

Talking Out of Tune

Remembering British Theatre

1944-56

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December 2008

Summary of Thesis

This thesis explores how British Theatre represented and reacted to cultural and social changes between 1944 and 1956. It is closely linked to the oral history strand of the AHRC University of Sheffield British Library Theatre Archive Project <<http://www.bl.uk/theatrchive>>. The five chapters focus on distinct subject areas in order to explore the vibrant diversity of the period. However, they are united by an overarching narrative which seeks to consider the relationship between memory and history.

The first chapter is based on the oral history strand. It explores the different ways in which the Project's methodology has shaped both the interviewee testimony and my own research. Chapter 2 focuses on the changing historical perceptions of the popular West End plays of the day. Case studies of plays are used to compare the responses of audiences and critics in the 1940s and 50s, with the critical commentaries that surround the plays and playwrights today. The third chapter explores the relationship between BBC television drama and theatre. It assesses the impact that cross fertilisation had on both media by examining plays, productions and policies. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two of the theatre companies of the period - Theatre Workshop and the Old Vic Theatre Company. Chapter 4 explores the impact that Theatre Workshop's early years as a touring group had on the development of the company. It draws on new oral history testimonies from former company members who joined the group in the 1940s and early 50s. Chapter 5 explores the legacy of the Old Vic Theatre Company between 1944 and 1952. It compares and contrasts testimonies from audience members, practitioners and critics in order to consider how and why certain theatrical moments appeal to the historical imagination.

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Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible for me to undertake this thesis without the generous financial support of the AHRC. I am extremely grateful to Professor Dominic Shellard for supporting my application for the AHRC studentship attached to the University of Sheffield British Library Theatre Archive Project. As a supervisor, Dominic has provided invaluable support and advice throughout my thesis. It has been a real pleasure to work on this research project with him and other colleagues.

I would like to express my gratitude towards the now over 200 people who have contributed their memories to the oral history strand of the Theatre Archive Project. Their memories have shaped both the form and content of my work and I would not have been able to write this thesis without them. Harry Greene and David Rose deserve particular recognition as, individually, they both gave up considerable amounts of time to help me. I am incredibly grateful to them for their enthusiasm, and the interest with which they, and many other interviewees, met my persistent queries.

Thanks are also due to the archivists and librarians who have helped me to access research material. Marie-Claire Wyatt and Kathryn Johnson provided guidance to the British Library Collections. Richard Workman, and his colleagues at the Harry Ransom Research Centre, Austin, Texas, helped me to access an incredible amount of material in the short space of time that my research trip allowed. At the BBC Written Archives Centre, Rachel Lawson unearthed documents that I would have never otherwise found. Andy O'Dwyer granted me access to the research facilities at the BBC Broadcast Centre and took time out from his own work to organise viewing material. Peggy Seeger kindly gave me permission to access the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger archives at Ruskin College Library, whilst librarians Elizabeth Schlackman and Valerie Moyses, provided guidance about the collection itself. Murray Melvin and Mary Ling gave up their free time to show me round the Theatre Royal, Stratford East archive. Murray's willingness to contact former Theatre Workshop members on behalf of the Theatre Archive Project, proved to be central to the shape of my research on Theatre Workshop.

The support of friends, family and work colleagues has been much appreciated over the past three years. In particular I would like to thank Heather Lonsdale for her administrative support in relation to the Project; Thomas Dymond and Helena Ifill for their friendship; and Robert Di Carlo for keeping me sane and reminding me that life exists outside of academia. Finally my parents have been an invaluable source of support and advice at every stage of this thesis. I would particularly like to thank them for reading my work and offering constructive criticism.

Introduction to the Thesis

BOHR A curious sort of diary memory is.

HEISENBERG You open the pages, and all the neat headings and tidy jottings dissolve around you.

BOHR You step through the pages into the months and days themselves.

HEISENBERG The past becomes the present inside your head.

Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*¹

This thesis is structured around two central ideas; the primary one being an analysis of the ways in which British theatre represented and reacted to the changing socio-cultural landscape between 1944 and 1956; the secondary one being an exploration of how these narratives have latterly been recorded within cultural history. Memory, and more specifically the different ways in which individuals remember, have shaped the form and content of this study. As chapter 1 will explore, my research is closely linked to the oral history strand of the AHRC University of Sheffield British Library Theatre Archive Project.² This thesis strives to give a sense of the diversity of the theatrical landscape in the 1940s and early 50s by considering the period from five distinct angles - Theatre and Memory, West End plays, BBC Television drama, Theatre Workshop and the Old Vic Theatre Company. The premise at the heart of my research is that cultural change is never the result of one single factor, but rather the product of a complex web of relationships which have interacted over a period of time.

Britain between 1944 and 1956 was in a state of cultural and social flux. The beginning of this period heralded the end of the Second World War, the election of the first majority Labour Government, the launch of the Welfare State and the arrival of peace-time austerity. It ended with the Conservative Government

¹ Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*, (London: Methuen, 2003), Act I, p. 6.

² Hereafter referred to as *TAP*

overseeing an era of burgeoning prosperity and mass consumerism on the home front, whilst facing up to Britain's decline as an imperial power in the wake of the Suez Crisis. In the theatre, the mid-to-late 1940s saw the weekly and fortnightly repertory theatres at the height of their post-war powers in terms of commercial success and audience appeal. In London, Terence Rattigan was fast becoming H.M. Tennent's most successful post-war playwright. At the New Theatre, Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson and John Burrell re-launched the Old Vic Theatre Company in a frenzy of publicity, whilst directors Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine began their plans for the pioneering Old Vic Centre. In Manchester, Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl set up a small touring theatre company called Theatre Workshop.

By 1956 the theatrical landscape had changed. The starry Old Vic directorate had broken up and the Old Vic Centre had closed. Theatre Workshop had moved to London and George Devine had launched the ESC. John Osborne was one of a number of new playwrights who had begun to make their mark on post-war British drama. Across the country, weekly and fortnightly theatre-going was falling out of fashion and television was gradually becoming the entertainment medium of choice for a growing section of the population. The reasons behind these changes are central to the overarching narrative of this thesis, which seeks to suggest that British theatre in this period developed across a range of different genres and mediums.

1. Thesis structure

As in any historical study, imposing a time-frame, and selecting specific subject areas within that chronology, creates an artificial sense of historical importance. However, I deliberately try to avoid the linear structure that is used in many historical studies by selecting five distinct foci, and setting the narrative of the thesis across two decades, thereby giving each chapter the space to cover a slightly different time-frame. My work illustrates that *TAP* interviewees exhibit a range of different attitudes towards the period under discussion, and the structure embodies the idea that memorial processes cannot be represented by a single chronological narrative. The five subject areas have been chosen, in part, because

they represent issues and ideas that are frequently discussed within the interviews. This thesis considers why certain topics have come to the fore in interviews and what that might tell the theatre historian about the period.

Memories provide a kaleidoscopic view of the past. As individuals we remember things differently, and the stories we carry forward are subject to change and revision with the passing of time. History does not evolve along a straight line of inter-related narrative progression. People and places are not always part of a common, cultural narrative, and, in some cases, disconnection or difference can actually be integral to our understanding of a particular aspect of history. As the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks observes:

Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed continuously, unconsciously, by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives - we are each of us unique.³

The 'uniqueness' of individual experience is often lost in historical studies of specific eras. In featuring individual interview case studies throughout this thesis, I wish to convey a sense of the individuality of people who lived and worked in the theatre in the 1940s and 50s. I have sought to avoid making forced connections between movements, companies and individuals for the sake of creating a tidy, linear narrative. I hope to show that theatre history of this period can, and should, be read in a variety of ways. The chapters are not directly connected, and it is for this reason that each chapter has a distinct introduction and conclusion that is not directly tied to its predecessor.

³ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 105.

2. Thesis methodology

Methodologically, I have sought to examine the relationship between contemporaneous accounts of the period, and the retrospective narratives within written and oral histories. The following sections will address how I have used oral and archival sources to do this.

2.1. Memory and oral history

My thesis draws on interviews that have been collected by the *TAP*. However, the impact that the Project's methodology has had on both the interviews and my own research, will not be covered here, because it is discussed in detail in chapter 1. Instead this section will summarise my methodology with regard to the use of oral sources. It will also reference how different writers' and theorists' arguments about memory have influenced my work. A more detailed discussion of the breadth of secondary sources that I have consulted will be given in the subsequent literature review.

The extract from Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, with which I began this thesis, encapsulates both the pleasures and the challenges of using personal memories within historical research. Oral histories and autobiographies can provide the researcher with vivid glimpses of lived experience, thereby opening up new and different ways of looking at the past. However, as Frayn's characters' conversation reflects, our memories are not clear-cut slices of history. Although they often appear to be distinct stories about particular moments in time, all memories are unconsciously shaped by the multiplicity of moments which precede and follow them. Memories are secondary sources which encapsulate myriad different narratives, and this is one of their strengths as a historical resource. As Alessandro Portelli observes:

Memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to

make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context.⁴

Portelli's argument about the multi-layered nature of oral history interviews is central to the way in which I approach the analysis of the *TAP* testimonies that I reference within this thesis. His comments emphasise that what people remember is not necessarily a factual reflection of what actually happened. This argument can equally be applied to written histories; as Hayden White points out, all historical narratives can be regarded as 'verbal fictions', by dint of the omniscient role of the narrator:

How [HW's italics] a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say a fiction-making operation.⁵

My research seeks to address both Portelli's and White's ideas by assessing the potential impact of oral testimony within post-war theatre history, and exploring the kinds of 'verbal fictions' that exist within both written and oral accounts of this period. In line with my desire to explore the way in which narrative histories are shaped over time, my work within the *TAP* oral history archive has also been supplemented by extensive research at a number of national and international archives which hold collections relating to 1940s and 50s theatre.

2.2. Archival research

2.2.i. Individual collections

This thesis looks at the work of a diverse range of theatre practitioners. The research that I undertook in personal archives was vital because it allowed me to access information that had never been published and enabled me to follow up potentially useful areas of research which published biographies and theatre

⁴ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Oxon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 63-74 (p. 69).

⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 85.

histories only allude to in brief. This work is particularly important to chapters 4 and 5, which focus on the histories of specific theatre companies.

