional theatres such as the Mercury because they contribute to the desire, articulated by the philosopher RG Collingwood, "that most people want a better life". If that means making money by doing some canny co-productions with commercial managements, so be it, but it also means putting the theatre at the heart of the community."<sup>41</sup>

It was, as Gardner points out, a "lesson in how the survival of regional theatre is about not just money but also the will and the vision to reinvent yourself."<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> William Rees-Mogg quoted in Nicholas de Jongh & Donald Wintersgill, "Gowrie Grant Cut Staggers Arts and Gallery Chief", *Guardian*, December 18, 1984; Dominic Cavendish, "Drama in Crisis", *Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 2008

<sup>2</sup> Philip Hensher, "You Can't Run a Regional Theatre From London", *Independent*, September 18, 2007; Richard Brooks & Roger Tredre, "Tragicomic Opera" *Observer*, November 9, 1997; John Davison, *Times*, August 10, 1986; Philip Hedley is quoted in Benedict Nightingale, "Sharp Pains in the Extremities", *Times*, October 9, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Paul Taylor "Making a Drama Out of a Crisis", *Independent*, February 23 1995. The Holbeck Hall Hotel had collapsed as a result of a crumbling cliff in Scarborough in June 1993

<sup>4</sup> Hensher, "You Can't Run a Regional Theatre From London", *Independent*, September 18, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (London: Portobello, 2009), 8

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 6

<sup>8</sup> Michael Billington, "No More Theatres, OK!", *Guardian*, July 9, 1997

<sup>9</sup> Dick Downing, *In Our Neighbourhood: A Regional Theatre and Its Local Community* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001), 69-70

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Glaister & Martin Wainwright, "Exit North as Sir Ian Tires of London's Bourgeoisie", *Guardian*, September 24, 1998

<sup>11</sup> Kingsnorth, 9

<sup>12</sup> See Marvin Carlson 2004 and Dan Rebellato 2009. See also Jo Robinson 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Billington, *State of the Nation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 254

<sup>14</sup> For other accounts of this period see: Olivia Turnbull 2008; Robert Hewison: 1995; Andrew Sinclair 1995; Richard Witts 1998; Ian Brown and Rob Brannen 1996; Ian Brown, Rob Brannen and Douglas Brown 2000; Ian Brown 2007.

<sup>15</sup> John Maynard Keynes, "The Arts Council, Its Policies and Hopes", *Listener*, July 12, 1945; reprinted in John Pick, *Vile Jelly: The Birth, Life and Lingering Death of the Arts Council of Great Britain* (Doncaster: Brynmill, 1991), 105-8

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Robert Hutchison, *The Politics of the Arts Council* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1982), 119. The original offices were based in Newcastle, Leeds, Nottingham, Cambridge, London and Middlesex, Reading, Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh plus Kent, Surrey, Sussex (all based at London headquarters)

<sup>17</sup> South West Arts: 1956; Northern Arts: 1961; Lincolnshire and Humberside: 1964; North West Arts: 1966; Greater London Arts: 1968; Merseyside Arts: 1968; Southern Arts: 1968; Yorkshire Arts: 1969; East Midland Arts: 1969; Eastern Arts: 1971; West Midland Arts: 1971; South East Arts: 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Rowell and Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: a History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 114

<sup>19</sup> John Myerscough, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1988), 6 & 12. The other surveys were published separately by the Policy Studies Institute

<sup>20</sup> David Hewson, Arts Campaign Goes Public, *The Times*, September 13, 1985; Leslie Geddes-Brown, "The offer the government can't refuse", *The Times*, September 15 1985; David Hewson, "Arts Council to fight for 50% increase in government grants", *The Times*, September 18, 1985

<sup>21</sup> "Arts and Business Awards" supplement in *Guardian*, 2007. The supplement also notes that on top of business investment, 2005/6 had seen private investment totalling £529.5 million and trust and foundation investment of £113.7 million. ABSA became Arts and Business in 1999 and in January 2008, ACE announced that its grant was to be cut by a third to £4 million.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm Piters: "Political Play Costs Theatre £3000", *Guardian*, February 13, 1986

<sup>23</sup> British Actors' Equity Association, *The Theatre Commission: A Report on Subsidised Theatre in the UK* (London: British Actors' Equity Association, 1996), 13; Turnbull, 91

<sup>24</sup> Sinclair, 183

<sup>25</sup> David Lister, "Thatcherite Model Still in the Red", *Independent*, October 23, 1990

<sup>26</sup> ACGB: *Partnership: Making Arts Money Work Harder*, (London: ACGB, 1986), 3. Housing the Arts ran from 1966-1988 providing money for restoring and rebuilding theatres.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>28</sup> For this and other criticisms of Myerscough see Hewison 277-278.