At the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, in Austin, Texas, I was able to look at the papers of Joan Littlewood, John Osborne, and the West End director, Frith Banbury. Although I had already read extracts from documents in Littlewood's archive in Robert Leach's recent study of Theatre Workshop, being able to read her production notes in full, gave me a much more in-depth insight into how she planned her work with Theatre Workshop.⁶ This allowed me to make a more informed decision about the areas of her archive which were relevant to my own research. Frith Banbury's papers contain an extensive record of press cuttings about his West End productions in the 1940s and 50s. The cuttings introduced me to a diverse range of critical opinions in newspapers and magazines that I would not have otherwise come across. They also reminded me that many productions of this period had a pre-London tour before they opened in the West End. As a result, regional theatre audiences often saw West End productions before their London contemporaries. Banbury's files contain a huge number of production photographs taken by the prominent theatrical photographer of the day, Angus McBean. These photographs gave me a sense of how plays like *The Deep Blue Sea* were staged. I looked at, but did not ultimately use any material from John Osborne's archive. Prior to my visit I had hoped to find references to the television broadcast of *Look Back in Anger*. However, there are no references to this within his diaries, and the files relating to his work with the ESC mostly contain administrative records. This experience impressed upon me that archives cannot always provide comprehensive records of an individual's life and, in this respect, the documents within them cannot necessarily be relied upon to prove or disprove a particular historical viewpoint.

At the British Library, I looked at the archives of Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson and Michel Saint-Denis. These collections have been well used in

⁶ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop: Joan Littlewood and the making of modern British Theatre* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006)

recent historical research.⁷ However, visiting them for myself enabled me to build my own sense of the three practitioners' different roles at the Old Vic, without being influenced by the narrative voice of another historian. Although my thesis only considers a small section of their theatre work, the archives gave me a broader sense of their careers, which were brought to life by their extensive collections of personal letters and photographs.

Of all the personal archives that I have used over the course of researching this thesis, the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger collection at Ruskin College, Oxford, is probably the most important, as it contains copies of MacColl's plays that have never been published. The collection also holds different draft versions of many of his plays, and draft copies of his published writing about Theatre Workshop. These documents, along with personal interview transcripts, suggested that MacColl's impact on Theatre Workshop was much broader than his own published accounts of this period suggest.⁸ My understanding of Theatre Workshop was also helped by a research trip to the Theatre Royal Archive, Stratford East, where I accessed Theatre Workshop policy documents and press cuttings relating to both MacColl's plays and the regional tours that the group undertook before 1953.

2.2.ii. Play-scripts

I used the British Library to access published editions of 1940s and 50s plays for my chapter on West End drama. The Library's status as a copyright library proved invaluable when I was researching playwrights such as Wynyard Browne and Enid Bagnold, whose work had fallen out of favour and never been re-printed. It was important for me to look at play-scripts that were published in the period because they often contain information about the original productions which cannot be gleaned from later publications or theatre history books. Weekly and fortnightly

⁷ See Terry Coleman, *Olivier* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), Kate Dorney, 'Ralph Richardson', in *The Golden Generation: New light on post-war British theatre*, ed. by Dominic Shellard (London: British Library Publications, 2008) pp. 116-151 and Ewan Jeffrey, 'Theatres of Resistance: Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine', in *The Golden Generation*, pp. 92-115.

⁸ In his autobiography, Ewan MacColl devotes only one chapter to his post-war work with Theatre Workshop, see chapter 19 in *Journeyman: An Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1990)

theatre-going were popular in the 1940s and 50s, and, as a result, repertory theatre companies needed play-scripts which helped them to put productions on in a short space of time. French's Acting Editions produced scripts which detail the casts, costumes, prop lists and, in some cases, the on-stage moves and audience laughs, from the original West End productions. In addition to this, editions of plays printed in the 1940s and 50s sometimes contain photographs from the original production which help to give a sense of both the stage design and the appearance of the actors. Publications which include introductions from the playwrights themselves proved particularly valuable as they reference their thoughts on the play, the production and the surrounding theatrical landscape.⁹ However, these publications were still published some time after the first production, and I relied on newspaper and magazine reviews to give me a more immediate sense of contemporaneous critical reactions to plays of this period.

2.2iii BBC Written Archives Centre

It would not have been possible to write chapter 3 without the existence of the BBC Written Archives Centre. Television's influence on theatre in this period is one of the most discussed topics within *TAP* interviews and this led me to select this subject as one of my areas of research. However, the relationship between television and theatre in the 1940s and 50s is a largely un-explored area in both theatre and television history, and consequently there were very few academic or historical studies that I could draw on.¹⁰ My initial research was also hindered by the fact that most television programmes in the 1940s and early 50s went out live, and, even in the cases where recordings were made, the BBC rarely kept copies. The policy and programme files at the BBC Archives Centre are, for the most part, the only remaining physical records of BBC television drama in this period and, as a result, my work is largely based on the information that they contain. In many

⁹ The collected editions of Terence Rattigan's plays proved particularly helpful in this respect, see Terence Rattigan, *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, vol. I (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953)

¹⁰ To my knowledge, Neil Taylor is the only previous historian to write specifically about this area, see his article, 'A History of the Stage Play on Television', in *Boxed Sets: Television Representations of Theatre*, ed. by Jeremy Ridgman (Luton: The Arts Council of England, John Libbey Media, University of Luton Press, 1998), pp. 23–37.

respects the archives represent a treasure trove for the researcher, containing detailed memos, letters, productions notes, research, scripts and policy documents. However, I was often frustrated by the fact that the BBC's archival procedures had been selective. For some of the productions that I consider, records have been thrown away to make space, or simply never kept. This experience provided me with another reminder of the fragility of archival records and re-enforced my belief in the importance of recording the oral histories of practitioners who lived and worked in this period.

2.2iv. Newspapers and magazines

Newspaper and magazine reviews of theatre productions and television programmes were central to my research and I made a number of visits to the Colindale Newspaper Archive. The *Radio Times* collection is a vital source for early television programme information, providing plot summaries, cast details, broadcast times and, crucially, critical reviews. In chapter 2, I compare and contrast the critical reactions to productions of early post-war plays, with the later critical assessments of the texts, and, in some cases, the revivals. Reviews from recent revivals are easily accessible online, and some critical reviews are published in book collections.¹¹ However, the reviews of lesser known plays are only accessible at the Colindale Newspaper Archive. The research that I did there enabled me to build a picture of the breadth of critical attitudes towards drama of this period. Today, Kenneth Tynan is one of the few remembered critics of the period. He was a brilliant writer and his pithy theatrical commentaries continue to provide perceptive and entertaining insights into British Theatre history. However, his enduring legacy has undoubtedly been helped by the fact that two biographies have been written about him, and a number of collected editions of his reviews have been published.¹² In this thesis I acknowledge that Tynan had an important

¹¹ *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. by John Elsom (London: Routledge, 1981), Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1961), Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), Kenneth Tynan, *Kenneth Tynan: Theatre Writings*, ed. by Dominic Shellard (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007)

¹² Dominic Shellard, *Kenneth Tynan: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), Kathleen Tynan, *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (London: Weidenfeld, 1987), Tynan, *Curtains*, Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre*, Tynan, *Kenneth Tynan: Theatre Writings*

critical influence. However, I also quote from other newspaper and magazine reviews, in order to contextualise Tynan's writing, and make the point that his was not the only critical opinion that mattered in this period.

3. Literature review: Secondary sources

Changing historical attitudes towards 1940s and 50s' theatre have influenced the way in which I have approached the research and the writing of this thesis. My arguments have also been informed by different critical perspectives on the role of memory within history. The first section of this literature review will outline the historiographical standpoint of my work, whilst the subsequent sections will reflect on the secondary sources that have been useful to my research. The fact that I have written on five distinct subject areas has meant that the scope of my secondary reading has been broad. As a result, I have broken-down my secondary reading into subject groups.

3.1. Theatre histories and surveys

The ESC's premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, in May 1956, was, for a long time, seen as the defining moment in early post-war British theatre history.¹³ Osborne's depiction of marital strife, generational conflict and class division in 1950s Britain broke away from the upper-middle-class settings which had dominated the British stage in the 1940s and early 1950s. The play's cramped and dingy bed-sit setting was the antithesis to the glamour and expense which typified many of the contemporaneous productions in London's West End. The vehement, emotional outbursts of the protagonists marked a radical departure from the formal diction and emotional concealment which had characterised the style of successful 1940s playwrights like Terence Rattigan. The influential *Observer* theatre critic, Kenneth Tynan, identified the play with the voice of a young post-war generation.¹⁴ In *Anger and After*, written in 1962, John Russell Taylor set the tone for the almost

¹³ See John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 39, Peter Lewis, *The Fifties* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 163, Bryan Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and imagination in post-war Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 106.

¹⁴ Kenneth Tynan, 'The Voice of the Young', *Observer*, 13 May 1956, in Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, pp. 112-114.

mythological status that the play's opening night had achieved in the six years since its premiere:

No one can deny that *Look Back in Anger* started everything off, after a slightly shaky beginning it became the first decisive success in the career of The English Stage Company [...] 8 May 1956 still marks the real breakthrough of 'the new drama' into the British theatre.¹⁵

Taylor's role in fuelling the play's academic reputation as a major post-war work should not be underestimated. *Anger and After* was reprinted and revised seven times between 1962 and 1983 and when the 1996 Faber edition of the play text was issued, it still carried his ebullient praise on its back cover. However, over the past fifteen years revisionist historians have argued that the play's mythical status has created an artificial division between pre- and post-1956 theatre. In the mid-90s, Charles Duff's biography of the West End Director, Frith Banbury, brought the work of oft neglected 1940s and 50s playwrights like Wynyard Browne, Rodney Ackland, N.C. Hunter and John Whiting to critical attention.¹⁶ On the eve of a new century, Dan Rebellato's *1956 and All That* re-examined *Look Back in Anger* in the wider context of the surrounding theatrical landscape, and the shifting political and social mores of 1950s Britain.¹⁷ Whilst more recently, in separate historical surveys of the post-war period, Dominic Shellard and Michael Billington both emphasise that shifts and developments in British Theatre have been influenced by the work of many theatre practitioners across the decades.¹⁸ There has also been a theatrical re-assessment of this period of drama. As chapter 2 explores, over the past fifteen years, there have been critically feted revivals of plays by Terence Rattigan, Enid Bagnold and J.B. Priestley.

The resurgence of critical interest in this period has led Dan Rebellato to argue that, 'it is becoming almost a cliché to refer to mid-century British Theatre as a "lost" period'.¹⁹ In this respect, the point that the 1940s and 50s were interesting

¹⁵ John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 39.

¹⁶ Charles Duff, *The Lost Summer* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995)

¹⁷ Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That* (London: Routledge, 1999)

¹⁸ Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000),

Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007)

¹⁹ Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, p. 225.

and influential cultural decades, has been made. However, little work has been done on how and why certain plays, practitioners and institutions have remained, or as has been the case in recent years, re-surfaced, as worthy objects of critical attention, whilst other influential moments and movements within the same period remain largely ignored. This thesis seeks to address this issue by exploring the way in which different historical and memorial narratives have been revised, re-written and in some instances, excluded, with the passing of time.

3.2. Memory and oral history: Secondary sources

Robert Perks' and Alistair Thomson's *The Oral History Reader*, and Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past*, have both helped to formulate my approach to oral history.²⁰ *The Oral History Reader* provides a thorough guide to the diverse theoretical and methodological approaches within the oral history field. In *The Voice of the Past* Thompson's arguments about the importance of historical difference prove to be particularly instructive in relation to the interview case studies in chapter 1. His view that, 'Oral historians can think now as if they themselves were publishers: imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out and capture it', encouraged me to seek out interviewees who could fill in the blanks which written history has left. This was particularly useful to my research on early television drama.²¹

Harriet Harvey Wood's and A.S. Byatt's anthology about memory offers an insight into the different ways in which a range of historians, philosophers, scientists, novelists, poets, and playwrights have addressed the subject.²² The sub-section containing extracts on the subject of 'Memory and Imagination' serves to remind the reader of the importance of creativity within historical narratives. Ira Bruce Nadel's study on biography, explores the extent to which fictional discourses influence the form and content of biographical narratives.²³ Her bibliography introduced me to a number of secondary sources that I subsequently followed up in my own reading. Virginia Woolf's reference to the power of the

²⁰ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

²¹ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 6.

²² *Memory: An Anthology*, ed. by Harriet Harvey Wood and A.S. Byatt (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008)

²³ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, Form* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984)

'creative fact' in biography, and Jacky Bratton's analysis of the way in which anecdotes and mimicry inform the idea of theatrical identity, are used to support my arguments about the dramatic quality of *TAP* interviews.²⁴ The relationship between historical and literary narratives is explored in more detail in Hayden White's *The Tropics of Discourse*. Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory*, and Patrick Wright's *A Journey Through Ruins*, offer a broader consideration of the ways in which concepts of heritage and history have changed in the 20th Century.²⁵ The changing nature of archival practices is addressed by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*.²⁶ His references to the impact of new technology are particularly relevant to my consideration of the *TAP*'s status as an online archive.

3.3. General histories

In each chapter, I aim to place the theatrical moments and events in the context of the surrounding socio-political environment. This is particularly important where I use *TAP* oral history testimony, as many interviewees make references to events that were taking place on both the national and world stages. Kenneth O. Morgan's *Britain Since 1945*, provides a concise survey of the major political events of the 1940s and early 1950s, whilst Dominic Sandbrook's *Never Had it so Good*, gives a more detailed sense of the cultural and social shifts that took place in the mid-to-late 1950s.²⁷ Peter Lewis' *The Fifties*, and Robert Hewison's *In Anger*, both underline the extent to which historians of the 1970s and 80s tend to prioritise the literary and theatrical culture of the late 50s and 60s over that of the earlier post-war period.²⁸ David Kynaston's impressive multi-voiced history, *Austerity Britain 1945-51*, introduces the diversity of political, social and cultural

²⁴ Virginia Woolf uses this phrase in relation to her discussion of biographical 'truth' in 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

²⁵ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and present in contemporary culture* (London: Verso, 1994), Patrick Wright, *A Journey through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (London: Radius, 1991)

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996)

²⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Little, Brown, 2005)

²⁸ Peter Lewis, *The Fifties*, Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, c1981)

opinions in this period, and re-enforces my belief in the importance of histories which include the voices of those who have lived through them.²⁹

3.4. Historical studies about individuals, companies and movements

I refer to J. P. Wearing's guides to the London Stage throughout the thesis as they provide comprehensive information about the plays that were being produced in West End theatres in the 1940s and 50s.³⁰ Richard Huggett's biography of the West End impresario Binkie Beaumont, offers a useful initial introduction to the work of the powerful H. M. Tennent management.³¹ However, the gaps in the book's chronology undermine the reliability of his account and as a result it is difficult to use his research to corroborate information from other sources. Geoffrey Wansell's *Terence Rattigan*, gives a thorough account of the playwright's life, although, as I discuss in chapter 2, I find his tendency to read Rattigan's biography into his plays unhelpful.³² Biographies of a number of other playwrights have also provided useful information about the West End in the 1940s and 50s.³³ TAP interviewees' repeated references to weekly and fortnightly theatre-going sparked my interest in the impact that the repertory system had on shaping audience and practitioner attitudes towards plays of the period. George Rowell's and Anthony Jackson's *The Repertory Movement*, provides a fascinating history of the tradition, which gives a true sense of the range of theatrical practices that the term 'repertory' could encompass.³⁴ It also provides information about the reasons behind the decline of weekly and fortnightly reps in the late 1950s.

In relation to Theatre Workshop, Robert Leach's detailed biography of the company, and Nadine Holdsworth's work on the practical and theoretical ideas

²⁹ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007)

³⁰ J.P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1940-1949: A calendar of plays and players*, 2 vols (Metuchen, N.J and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1991) and *The London Stage 1950-1959: A calendar of plays and players*, 2 vols (Metuchen, N.J and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1993)

³¹ Richard Huggett, *Binkie Beaumont: Eminence Grise of the West End 1933-1973* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989)

³² Geoffrey Wansell, *Terence Rattigan: A Biography* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996)

³³ Laura Thompson, *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery* (London: Headline, 2007), Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (London: Harper Collins, 1983), Eric Salmon, *The Dark Journey: John Whiting as Dramatist* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1979), John Heilpern, *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2006)

³⁴ George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A history of regional theatre in Great Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

behind Joan Littlewood's theatrical style, were a useful starting point for my own research.³⁵ Howard Goorney's *The Theatre Workshop Story*, gives an informative inside account of the company. However, as I will explore in chapters 1 and 4, I found that over the course of interviewing other theatre practitioners, Goorney's versions of events did not always tally with the memories of his contemporaries.³⁶ With regard to Ewan MacColl, Ben Harker's biography gives a comprehensive account of the extent to which politics and class shaped MacColl's life in the theatre.³⁷ However, Harker's analysis of MacColl's work with Theatre Workshop is surprisingly brief, given both the number of plays that MacColl wrote for the company, and the richness of the material within his archive. The aforementioned secondary sources were particularly helpful when I came to interview former members of Theatre Workshop as they enabled me to ask interviewees detailed questions about specific events in the company's history.

Peter Roberts' and George Rowell's histories of the Old Vic Theatre both assess the central events which shaped the fate of company in the early post-war years.³⁸ Theatrical biographies have also been helpful to my research about the roles of specific company figures in this period. Jane Baldwin's sympathetic portrait of Michel Saint-Denis underlines the influence that the French director's ideas and theories had on the Old Vic Theatre Centre, whilst biographies focusing on the theatrical careers of Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson and George Devine, proved to be helpful for similar reasons.³⁹

3.5. Television Drama

As has already been noted, very little has been written about the relationship between theatre and television in this period. I therefore directed my attention to secondary sources which could give me an insight into how the BBC television

³⁵ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood* (London: Routledge, 2006)

³⁶ Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981)

³⁷ Ben Harker, *Class Act: The cultural and political life of Ewan MacColl* (London: Pluto Press, 2007)

³⁸ Peter Roberts, *The Old Vic Story* (London: W. H. Allen, 1976), George Rowell, *The Old Vic Theatre: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

³⁹ Jane Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), Terry Coleman, *Olivier, John Miller, Ralph Richardson: The authorised biography* (London: Pan Books, 1996), Gary O'Connor, *Ralph Richardson: An actor's life* (London: Methuen 1999), Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979)

drama department operated in the period. Lez Cooke's *British Television Drama*, offers a concise introduction to the evolution of twentieth century television drama.⁴⁰ Jason Jacob's pioneering study, *The Intimate Screen*, made me realise that it is still possible to piece together the history of unrecorded television programmes with the aid of archival documents.⁴¹ Asa Briggs's multi-volume history of the BBC is an invaluable source of statistical information, covering everything from the number of television sets bought in a particular year, to the exact dates when individual television practitioners were appointed to management posts.⁴²

Paul Rotha's *Television in the Making*, published in 1956, gives a useful insight into the attitudes of television practitioners at the time.⁴³ In relation to drama-documentary, Paul Kerr's and Derek Paget's separate studies both provide a good introduction to what has become an increasingly broad academic research area, whilst Elaine Bell's account of early television documentaries, highlights the ambiguous relationship between factual and fictional programmes in the period under discussion.⁴⁴

3.6. Autobiographies

Alongside the *TAP* oral testimonies, I also make reference to the autobiographies of numerous theatre and television practitioners who were working in the 1940s and 50s.⁴⁵ Autobiographical accounts have been particularly useful, of course, in

⁴⁰ Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2003)

⁴¹ Jason Jacobs, *Early British Television Drama: The Intimate Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁴² Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 Vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)

⁴³ *Television in the Making*, ed. by Paul Rotha (London: The Focal Press, 1956)

⁴⁴ Derek Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It: Dramadoc/ docudrama on television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), Paul Kerr, 'F for Fake? Friction over Faction', in *Understanding Television*, ed. by Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 74–87, Elaine Bell, 'The Origins of British Television Documentary', in *Documentary and the Mass Media*, ed. by John Corner (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1986), pp. 65-79.

⁴⁵ Joan Littlewood, *Joan's book: Joan Littlewood's peculiar history as she tells it* (London: Methuen, 1994), MacColl, *Journeyman*, Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (London: Orion Books, 2002), Agatha Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1986), Peter Saunders, *The Mousetrap Man* (London: Collins, 1972), Brian Rix, *My Farce from My Elbow: An Autobiography* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), Oscar Lewenstein, *Kicking Against the Pricks: A Theatre Producer Looks Back*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), Joan Plowright, *And That's Not All: The Memoirs of Joan Plowright* (London: Orion, 2002), Sheila Hancock, *The Two of Us: My Life with John Thaw* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), John Osborne, *Almost a Gentleman: An Autobiography*. Vol. II 1955–1966 (London: Faber, 1991), Tony Richardson, *Long Distance Runner: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), Val Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), Michael Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove: Michael Barry* (London: Royal Television Society, 1992), Michael Hallifax, *Let Me Set the Scene* (London: Smith and Kraus, 2004)

the case of practitioners who are no longer living. In cases like this, it is possible to gain an understanding of a person's work through speaking to their contemporaries, and, if the individual was well known, the researcher can read interviews and articles that were produced during his or her life-time. However, autobiographies often furnish the researcher with details that cannot be found anywhere else. This was particularly true in the case of the autobiographies of the television practitioners Val Gielgud and Michael Barry, which both provided information about practitioners and programmes that I would never otherwise have known about.⁴⁶ Autobiographies also give the reader a much broader sense of how the individual saw his or her life story. Autobiographies and biographies of the same person often interpret the events of their subject's lives, differently. As Ira Bruce Nadel comments: 'As a genre, biography continually unsettles the past, maintaining its vitality through its continual correction, revision, and interpretation of individual lives. Each new life is a provocation to re-assess all past lives of that subject'.⁴⁷ This thesis will explore how differences and omissions in autobiographical and biographical accounts can often tell a history of their own. Many of the autobiographies that I reference are now out of print, providing a salient reminder that once famous theatrical figures can fade from public view in a matter of decades.