<sup>29</sup> Dominic Shellard: *Economic Impact Study of UK Theatre* (London: ACE, 2004); Dominic Shellard & Bill McDonnell, *Social Impact Study of UK Theatre* (London: ACR, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Jim Hiley, "Business Treads the Boards", *Times*, October 20, 1990

<sup>31</sup> British Actors' Equity Association, *The Theatre Commission*, 3. Members of the Theatre Commission included David Edgar, Richard Eyre, Miriam Karlin, Brian Rix and Braham Murray.

<sup>32</sup> Hansard 29 October 2002 vol 391 cc229-37WH

<sup>33</sup> The others to receive no funding were Croydon Warehouse, York Theatre Royal, Chester Gateway and the Palace Theatre, Westcliff-on-Sea

<sup>34</sup> *This is Worcestershire*, January 29, 2003

<sup>35</sup> Terry Grimley, "Dying Swan Takes Its Final Bow", *Birmingham Post*, January 6, 2003

<sup>36</sup> Michael Billington, "Red Skies Over the Severn", *Guardian*, October 29, 2001

<sup>37</sup> This still left The Courtyard, which was also a producing theatre specialising in large cast shows that mixed amateurs and professionals, with an annual budget that was some £50,000 less than The Swan. See Terry Grimley, "Winners and Losers", *Birmingham Post*, March 9, 2001

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Turnbull, 9

<sup>40</sup> Kate Kellaway, "The Dramatic Revival of Britain's Regional Theatres", *Observer*, November 15, 2009

<sup>41</sup> Lyn Gardner, "You Can't Market Rubbish", *Guardian*, September 27, 2000

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

## CHAPTER ONE

# FROM “REP” TO “REGIONAL”— SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF REGIONAL THEATRE IN THE 1980S

ANTHONY JACKSON

In the book which George Rowell and I published in 1984 (but wrote in 1983), we aimed to do a number of things: to tell the story of the repertory movement, and to celebrate and interrogate the contribution of “rep” to British cultural life over 80 or so years.<sup>1</sup> We were also writing at a time of “retrenchment” which gave our discussion a certain edge – the future was not looking particularly rosy. Over the next few pages, I want to re-visit (and remind the reader) of one particular period in the history of regional theatre, not as a history lesson but rather to see if it will help us to get a purchase on those things about regional theatre (or “rep”) that seem to have been constant and those that have fluctuated. The shift in the terminology used to describe this theatre - from “rep” to “regional” - was one of the markers of the change evident in the early eighties, and this will provide a peg on which to hang some of the discussion. In the process some questions will emerge – ones that we raised in 1984, but which still, in my view, have relevance today even if the material circumstances have changed.

First, just how long ago was 1984? Among the events that occurred that year that serve to characterise and to locate the period were the following. The Thatcher government had been in power for five years and had already embarked on a second term having won a landslide victory in the 1983 election. Inflation had fallen to 4.6% from a high of 20% only a few years earlier – due largely to the monetarist policies that were zealously implemented during Thatcher’s early years in power. Whole tranches of the public sector were being privatised, including in 1984 one of the great public sector icons, British Telecom. The cost in industrial jobs especially in the public sector was, in the post-war era, unprecedented,

and 1984 saw the beginning of the year-long national miners' strike called in protest at the planned closure of pits across the country. It was also the year of President Gorbachev's first visit to the UK; the eviction of the peace protesters from Greenham Common; and the IRA bombing of the Grand Hotel during the Conservative Party annual conference in Brighton. If that were not enough, York Minster was hit by lightning; Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* opened at London's Apollo Victoria; Band Aid recorded "Do they know it's Christmas?" for famine relief in Ethiopia; and Winston Smith finally came to love Big Brother. Of particular note too was the arrival of the (remarkably cheap) Amstrad PCW home computer: academics began to discard the typewriter, but it came too late for writing *The Repertory Movement*. And finally, of course the Arts Council launched *The Glory of the Garden* – its "strategy for a decade" for the arts in England.

The coincidence of the publication of *The Repertory Movement* and (several months later) *The Glory of the Garden* offers a useful starting point for assessing the state of regional theatre in the early 1980s. Sir William Rees Mogg, the then-chairman of the Arts Council, signalled on the first page of his preface to the report exactly where the most urgent priority of the Council lay: in redressing the imbalance between London and the regions. Indeed, de-centralisation of the theatre – from its obsessively London-oriented focus – and the closely-related if complex notion of "repertory programming", with all the ideas and practices that that term seems to embody, such as subsidised ticket prices, the promotion of new plays, the raising of standards, and the relationship of theatre to its community, are the two key themes that characterised the repertory movement throughout its history. The themes are symbiotically linked and I will return to them in more detail later. They likewise formed the backbone of our 1984 study, which offered a history of the regional repertory movement spanning the period from the late 19th century stock companies to "the present"; and culminated with a snapshot of six "representative" companies in the early 1980s: namely, the Glasgow Citizens, the Liverpool Everyman, the Nottingham Playhouse, the Royal Exchange, Manchester, the Salisbury Playhouse, and the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.