4. Chapter outline

Chapter 1 explores the ways in which oral history and memory work have shaped this thesis. The opening section reflects on the methodology of the *TAP*, and considers the extent to which this has informed the form and content of its interviews. The interviewee testimony cited in the chapter as a whole, is, for the most part, directly related to the time period covered by the thesis. The main body of the chapter is comprised of three interview case studies which are used to explore the paradoxical relationship between the interviewees' imaginative re-telling of past events and researcher's desire to establish a historical 'truth'. The

⁴⁶ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*

⁴⁷ Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, Form*, p. 103.

first two case studies focus on the interviewees' use of theatrical anecdotes and performance techniques, whilst the third study considers the authoritative status that written history often holds over oral testimony. The concluding section explores the *TAP*'s archival processes and considers the extent to which technology has influenced the way in which individuals and institutions remember and record the past.

In chapter 2, I move to consider some of the popular and commercially successful West-End dramas of the 1940s and early 1950s. This chapter begins by charting historians' contradictory attitudes towards both the plays and the playwrights. The second section is broken down into a series of case studies which explore how a selection of successful West End plays represented both the surrounding society and the theatrical values of the time. Each study examines the relationship between the play's contemporaneous reception and the critical attitudes that surround its author today. The third section discusses the connections between the West End and the theatrical 'new wave' of dramatists and practitioners who rose to prominence in the late 1950s and 60s. Specific consideration is given to the impact that regional repertory theatres had on theatre-going habits between 1945 and 1956.

Chapter 3 examines the uneasy relationship between theatre and television in the 1940s and 50s. It explores how the theatre went from wielding absolute control over television's dramatic output, to a position where theatre practitioners were actively seeking out the support of the newer medium. This chapter draws extensively on *TAP* interviews with television practitioners, and research that I conducted at the BBC Written Archives Centre. Archival documents are used to illustrate how the collaborations and collisions of the two media, over the course of this period, influenced a new generation of writers, performers and audiences. Specific focus is given to the BBC television broadcast of *Look Back in Anger*. This case study provides new information about the afterlife of one of the most celebrated plays in post-war British theatre history, and reveals the important links between theatre and television in the mid-50s. The chapter closes by considering the extent to which television drama documentaries helped to prepare British

audiences for new forms of socially realistic drama that addressed the pressing social problems of post-war society.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider the period from the perspective of two very different theatre companies. The earlier chapter considers the history of Theatre Workshop between 1945 and 1953. In this period the company was an impoverished regional touring group taking innovative theatrical work to new audiences around the country. The impact of the company's work in the early post-war years is explored by comparing and contrasting the oral testimonies of former Theatre Workshop members. In contrast, chapter 5 focuses on the history of the Old Vic Company when it was at the height of its post-war fame in the mid to late-1940s. The first section of the chapter considers how and why the theatre company appealed to the popular imagination by exploring the memories of former audience members. The second section explores the differing attitudes towards the work of the pioneering Old Vic School in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The chapter concludes by considering the demise, and subsequent legacy, of both the star-driven company and the school. Interviewee memories are used to explore how and why certain moments in cultural history establish a lasting hold within cultural memory, whilst those that once surrounded them, fade.

The thesis draws to a close with an afterword which offers some final thoughts on the value of oral history and outlines possible future directions for my own research.

Chapter 1

Private Spaces in Public Places: Oral History and Theatrical Memory

This chapter explores the way in which *TAP* interviewees recall their memories of theatre, and considers the extent to which the form and content of the interviews are mediated through the methodological and archival practices of the Project. Both strands of discussion necessitate a consideration of the relationship between 'individual' and 'public' history. In the context of this thesis I am using 'public history' in a broad and pluralistic sense to refer to narratives which have entered the general consciousness through widely disseminated written, visual or oral records. However, used even in this general sense 'public history' remains a problematic term and I use it in part to interrogate whether it has any meaning in a world where advances in computer technology, and changes in archival practices, are allowing people to create an increasingly multifaceted view of history.

1. Project background

The *TAP* interviews practitioners who either went to, or worked, in post-war theatre. To date, interviews have been generated in four main ways; publicity in newspapers, academic journals, and theatre programmes; targeted letters to prominent practitioners of the period; a Project web-site affiliated to the British Library; and word of mouth. Interviews are conducted on a voluntary basis by students and academic staff engaged in theatre research within the School of English, and British Library staff with connections to the post-war Theatre Collections. All volunteers attend a training session which focuses on oral history interview techniques and provides an opportunity for volunteers to practice with the digital recording equipment. Interviewers are advised to ask open questions which focus on the interests and experiences of the interviewee.

The Project keeps a record of prospective interviewees in order to provide volunteers with information about their interviewee's theatrical experiences. Further background research is encouraged and interviewers contact their

interviewees via phone or e-mail to introduce themselves and discuss the interview process. The subsequent recording is transcribed by the volunteer, according to the British Library's transcription guidelines. Interviews that have been conducted by Project team members and British Library staff are, in most cases, transcribed by a professional transcriber. The recordings are then housed at the British Library Sound Archive and the University of Sheffield Special Collections, and the transcriptions are uploaded onto the *TAP* web-site. All interviewees sign copyright declarations stating that they are happy for the Project to archive the interview recording and publish the transcript online. Professor Dominic Shellard oversees the *TAP* as a whole and, over the five years, the administrative side of the Oral History Project has been managed on a part-time basis by three different people; Dr Ewan Jeffrey (September 2003 to December 2005), myself (January 2006 to March 2007) and Lada Price (May 2007 to the present).

1.1. The Interview Demographic

When the *TAP* began in 2003, Dominic Shellard had planned that the oral history strand would consist of twenty-five interviews. By 2004 it was clear that there were more than twenty-five interested participants and, to date (November 2008), the number of interviews conducted stands at just over 200. In the first year of the Project, interviewees were not asked to focus on a specific time-frame within the post-war years and, as a result, some of the interviews from this period consider relatively recent theatre history.⁴⁸ The steady growth of interviews combined with the constraints of time and budget meant that by January 2004, Shellard and the then Oral History Project administrator, Dr Ewan Jeffrey, had made a decision to structure the burgeoning collection around a clearly defined start and finish point.⁴⁹ The period 1945 to 1968 was chosen in part because it marked two significant dates in 20th Century British history, the first being the end of the Second World

⁴⁸ For example in Laura White's interview with Grahame Morris (26 November 2003) the focus of the interview is the rationale behind programming at Sheffield Theatres in the nineties and the noughties
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/morris.html>> [accessed 10 April 2008]

⁴⁹ Dr Ewan Jeffrey summarises this situation in the report that he produced in December 2005. A copy of the report is archived within *TAP* administrative files.

War and the second being the final year of Stage Censorship. The revised time-frame also created a closer historical link between the Oral History Project and the archival strand of the *TAP*, which has created description lists for the British Library Theatre collections of John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Michel Saint-Denis, and Cedric Hardwicke.⁵⁰ Underlying the decision to focus on the first twenty-three years of post-war theatre history was the unavoidable fact of human mortality; the new time-frame allowed the Project to give priority to the more elderly interviewees, and this is reflected in the earlier historical scope of the majority of the post-2004 interviews.

The Project has always worked on the basis that it would interview everyone who requested to be interviewed, providing that they met the basic criteria. In theory, the broad parameters of interview selection should open up participation to anyone and everyone involved in theatre of this period. In practice, the working reality of a small project team has meant that the interviewee demographic and interview content has been shaped to a certain extent by the interests and professional and personal contacts of the people who have, in the first place, organised and undertaken interviews, and in the second place, given them. For example, Jamie Andrews, the Head of Modern Literary Manuscripts at the British Library, has generated a subsidiary group of interviews which focus on people with memories of the first production of Harold Pinter's *The Room*. Murray Melvin, a former member of Theatre Workshop, is one of a number of interviewees who passed on contact details for many of the people he had worked with. Without Melvin's help the Project would not have been able to create the existing collection of interviews about Theatre Workshop. Collectively the *TAP* interviews are clearly not representative of everyone who went to or worked in the theatre in this period. As a result, in this chapter, and in the thesis as a whole, questions of 'representation' are discussed in the context of the connections between the interviews within the archive, and their wider relationship to the surrounding socio-historical context.

⁵⁰ <http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/archives.html> [accessed 5 May 2008]

1.2. Interview content: A shared heritage?

The majority of interviewees discuss their experiences of theatre between 1945 and 1968. However, they do so from the vantage point of early 21st century life. As a result the collection of interviews reflects over eighty years of lived history, as opposed to the twenty-three years of theatre history that is implied by the Project's time-frame. I use the phrase 'lived history' rather than 'theatre history' because the autobiographical nature of the memories inevitably situates them in a broader socio-historical context. Family, friendships, relationships, upbringing, education, and work are just some of the recurrent 'non-theatrical' topics of discussion. The memories of theatre are also diverse. Interviewees include actors, writers, directors, stage managers, designers, technicians and theatre-goers. Recollections of ticket prices, dress codes, theatrical digs and rehearsals appear alongside memories of musicals, the West End, weekly rep and variety shows. Christmas pantomimes and amateur dramatics are recalled in as much detail as the performances of Laurence Olivier and productions of *Look Back in Anger*. As seen through the collective memories of the interviewees, the definition of 'Theatre' assumes an elastic quality. The range of voices and opinions within the archive are one of its strengths as a historical resource, as Paul Thompson observes: 'Reality is complex and many sided; and it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated'.⁵¹

As the archive has grown, the diverse individual memories have been counter-pointed by the emergence of strands of shared memories which have a more 'public' nature. Events that unfolded on national and international stages resurface; Pearl Goodman and Anne Piper refer to the bombing of Hiroshima; Corin Redgrave and Arnold Wesker remember the Aldermaston marches; Frank Bench, like many interviewees, reflects on the impact of the Second World War.⁵²

⁵¹ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 6.

⁵² TAP interview with Pearl Goodman conducted by Kate Harris (26 March 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/goodman.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

TAP interview with Anne Piper conducted by Kate Dorney (12 March 2005)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/piper.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

Footnotes continued on next page

In the theatrical world, interviewees who have never met remember the same production(s), play(s), actor(s), and theatre(s). Frequent references to other dramatic forms such as opera, ballet, film, television, and radio emphasise the fact that theatre does not operate in isolation.⁵³ An interviewee's understanding of one medium is often influenced by an experience of another. For example, both Arnold Wesker and Ronald Gray refer to the important role that radio played in their introduction to drama.⁵⁴ Whilst there may not be a single 'grand narrative' within the archive, there is a definite sense of shared history.

2. Interviewer and interviewee

The interviews are the product of a dialogue between two people, within which the role of the interviewer is no less significant than that of the interviewee. Whilst interviews focus on the memories of their interviewee, the knowledge of the interviewer, and their interview style, will influence the resultant conversation. *TAP* interviewers often have a shared sense of theatre history because they are, in most cases, either students or academics studying or researching theatre at the University of Sheffield. The majority of volunteers have undertaken interviews as part of either an undergraduate or post-graduate module specifically about the history of British Theatre between 1945 and 1968. Over the past five years both of these modules were convened by Dominic Shellard. His historiographical approach to theatre of this period, as outlined in *British Theatre since the War*, shapes the form and the content of the courses and, to a certain extent, the

TAP interview with Corin Redgrave conducted by Ian MacKillop (no date)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/redgravec.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

TAP interview with Arnold Wesker conducted by Ewan Jeffrey (19 December 2003)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/wesker.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

TAP interview with Frank Bench conducted by David Miller (12 February 2004)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/bench.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

⁵³ Examples of references to ballet can be found in the *TAP* interview with Leo Kersley conducted by Thomas Dymond (17 July 2006) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/kersley.html>> [accessed 1 November 2009],

and the interview with Jean Newlove conducted by Kate Harris (6 November 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/newlove.html>> [accessed 1 November 2008]

Examples of *TAP* references to opera can be found in the interview with Freda Chapple conducted by Kate Harris (12 January 2004) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/chapple.html>> [accessed 1 November 2008],

and the interview with Philip Morgan conducted by Christina Irving (26 February 2005)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/morgan.html>> [accessed 1 November 2008].

Interviewee references to film, television and radio will be discussed in other sections of the thesis

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Arnold Wesker, *TAP* interview with Ronald Gray conducted by Payam Hosseinian (4 May 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/grayr.html>> [accessed 5 April 2008]

opinions of the students who take them.⁵⁵ Students inevitably appropriate some of the academic discourses that they are exposed to during their studies, whether it is in the form of the information that is disseminated via their seminars and lectures, or the critical opinions that they discover through independent study. These views often feed into interviews as students are naturally inclined to show interest in the post-war plays, practitioners and companies that they have studied. This point has to be taken into consideration when considering the repeated interview references to playwrights like John Osborne, Bertolt Brecht and Harold Pinter, all three of whom are studied on the aforementioned courses.

However, the contributions of both interviewers and interviewees are also defined in relation to their sense of one another, as Michael Frayn notes: 'You are asking me questions which you hope are relevant to the answers I might give and the purposes of your research. I'm trying to find answers which have some relation to your questions'.⁵⁶ The interviews offer an insight into the way in which different people historicize the past. Historiographical information resides as much in the narrative form of the memories as the content, and in this respect discrepancies and disagreements within the interviews can be informative. When such moments occur between interviewers and interviewees they are often markers of historical discord, which encourage the researcher to reconsider the validity of existing historical accounts of the past. This is reflected in an interview that I conducted with the producer Anthony Field, in which he recalls the West End manager, Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont's involvement in the New Watergate Theatre's club performances of *A View from the Bridge* (1956), *Tea and Sympathy* (1957), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958):

TF: Binkie, of course, was on the National Theatre Board, and anything big that came up -like the New Watergate - he would want to have a hand in,

⁵⁵ Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*. This book offers a survey of post-war British theatre between 1945 and 1997. It explores the period 1945-1968 by making a detailed chronological study of prominent managements, companies, plays and theatrical figures of the period. Companies studied include the management H.M. Tennent, the Old Vic, the ESC, Theatre Workshop, the RSC and the National. The modules follow a similar approach in terms of content. Students look at the work of two different playwrights each week and consider the relationships between the plays and the surrounding theatrical context.

⁵⁶ TAP interview with Michael Frayn conducted by Ursula Jeffries (27 February 2004)
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/frayn.html>> [accessed 5 March 2008]

because even if he wasn't going to be in control of it, he would know what was happening and like to be, a) seen to be involved and b) to be involved.

KH: That's quite interesting, because from an academic point of view, Binkie Beaumont's really associated with sort of a different generation of theatre and not the kind of new social realism of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and things that were sort of breaking the boundaries in terms of censorship.⁵⁷

As the interview reflects, I was surprised by Field's account of Beaumont's support for a group of plays which had been banned by the Lord Chamberlain, because my view of Beaumont had been conditioned by the conservative reputation which is often associated with West End managers in the 1940s and 1950s. Richard Huggett, the author of the only biography on Binkie Beaumont provides an example of this:

What attracted Binkie was the good, pleasant, commercial play [...] which would attract one or two stars and which would appeal to the middlebrow and middle-class audiences in the Home Counties who kept the theatre alive.⁵⁸

After the interview, I compared Field's account to Huggett's and found that the latter made no reference to Beaumont's involvement in the New Watergate venture. Curiously, the years 1955 to 1957 are entirely absent from the biography and, whilst the narrative resumes in 1958, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is not mentioned. The gaps in the chronology of Huggett's book shows that written histories are subject to the same selective revisionism as oral histories. It also indicates the extent to which absence can shape historical narratives, as Krinka Vidakovic Petrov comments: 'memory implies both remembering and forgetting; it implies a choice, a discrimination between items which will be preserved and those which will be suppressed. As a mechanism inherent to memory, oblivion is creative'.⁵⁹

Further research reveals that Field's account of Beaumont is corroborated in other histories of the period. Dominic Shellard notes Beaumont's support for A

⁵⁷ TAP interview with Anthony Field conducted by Kate Harris (14 March 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/field2.html>> [accessed 6 March 2008]

⁵⁸ Huggett, *Binkie Beaumont*, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Krinka Vidakovic Petrov, 'Memory and Oral Tradition', in *Memory*, ed. by Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 77-96 (p. 78).

View from the Bridge in his biography of Kenneth Tynan, Charles Duff describes him as the 'leading light' in *The Lost Summer*, whilst in *The London Stage 1950-1959*, J.P. Wearing references the fact that the furniture and props for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* were provided by H.M. Tennent Ltd's workshops.⁶⁰

The interviews reflect shifts in cultural perceptions on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee; indeed interviewee anecdotes are sometimes tailored to reflect the impact of change. This is particularly the case in memories which focus on theatrical practices which are no longer common in contemporary theatre. For example, David Budworth is one of a number of interviewees whose view of the prominent post-war repertory theatre circuit has been conditioned, at least in part, by its disappearance: 'Rep was an extremely good training I think. And you do notice the difference now in the standard of acting I think, in that I think it was a very good thing for young actors to work in rep for a limited time'.⁶¹ In contrast, Stage Designer Alexander McPherson has no regrets about the demise of weekly and fortnightly rep: 'We don't have that tradition anymore. It's long gone. Lots of people say that it's a wonderful thing. I don't think it was. It was to teach people shortcuts and bad habits, actors as well [...] the standard would be totally unacceptable now'.⁶² The excerpts from Budworth and McPherson's interviews are a reminder that the archive is often a site of disagreement. Whilst the interviewer's questions and comments can mediate the way in which the interviewee records his or her narrative in the present, the comments of both parties will also carry traces of narratives that have been forged in the time and space outside the interview situation. As Mikhail Bakhtin observes, 'Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others'.⁶³

⁶⁰ Shellard, *Kenneth Tynan*, pp. 177-178. Duff, *The Lost Summer*, p. 55, Wearing, *The London Stage 1950-1959*, VII (1958-1959), p. 932.

⁶¹ TAP interview with David Budworth conducted by Sarah Strachan (10 November 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/budworth.html>> [accessed 5 March 2008]

⁶² TAP interview with Alexander McPherson conducted by Therese Clutario (14 April 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/mcpherson.html>> [accessed 5 March 2008]

⁶³ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, general ed. Vincent B Leitch (London and New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 1186-1220, (p. 1215).

In the context of an oral history interview, Bakhtin's argument can be used to suggest that the interviewer/ interviewee dynamic is a relatively small component within the conversation. The ambiguous power balance in the relationship between the different voices serves to exemplify the larger narrative process in which it is operating. Raphael Samuel makes the point that, 'History is an argument about the past, as well as the record of it, and its terms are forever changing'.⁶⁴ Oral history is ideally placed to capture such shifting frameworks, because, as Ronald Grele observes, 'there are seemingly two relationships in one – that between the informant and the historian, and that between the informant and his historical consciousness'.⁶⁵ It is arguable that Grele's point could be expanded to include a third relationship, which is that between the interviewer and their historical consciousness. The following section contains three case studies of interviews which explore the different ways in which the interlinked relationships can interact. Within the case studies, specific consideration will be given to issues of narrative unreliability and historical 'truth'.

3. Case studies

3.1. The theatrical anecdote: Peter Bartlett

I was the youngest actor in Bernard Shaw's last play and he didn't want the whole company to go down, 'Bring the youngest', he said to the producer, so I was taken down to Eyot St. Lawrence and met Bernard Shaw. He wrote an inscription, inscribed 'For Peter Bartlett, a young rip who, on the strength of having created the part of Fiffy in *Buoyant Billions*, now demands my autograph; here it is, G. Bernard Shaw, 5th November, remember, remember, 1949.

Peter Bartlett, *TAP*.⁶⁶

When Dr Ewan Jeffrey and I interviewed Peter Bartlett nearly 56 years later, on the 20th October 2005, his memories of the past remained vivid. In contrast, his sense of the recent present, the place he lived, the people around him, and even the

⁶⁴ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 430.

⁶⁵ Ronald Grele, 'Movement without aim' in *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 38-52 (p. 45).

⁶⁶ *TAP* interview with Peter Bartlett conducted by Kate Harris and Ewan Jeffrey (20 October 2005) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/bartlett2.html>> [accessed 5 March 2008]

interview which we were conducting, were subject to continual unsettlement as a result of ill health. His days of treading the boards were long gone, and he was living at a retirement home for theatre practitioners, where Ewan Jeffrey and I had journeyed in search of the theatrical past. Bartlett was one of the first residents to volunteer to give an interview and, as the aforementioned anecdote reflects, he took great delight in telling us about his encounters with famous figures of the day. His memories of his working life seemed to supply him with a clearly defined sense of narrative identity, and perhaps a refuge from the more shadowy movement of time in recent years.