We had seen the post-war development of rep as happening over three broad overlapping phases. First – from 1958 through to the mid-1970s – was the period of undeniable optimism as the gradual re-building of Britain after the war began to take shape, and as the new Arts Council subsidies began to make a difference: allowing companies to escape from the tyranny of "weekly rep", increase the period available for rehearsal and

set (or keep) ticket prices at affordable rates. A sense of expansiveness and a renewed belief in the idea of “rep” and of what it might encompass was, before long, accompanied by an extraordinary building and refurbishment programme to provide new and updated theatre spaces - from the Belgrade, Coventry (1958), the first purpose-built repertory theatre to be constructed in the post-war period, to the Royal Exchange, Manchester, and the National Theatre (both opening in 1976). Much of the innovative repertoire programming and, more critically, of the more adventurous new writing was now emanating from leading reps such as the Nottingham Playhouse under the direction of Richard Eyre, who gathered around him some of the most significant talents of the day: Howard Brenton, David Hare and Trevor Griffiths to mention but a few. Under Giles Havergal’s leadership the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre began to demonstrate that British theatre could achieve the kind of imaginative and inventive reinterpretation of the classics more commonly associated with the European mainland. And during Peter Cheeseman’s remarkable and enduring tenure at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, the idea of what a genuinely “community theatre” might look like was being redefined, largely though not exclusively through the series of ground-breaking documentary plays dealing with topical and locally-relevant issues (such as the steel industry, its history and its threatened future, or the development of the railways) but which also made for entertaining theatre in their own right.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning later but running concurrently with phase one, from the mid-1960s through to the late-1970s, was a period of experiment and remarkable energy, marked by the establishment of the Liverpool Everyman, and later the Contact Theatre in Manchester and the Young Vic, London, as “alternative” reps— appealing to specific rather than catholic audiences, and especially to young people. These theatres were, in spirit and personnel alike, youthful, experimental, provocative, and motivated by a belief in the inspirational and, in many cases, the educational potential of live theatre. In response, many of the larger theatres began to build studio theatres to complement the main house, dedicated to riskier new plays or plays for children. At the same time outreach work was being developed for schools and youth centres: Theatre in Education began at this time, initially at the Belgrade, Coventry, but spreading quickly to other regional theatres such as the Leeds Playhouse, Bolton Octagon and Nottingham Playhouse. There was too an increase in the number of small, independent alternative theatre companies which in turn challenged and subsequently fed the mainstream reps. As we noted in 1984, “For three decades after the end of the Second World War, the notions of theatre as a civic institution,

as a cultural focus for the community, as an expression of local identity and pride, became accepted – as the increasing scale of public funding and municipal theatre building demonstrated.”<sup>3</sup>

During the mid-1970s, however, a third phase came to predominate, triggered largely by a faltering economy and a loss of faith in some of the expansive ideas of the 1960s. In 1975, as inflation peaked at 25%, the disadvantages of the prestigious, new large buildings began to make themselves felt – the costs of keeping theatres open, let alone mounting the adventurous and often large-cast productions of earlier years, became prohibitive. While there were exceptions, the creative energy and the initiative for new and exciting developments seemed increasingly to be centred either in (what we called then) the Fringe or in the hugely subsidized national companies. So, while the regional rep network had become by the late 1970s the main provider of theatre in Great Britain, by the early 1980s the sense was clearly one of a dwindling momentum. The crisis in arts funding was hitting building-based companies especially severely. This was then a period of retrenchment: withdrawals of grant-aid began and some theatres closed (Chesterfield, Crewe, Canterbury); some larger theatres shut down their outreach teams and reduced, or terminated, the work done in their studio theatres. Funding levels in real terms fell, and arguments intensified about not just the level of funding but the ideologies that underpinned the decisions made and the criteria being applied; and the pre-eminence of London came increasingly to be questioned now that the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company between them attracted nearly 50% of the whole ACGB Drama allocation (in 1970 it had been 30%).