However, the difficulties of negotiating memories of a long ago past through Bartlett's ever-vanishing present made it an unusual interview experience. Questions would sometimes be forgotten before they were answered and I was left with a lingering sense of lost connections. For example, a question about Michael Redgrave, with whom he worked, elicited a response in which the actor, then dead for twenty years, was referred to in the present tense. In this sense the recording that the three of us made, is a poignant reminder of the fragility of human memory. However, whilst the background to the interview is important, over the course of conducting and studying a range of different interviews I have gradually realised that the form and content of Bartlett's remarkable memories were also illustrative of the way in which interviewees often employ anecdotes to bring the theatrical past to life, and it is in this context that I want to discuss it.

The ephemeral nature of theatre allows the anecdote to assume a pivotal role in the construction of theatrical identity, it is, as Jacky Bratton observes, 'a kind of history that is perceived as a possible continuity in an evanescent tradition'.⁶⁷ Theatre's success, in the commercial mainstream at least, is dependent on public recognition and acclaim, and it is not surprising that interviewees like Bartlett are often keen to recount anecdotes which connect them to celebrated practitioners and productions of this period. Famous individuals become almost like memorial repositories through which interviewees negotiate their sense of the theatrical past. The biographical detail that is encompassed in such memories allows the memory

⁶⁷ Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, p. 106.

of historical figures to live on in contemporary consciousness, as Ira Bruce Nadel comments: 'even though the historical figures dies, the biography continues his [or her] presence – in itself a mythic, phoenix like activity- recreating and perpetuating the self'.⁶⁸ This idea of continuity subtly re-defines memory as, 'not only what we personally experience, refine and retain (our 'core'), but also what we inherit from preceding generations, and pass onto the next'.⁶⁹ This process is arguably particularly important to theatre history because it creates a sense of community within what can be a disparate and unstable profession. Productions open and close, companies disband, and practitioners move on to the next job, and in this context the anecdote about the well known individual becomes a way of forging a sense of theatrical identity. Jacky Bratton develops this idea specifically in relation to impersonations, but her argument can also be applied to anecdotes which link practitioners to one another: 'By impersonating another performer, past or present, actors claim for themselves familiarity, a knowledge that implies membership of a group, a community, and they also protect and ingratiate themselves with the audience'.⁷⁰

In Bartlett's case, his memorable career moments were characterised by an impressive list of famous individuals. He trained at RADA and in 1948 began his career playing the third apparition to Michael Redgrave's *Macbeth*. In 1960 he joined the Orson Welles' led cast of *Chimes at Midnight* for its brief stage run in Belfast. In 1966 he found himself working with Charlie Chaplin, Marlon Brando and Sophia Lauren in the Chaplin directed film, *The Countess from Hong Kong*. His memories of theatre-going were similarly star defined: Gielgud's Hamlet, Olivier's Othello and Edith Evans as Madame Ranevskaya. Bartlett told us about these specific memories because he felt them to be extraordinary; Orson Welles and Charlie Chaplin are described, respectively, as 'the major thing in [his] life'; and 'the greatest name in [his] life'; whilst Edith Evans' performance is remembered as, 'the most moving experience [he] ever had'.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, Form*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ Thomas Butler, 'Memory a Mixed Blessing', in *Memory*, ed. by Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 1-31 (p. 13).

⁷⁰ Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, p. 103.

⁷¹ Interview with Peter Bartlett

I know that Bartlett's stories were widely known amongst the other residents at the Home as the matron had briefed us about his remarkable recollections before we met him. He and the other residents we interviewed that day had discussed their theatrical memories with each other countless times before, as the former agent Peter Greene, commented: 'I have fierce arguments with people here, I mean Peter Bartlett, who you've spoken to, absolutely adored him and lived and breathed John Gielgud, and I don't dare discuss it with him now'.⁷² Repetition had given Bartlett's anecdotes a routine fixity which belied the ephemeral quality of the original experience. This quality of remembrance is seen by Paul Ricoeur as a central facet of memory itself:

Things and people do not simply appear, they reappear as being the same, and it is in accordance with this sameness of reappearing that we remember them. In the same way we recall names, addresses and telephone numbers. Memorable meetings offer themselves to be remembered due less to their unrepeatable singularity than to their typical resemblance.⁷³

However, whilst it is likely that interviewees remember their anecdotes because they have told them many times before, in the context of an oral history interview, the interviewer is hearing them for the first time. In such circumstances the well worn anecdote recovers its singular quality and makes a fresh appeal to the imaginative faculties of an untested audience. It is invariably the colourful quality of the anecdote that draws the listener in, as David Novarr comments: 'the best collection of facts, all of them ordered, is no substitute for our love of sharp incident, revealing anecdote, suspenseful narrative'.⁷⁴ Bartlett's stories were built around vivid minor details; G.B. Shaw's gift to an overawed young actor; Chaplin's habit of saying 'I'm pooped' at 5.15pm on a working day; Orson Welles sitting on a throne, 'in a great purple dressing gown' at an early morning meeting. Such anecdotes emphasise the fact that oral history can be seen as both a dialogue and a performance. Two people converse and both, to a greater or lesser extent, shape the structure of the

⁷² TAP interview with Peter Green conducted by Kate Harris and Ewan Jeffrey (20 October 2005) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/greenp.html>> [accessed 6 March 2008]

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 23.

⁷⁴ David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's "Lives"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 495.

interview. However, within that dynamic the interviewee is the focal point, 'the performer', and the interviewee their 'audience'.

3.2. Acting out theatre history: Mavis Whyte

In an archive in which more than half of the interviewees were once professional or amateur actors, re-enactments of past performances are common and the anecdotes often come resplendent with different voices, sound effects and gestures. Mavis Whyte, a variety performer throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s provides some of the best examples within the archive of the performative quality of theatre history. In the following excerpt she is describing an ENSA tour in 1944:

That was my work, impersonating, giving my impression of stars like Shirley Temple, [mimics in American accent] 'oh my goodness there's a kid, I'm just an old fashioned girl'. [returns to normal voice] And Jessie Matthews, the English film star [mimics in RP English accent] 'over my shoulder goes one cow!' [returns to normal voice] And who else was there? Marlene Dietrich! [mimics in a German accent] 'I'm in love again, never wanted to...' [returns to normal voice] and Gracie Fields [mimics] 'sing as we go!'. [Returns to normal voice] I met the American Mae West [mimics in an American accent] 'oh, look me over boys, but don't try to reform me.'⁷⁵

In this interview, we hear Whyte as she is in the present, as she was in the past, and as she transformed herself on the stage. At a literal level the recollections are framed by the interview context: Whyte, then in her mid 80s, is looking back on a career that began over sixty years previously. However, her skills as both an impersonator and a story-teller enable her to vividly recreate the theatrical world in which she lived and worked. For much of this interview Whyte plays her younger-self, re-enacting old routines and impressions, and even dramatizing conversations with some of the people that she met along the way. She adopts the voices and personalities of other people with ease, and this narrative device allows the interview version of her younger self to share an imaginative stage with a host of other performers. Whyte's vivid descriptions of her Musical Hall routines provide a record of a theatrical tradition which was never set down in play scripts.

⁷⁵ TAP interview with Mavis Whyte conducted by Helen Temple (5 January 2005)
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/whyte.html>> [accessed 5 March 2008]

Testimony like this supports Robert Perks' and Alistair Thomson's argument that, 'the most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been "hidden from history"'.⁷⁶

Like Peter Bartlett, Whyte continues to make her memories of the past a central part of the present. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer mentions that Whyte has something of a reputation as a raconteur: 'As I'm well aware by talking to Mr Holliday over at the Floral Pavilion you're somewhat of a celebrity in these parts'.⁷⁷ A cursory internet search for 'Mavis Whyte' brings up a number of references to the fact that she often gives talks to local groups about her working life.⁷⁸ A video of a performance during one such talk has even been posted on YouTube.⁷⁹ The performative style in which she recounts her 'experiences' and 'perspectives' blurs the distinctions between the past and the present, and the fictional and the real. Such recollections reflect the extent to which narratives of the past rely on imaginative creativity in the present, as the theorist Hayden White observes:

The events are *made* [HW italics] into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play.⁸⁰

According to White, historical narratives are artificial constructs, in which meaning is refracted as much through their literary form as their historical content. Paradoxically, the common qualities of literary style mean that although our histories may be radically different in content, they are often united in form by their use of similar literary tropes. In the archive, the theatrical nature of the content

⁷⁶ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson 'Introduction' in *The Oral History Reader*, pp. ix-xiii (p. ix).

⁷⁷ Interview with Mavis Whyte

⁷⁸ For references to Mavis's talks see Larry Nield, 'Master of mirth takes a dig at the Holey City', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 27 March 2007 <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-news/regional-news/tm_method=full&objectid=18814380&siteid=50061-name_page.html> [accessed 7 March 2008] and *Saint Paul's Eye Appeal*, <http://www.eyecharity.com/croxteth_country_park_walk.htm> [accessed 7 March 2008]

⁷⁹ "'No Regrets" ...from "The Tiddley Winkie Girl"! on YouTube <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfIM9jwc4kQ>> [accessed 7 March 2008]

⁸⁰ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 84.

encourages the frequent use of narrative devices like mimicry, song and dialogue, and this creates a sense that there is a collective narrative style which is specific to the theme of this particular archive. White's argument breaks down the distinction between history as a report of actuality, and fiction as its imaginative representation. His view is rooted in a belief in the importance of imaginative creativity:

To say that we make sense of the real world by imposing upon it the formal coherency that we customarily associate with products of writers of fiction in no way detracts from the status of knowledge which we ascribe to historiography. It would only detract from it if we were to believe that literature did not teach us anything about reality.⁸¹

The evident historical value of Whyte's accounts of musical hall routines in particular, underlines the importance of 'the creative fact'.⁸² Hayden White's observations about both the literary and the imaginative quality of history are especially relevant to the history of cultural art forms, given that creativity is fundamental to their existence. His point has a particular relevance to the history of an art form which is as ephemeral as theatre. If archival records survive, the details of theatrical production - venue, company, play, practitioners, box office records - are ascertainable. However, even assuming that some of the material records of production exist, in order to write about performances, which are borne out of imaginative processes, historians invariably have to turn to practitioner biographies and contemporaneous reviews. Ira Bruce Nadel's observations about the literary quality of biographies can equally be applied to theatre reviews: 'language and modes of narration, not content, structure a biography. Not facts, but the presentation of those facts, establish the value of biographical writing'.⁸³ The theatrical legacy of Kenneth Tynan, whose colourful reviews remain a feature of theatre histories of this period, exemplifies Bruce Nadel's point. As Tom Stoppard comments in the foreword to the most recent edited collection of Tynan's theatre writings:

⁸¹ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 99.

⁸² Virginia Woolf uses this phrase in relation to her discussion of biographical 'truth' in 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*, p. 126.

⁸³ Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, Form*, p. 9.

His reputation as a critic [...] rests paradoxically on his artistry. His gift for describing what he saw and heard was close to genius. You can open this book on almost any page and come across a phrase or a vignette which is the next best thing to having been there.⁸⁴

In this light, Tynan's brilliance as a writer is comparable to Whyte's skill as a raconteur. The appeal of such testimonies lies in their individuality, and the accounts remain powerful today because of their dramatic quality. 'Creative facts' and subjective histories allow us to create a more expansive sense of the past which can cast new light on both the form and content of existing theatre histories. However, the question of 'historical truth' becomes problematic when individuals actively disagree with proven actuality. In such situations the 'creative fact' morphs into factual error, and threatens to undermine the interviewee's testimony as a whole. This idea will be explored in the final case study, which focuses on Renee Goddard's account of Bertolt Brecht.

3.3. True lies? Renee Goddard

The diversity of Renee Goddard's theatrical experience between 1945 and 1955 - actress, production assistant, script reader, and producer - made her an ideal interviewee for the Project. Between 1945-7 she trained at RADA. Post-RADA she worked in Children's Theatre and weekly rep. Between 1951 and 1952 she played in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* and Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in a company led by Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. In the mid 1950s she worked as an assistant to the producer Oscar Lewenstein during which time she was responsible for liaising with leading European writers and directors, including Jean Genet and Bertolt Brecht. In 1955, prior to Peter Hall's production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, she arranged a read through of the play for the West End manager Donald Albery. For the purposes of this case study I am going to focus on Goddard's description of a trip that she and the theatre producer Oscar Lewenstein made to East Berlin in the mid-1950s.⁸⁵ The purpose of their visit was

⁸⁴ Tom Stoppard 'Foreword' in Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, p. xv.

⁸⁵ I have not been able to tie this visit down to a specific year although I suspect it took place at the beginning of 1955 for reasons which will subsequently be explained

to meet Bertolt Brecht and negotiate the English performance rights for one of his plays. The first section will consider the seemingly 'fictional' elements of Goddard's account, whilst the second section will explore the importance of the form and the content of her memories, in a wider historical context.

When I first listened to the recording after I had completed the interview, it struck me that the most immediate problem facing a theatre researcher who might want to make use of Goddard's interview was that she seemed to mix-up Theatre Workshop's 1955 production of *Mother Courage* with Sam Wanamaker's 1956 production of *The Threepenny Opera*. In the following excerpt, which I quote from, Goddard and I begin by discussing the latter production, in which Goddard played the part of Coaxer.⁸⁶ However, as the conversation moves on, the question of which of the two productions Goddard negotiated the rights for becomes confusing:

KH: Did you meet Brecht when you did *The Threepenny Opera*?

RG: No. Brecht I only met that time when I was asked to meet him.

KH: When were you asked to meet him?

RG: Well over the Joan Littlewood business.

KH: This was when Theatre Workshop wanted to put *Mother Courage* on?

RG: Yes. Ted Allen - he wrote *The Boy Friend* didn't he? Have you heard of a show called *The Boy Friend*? Anyway this writer, was he Canadian? Anyway he said that he had the rights to *The Threepenny Opera*, given to him by Bertolt Brecht and I think he produced some sort of...and Joan Littlewood wanted to play it and her company to be in it, and Oscar was asked by them to be the manager, to present it and this was announced in *The Times*. Came [sic] a letter from Brecht to say that they certainly did not have the rights and so they asked me to go and see him, to make an appointment for Oscar and to explain why.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Goddard does not name the part that she plays in the interview but J. P. Wearing records her name and role in *The London Stage 1950-59*, VI (1950-1957), p. 707.

⁸⁷ Interview with Renee Goddard conducted by Kate Harris (26 October 2005)
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/goddard7.html>> [accessed 29 April 2008]

In this extract I ask the third question - 'This was when Theatre Workshop wanted to put *Mother Courage* on?'- in a way that suggests that I already know the answer. This is because prior to the start of the interview Goddard and I had discussed her theatrical experiences and she had told me she negotiated the rights for the Theatre Workshop production of *Mother Courage*. As a result, I asked about *Mother Courage* with the aforementioned answer in mind, and my preconceived certainty about her response led me to miss the important change that she made in the recorded account. When I transcribed the interview the difference became apparent and I included an editorial bracket, '[later established RG meant *Mother Courage*]', which aimed to clarify the confusion. I included this bracket only after having checked different accounts of Theatre Workshop, which confirmed that whilst the company had produced *Mother Courage*, they had never put on *The Threepenny Opera*.⁸⁸

However, when I subsequently read Oscar Lewenstein's autobiographical account of the same events, I began to wonder if what had initially seemed to me to be a simple name mix-up, was actually an issue of narrative unreliability, in which my supposed 'clarification' had retrospectively become a part. Lewenstein's autobiography mentions that Goddard was involved in negotiating with Brecht for the rights of the 1956 production of the *Threepenny Opera*.⁸⁹ His record of her presence during the negotiations problematises Goddard's account because she says she only met Brecht once 'over the Littlewood business'. Neither Goddard nor Lewenstein provide specific dates for the Berlin visits but according to Lewenstein the visit to Berlin to acquire the rights for *Mother Courage* took place after the trip to acquire the rights for *The Threepenny Opera* (despite the fact that the former production took place seven months earlier than the latter). In Lewenstein's recollection of the second trip there is no mention of Goddard accompanying him:

⁸⁸ I checked the following books at the time of the transcription in 2005, and subsequently in the case of the more recent publications- Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, Murray Melvin, *The Art of Theatre Workshop* (London: Oberon Books, 2006), Leach, *Theatre Workshop*

⁸⁹ See Lewenstein, *Kicking Against the Pricks*, pp. 20-21. For confirmation of production and date see also, Dominic Shellard, *Harold Hobson: The Complete Catalogue 1922-1988*, (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), p. 174.

Shortly after I returned from my visit to Brecht in Berlin, Joan and Gerry came to see me and told me that the rights for *Mother Courage* had fallen through [...] they asked me if there was anything I could do to help them get Brecht's permission and I agreed to go back to Berlin and see what I could do [...] I went to Berlin, saw Brecht and persuaded him, on the basis of Theatre Workshop's record and my description of Joan, to let them go ahead.⁹⁰

This account is supported by Howard Goorney's account of the production of *Mother Courage* in *The Theatre Workshop Story*. Goorney, like Lewenstein does not mention Goddard: 'Thanks to the good offices of Oscar Lewenstein, Theatre Workshop had obtained the British rights of *Mother Courage* from Bertolt Brecht'.⁹¹ These two written accounts differ considerably from Goddard's assurance of her presence at the discussion and, more importantly, her emphasis on the pivotal role she played in persuading Brecht to agree to the rights:

The rights, well, he [Brecht] said, 'Who's the best director in England?'. And I said I thought it was Peter Brook, 'And who is the best management?'. And I said that it was Binkie Beaumont, and he said, 'Well, these are the people who should do my play, not this little woman out there where you people will go and see her and nobody else will' and I said, 'Well, actually you'll get a good notice for it from Kenneth Tynan, sight unseen and Peter Brook and Binkie Beaumont certainly wouldn't want to do your plays'. Anyway I persuaded him, I don't remember how, to make an appointment with Oscar to somehow persuade him to find some way to do this play in Britain.⁹²

Goddard's word for word recollection of Brecht's conversation engaged me as a listener and encouraged me to believe in her testimony. However, the sense of immediacy that was generated during the interview is undermined by the fact that Goddard is producing a retrospective dramatisation of a conversation which took place over fifty years ago. The similarities between Howard Goorney and Oscar Lewenstein's accounts of the negotiations for *Mother Courage* added to my impression that Goddard had confused a meeting over *The Threepenny Opera* with a subsequent meeting that she may never have actually attended.

⁹⁰ Lewenstein, *Kicking Against the Pricks*, p. 24.

⁹¹ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 102.

⁹² Interview with Renee Goddard

However, as I thought about it I began to realise that I was privileging the written accounts of Howard Goorney and Oscar Lewenstein over the oral testimony of Goddard, in the same way that I had initially privileged Huggett's account of Binkie Beaumont over the oral testimony of Tony Field. In making these value judgements I realised that I was again conforming to what the oral historian Alessandro Portelli regards as, 'the dominant prejudice which sees factual credibility as a monopoly of written documents'.⁹³ As Portelli goes on to point out, written historical documents can be as distant from events as oral accounts and are therefore equally subject to, 'the distortion of faulty memory'.⁹⁴

Oral history interviews are often used extensively within written histories without the author giving much consideration to the surrounding methodological or historiographical issues oral sources present. For example, Oscar Lewenstein began writing his autobiography in the 1990s, using a series of tape recorded interviews about his life and career which had been conducted by the agent Peggy Ramsay over the course of ten weeks in 1966.⁹⁵ However, whilst he refers to Ramsay's help in the introduction, at no point in the book does he discuss the relationship between the recorded memories from 1966 and the written account he produced in the 1990s. Similarly, Howard Goorney's *Theatre Workshop Story* draws extensively on the autobiographical memories of practitioners who were once involved in Theatre Workshop without discussing how the source material was obtained. It is interesting to note that I have not been able to find any record of Goddard and Lewenstein's visits to the Berliner Ensemble either in Brecht's published journals or, as yet, in any of the academic studies of his work. Whilst these points do not necessarily make Goddard's account any more truthful, it does make it more difficult to discredit it on the grounds that it does not match up with existing written historical accounts, and this brings me back to a consideration of the way in which Goddard tells the story.

It seems that Brecht, far from favouring Theatre Workshop, a company who could be said to be similar to the Berliner Ensemble in terms of their ensemble

⁹³ Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', p. 68.

⁹⁴ Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', p. 68.