In his study of British theatre since the second world war, Dominic Shellard, writing some 15 years later, recapitulates these phases but argues that worse was yet to come.<sup>4</sup> He proposed two further phases: one commencing in 1984 in which the trend we had identified in phase three became more marked – the tightening of the grip of market forces upon the organisation and funding of the arts; and, in the 1990s, a fifth phase characterised by the effect on the arts of new funding from the National Lottery – as a result of which, the new money that began to come through was hedged around with conditions: it was short term and it required competitive bidding. I am not sure that “phase 4” was really anything other than an intensification of our third phase, but the advent of National Lottery funding, together with the push to get theatres to seek sponsorship from business, was undoubtedly significant in its impact. The additional pressures upon theatre administration (coping with a constant stream of

funding applications, and having to market “product” in a far more aggressive and time-consuming manner) were considerable.

All these developments combined to shape repertory theatre in Britain as it approached the millennium: in terms of its buildings, its staffing, its programming, and, more importantly, the evolution of artistic policy as aspiration had to be tempered with unremitting economic, social and political imperatives. Underpinning the changing policies and fortunes faced by regional theatres in this period was a recurring debate about what exactly repertory theatre was or should be. At a time of financial constraint, declining audiences and the temptation to play safe and produce only small-cast plays, what exactly were the ideals and rationale that could be said to sustain regional theatre – if any? First, then, just what was meant by the term that defined the movement which itself played such a major role in the shaping of British theatre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “Repertory”?

## **Repertoire and repertory**

Matthew Arnold, in a famous essay published in 1879, bemoaned the state of British theatre in comparison with the standards and range of plays offered by such European companies as the Comédie Française, and called for a sea change. The theatre was “irresistible”: “The people will have a theatre; then make it a good one. ... Organise the theatre!” he challenged.<sup>5</sup> By “organise”, he meant that the theatre needed something that could not be achieved by market forces alone, by the lowest common denominator, by the long run and by what was understood to be popular. A key element from the very beginning of repertory – at Manchester’s Gaiety Theatre, at Glasgow’s Repertory Theatre and at the Birmingham Rep – was the establishment of a repertory system of presenting plays - whether that be “true rep” or “short run”. By “true rep” was meant the repertoire system favoured on the European mainland in which a programme of plays is offered in constant rotation through the year, allowing audiences to see two or three different plays in the course of any one week (the system employed by the National Theatre, the RSC and a handful of regional theatres); by “short run” was meant the practice of running each play in sequence for two, three or perhaps four weeks before replacing it by the next play in the season – the system employed by most regional theatres now. The latter has the economic advantage of giving a cash-strapped director casting flexibility. He or she can cast play by play and is not committed to keeping all actors on the books for a whole season. Whichever the system employed, it marked out the repertory theatre – in

the early 1900s and in the early 2000s just as much – as clearly distinct from the mainstream commercial practice of the West End, and of many touring houses in the major cities, in which the “long run” is the aspiration and the measure of success. By contrast, repertory theatres could more effectively offer a variety of plays and maintain a degree of freshness that the long run generally could not. Closely tied in with the repertory system, then, were the objectives of the provision of a high quality and varied repertoire of plays, including the promotion of new drama and dramatists; the improvement of standards of acting and staging; the securing of civic or state patronage; and the forging of the vital links that must exist between a theatre and its community (however that community might be defined).

Although ideas and practices have varied enormously since the beginnings of the “modern” rep movement in early 1900s (from “true rep” programming to the short run; from permanent ensemble companies to play-specific casting; from “mainstream” rep to “alternative”), what animated the movement throughout its history was the ideal of offering a genuinely varied and balanced fare of plays and related artistic events each season that would command the interest and nourish the imagination of the community it served – fare that would include good plays of all types, new and classic, serious and comic. Theatre was seen as a cultural service rather than a commercial enterprise and to be justified in the same terms as one would a library, art gallery or swimming pool.<sup>6</sup> How different theatres chose to interpret that service was another matter and would be governed by the diversity of circumstances within which they operated – and indeed the vitality of rep has been demonstrated time and again in that very diversity and individuality of artistic policy. In the post-war period, the range of work at our six representative regional theatres, from the Royal Exchange to the Liverpool Everyman, from the Glasgow Citizens to the Salisbury Playhouse, crossed almost the entire spectrum of theatre activity in Britain at the time, as did the variety of their repertoires, artistic philosophies and policies, their architecture and their audiences.

## **De-centralisation**

Decentralisation of theatre from its persistent London-centredness was equally part of the original ambition of repertory pioneers such as Annie Horniman and Barry Jackson.<sup>7</sup> The theatres they founded, in Manchester and Birmingham, and (under Waring) in Glasgow, were assertively a regional rather than a London phenomenon; and, for the rest of the century, their geographical location and local base have been part of their