⁹⁵ Lewenstein, *Kicking Against the Pricks*, p. viiii.

working practices and leftist political sympathies, instead wanted *Mother Courage* to be directed by an established director and produced by the powerful West End Management, H.M. Tennent. Theatre Workshop and the English Stage Company were amongst the first professional companies to produce Brecht's work after the Second World War.⁹⁶ As a result, in British Theatre history, Brecht's work is associated with practitioners who became associated with the new wave theatre movement that came to prominence in the late 1950s. Both Theatre Workshop and the Royal Court became famous for promoting new writing, and more specifically, plays which introduced a grittier genre of social realism to British Theatre. In contrast, the West End of the early 1950s is often remembered for its staid conservatism. As Michael Woolf comments, 'By 1954, the theatre in Britain looked to be in a state close to stagnation. Traditional forms and themes continued to dominate, and a lack of creative excitement was apparent'.⁹⁷

However, the idea that Brecht wanted his plays to be produced by a West End management is not as unlikely as it might at first seem. Even before H.M. Tennent's association with the New Watergate Club Theatre in the mid-1950s, the management had connections to post-war British premieres of groundbreaking new foreign work. In 1949, Binkie Beaumont had orchestrated a commercially successful premiere of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Today the play is regarded as a modern classic. However, at the time, Williams' depiction of a central female character with a sordid sexual past generated controversy and divided the critics. The Chairwoman of the Public Morality Council was moved to call the play, 'thoroughly indecent' adding that, 'we should be ashamed that children and servants are allowed to sit in the theatre and see it'.⁹⁸

In contrast, Theatre Workshop, at the time of Brecht's meeting with Goddard (which to fit in with the time-frame of the earlier production, must have taken place

⁹⁶ The production of *The Threepenny Opera* had its pre-opening run at the Royal Court on 9 February 1956. It was presented by Oscar Lewenstein in association with the ESC Company. The first ESC production *The Mulberry Bush*, opened on April 2 1956. Lewenstein was general manager at the Royal Court and was one of the first ESC council members. See Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, p. 162, p. 164 and p. 174. Opening date of *The Threepenny Opera* referenced in Wearing's *The London Stage 1950-59*, I, p. 707.

⁹⁷ Michael Woolf, 'In Minor Key: Theatre 1930-55', in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume Two: 1930-1955*, ed. by Gary Day (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 86-106 (p. 104).

⁹⁸ Cited by Huggett, *Binkie Beaumont*, p. 420.

before July 1955), were best known, on the London stage at least, for their productions of the classics.⁹⁹ They had not yet produced plays like *The Quare Fellow* and *A Taste of Honey*, which would achieve commercially successful West End transfers and establish the company's reputation for producing groundbreaking new plays. In this light, Brecht's alleged dismissive view of the company in the mid-1950s is more understandable. Indeed, his suspicions, as articulated by Goddard at least, were proved correct when Joan Littlewood mounted a lacklustre production of *Mother Courage* at the 1955 Devon Festival which failed to achieve either critical acclaim or a West End transfer.¹⁰⁰ Even Kenneth Tynan, a Brecht enthusiast, was forced to conclude that Joan Littlewood's performance was below par: 'a lifeless mumble, looking both over-parted and under-rehearsed'.¹⁰¹

Goddard's account offers an unusual perspective on post-war theatre. For the historian, the significance of this particular anecdote arguably lies not in its reliability or unreliability, but rather in the fact that it presents a challenge to dominant historiographical perspectives. There is, as yet, no way of knowing whether Brecht did in fact contemplate a Binkie Beaumont managed, West End production, but the very fact that Goddard mentions it as a possibility, introduces a concept of cultural fluidity which is at odds with retrospective written histories of this period which often divide different theatrical forms, genres, practitioners, and companies into separate categories. Memories can blur the notion of a definitive historical truth, as Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone point out in their book *Contested Pasts*:

The idea of Memory as a tool with which to contest 'official' versions of the past, too, shifts from an opposition between the subordinate truth versus the dominant lie, to a concern with the ways in which particular versions of an event may be at various times, and for various reasons promoted, reformulated or silenced.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Theatre Workshop did not acquire a London base until 1953. Between 1953 and the end of 1955, Ewan MacColl's adaptation of *The Good Soldier Švejk* and Brecht's *Mother Courage* were the only plays to be put on that were written by a living post-war playwright. See Leach's production list in *Theatre Workshop*, p. xv.

¹⁰⁰ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 102.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Tynan, 'Dimmed Debut', *Observer*, 3 July 1955, in Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, pp. 67-69

¹⁰² Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), p. 5.

The myriad of narratives which underlie each testimony can raise difficult questions about how the researcher should then assimilate them within their 'new' historical narrative. For example, in selectively extracting a small section of Renee Goddard's interview in order to serve the historical focus of my research, I have marginalised the complex relationship between the personal and the wider historical narratives which inform the recollection as a whole. Goddard's recollections of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble were tied to her personal feelings about returning to Eastern Germany, in the light of the suspected death of her Jewish father in Buchenwald, and her own flight from Nazi Germany as a teenager. In the context of the Project's investigation into British Theatre between 1945 and 1968, and my own thesis on British Theatre between 1944 and 1956, this information is extraneous. However, in Goddard's memories, the on-and-off-stage worlds are inextricably intertwined and, in order to comprehend her attitude towards the Berlin visit, an understanding of the surrounding historical context is vital.

The sense of trepidation that underlies Goddard's account of her trip begins to emerge in her recollection of the first question she was asked by the members of the Berliner Ensemble: 'And they wanted to know, and also a number of people wanted to know what had happened to their brothers and sisters in America and something, anything I might know'.¹⁰³ At this point, Goddard touches briefly on what seems to be an allusion to the activities of the House of Un-American Activities Committee. She would have had knowledge of the Committee from the year she spent in America playing in Olivier's double-bill of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Both Goddard and her husband, Hano Fry, repeatedly return to the sense of unease with which Goddard approached the trip to East Berlin:

RG: Before I went over I phoned my friend from the BBC radio [...] And I said, 'well what have I got to be careful of?'. And he said, 'Well just don't take any West marks, don't use them, come back before whatever time [...]

¹⁰³ Interview with Renee Goddard

HF: There's the additional point isn't there? That you were worried about going to the East because of your father?

RG: Oh yes I'd always been told to keep away from the communist, Stalinist, East Germany because my father was considered an anti-Stalinist and I would not, I was simply not safe being the daughter [...] In fact it is said, and I think it's true from what I've heard later, that my father was shot in Buchenwald because of the Stalinists, who were... anyway to come back to the theatre.¹⁰⁴

Goddard's account is a reminder of the way in which our ability to become 'historical witnesses', to both our own and other people's lives, supports the existence of a multi-faceted historical past which survives in defiance of the horrific attempts to silence people within it. The fact that some of the most turbulent and traumatic aspects of 20th century history have been mediated through oral testimony has inevitably shaped 21st century attitudes towards memorial practices, as Eve Hoffmann observes: 'in the post-holocaust era, we have taken the obligation to preserve memory as sacred'.¹⁰⁵ Whilst few would disagree with Hoffman's point, the manner in which we 'preserve' memories remains contentious as a result of methodological debates within oral history itself and wider technological changes that are affecting archival practices as a whole. This issue will form the basis of the final section of this chapter.

4. Methodological minefields: Recording and archiving oral history

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida observes that 'the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event'.¹⁰⁶ Derrida's comment emphasises the fact that the archival practices which surround an archive will necessarily shape the attitudes of those who use it. This applies to any Collection which has been archived, but it arguably has a particular relevance to the *TAP* because the interviews have been brought into existence with the specific intention of forming

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Renee Goddard

¹⁰⁵ Eva Hoffmann, extract from *Shtetl in Memory: An Anthology*, pp. 378-381, (p. 378).

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 17.

an archive, and would not exist without the Project. In contrast, the majority of archives come into being when a group of pre-existing materials are collected together and housed by a private individual or institution. In the latter scenario, archival processes are generally imposed on materials which were created well before their archival value was realised, whereas in the former scenario the idea of archiving informs the very formation of the materials. The first part of this section will consider Derrida's point in the light of the archival practices of the Project, whilst the second part will explore it more broadly in relation to the impact that the internet has had on the formation and dissemination of memories.

4.1. Transcription Troubles

Transcription has been the most contentious methodological issue that those working on the *TAP* have had to work through. The Project sets out to format interview transcripts according to British Library Sound Archive guidelines which place an emphasis on producing verbatim transcripts. Every word that is spoken during the recording should be transcribed, changes in accent and tone of voice should be marked, and significant pauses and instances of laughter should be referenced. However, the way in which individuals talk and listen varies considerably, and in an archive which has involved two professional transcribers, over 200 interviewees, and over 80 different interviewers (most of whom have transcribed at least one transcript), there have inevitably been some variations in styles of transcription.

As the earlier interview extract with Mavis Whyte shows, referencing how an interviewee talks can be vital to understanding what they are saying. However, the mechanics of transcription raise questions which are extremely difficult to clarify. For example how long should a gap in speech be, before it need be referred to as a pause? What quantifies a laugh? Do you need to detail each variation in speech, pace, and tone? How does one decide whether changes in an individual's speech should be described as slow or fast, quiet or loud, given the variation in narrative styles across the archive? Aural and written styles are fundamentally very different from each other and it is impossible to create a version of the latter which could completely capture the essence of the former.

Furthermore, the act of transcription transforms the nature of the oral history interview and the way in which people will subsequently relate to it, as Paul Ricoeur observes:

The moment of the archive is the moment of the entry into writing of the historiographical operation. Testimony is by origin oral. It is listened to, heard. The archive is written. It is read, consulted. In archives, the professional historian is a reader.¹⁰⁷

The *TAP* and the British Library have addressed this problem by making C.D. recordings of each interview available for public access at both the University of Sheffield and the British Library. However, most people's first contact with the interviews comes when they access them via the transcripts that are put on the Project web-site, which is, at the moment, technically only able to support a limited number of sound recordings. In the future it is hoped that it will be possible for more recordings to be accessible via the website, but in the meantime, the archive, as represented online, is predominantly a written one, and, as a result, complies with the methodological points outlined in Ricoeur's argument.

In creating a transcript, transcribers are naturally inclined to follow the grammatical rules of written language. However, oral history does not follow the same stylistic conventions, and, as Raphael Samuel observes, 'The imposition of grammatical forms, when it is attempted, creates its own rhythms and cadences, and they have little in common with those of the human tongue'.¹⁰⁸ According to historians like Samuel, the transcript should attempt to be true to the interviewee's story by representing the cadences of the spoken word. Like Samuel, the British Library Sound Archive wants interviews to remain as close to the interviewee's original account as possible and as a result its archivists are against transcripts or recordings being edited retrospectively. Archivists at the Sound Archive see the transcript as a secondary source to the sound. If a major correction is requested (a name or a date) it is put in square brackets in the transcript so the listener can relate to the original recording, but also see the factual correction. It is apparently

¹⁰⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', in *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 389-392, (p. 389).

rare that an interviewee insists on editing, but in these cases the Library gives the listener both the edited and verbatim copy of the transcript.

4.2. Who controls the testimony?

In line with the British Library policy, the *TAP* encourages transcribers to follow the interviewees' patterns of speech. However, this can become problematic when, as has sometimes happened, the interviewees themselves decide they want to make changes to their interview. Such requests have forced the Project team to address the question of whether the shape of testimony in its archival form should be controlled by the interviewee or the institution that is creating the archive. The fact that the *TAP* transcribes all its interviews and then puts them online has meant that the issue of editing has been more pressing than in other Sound Archive collections. Outside of the *TAP*, the British Library Sound Archive transcribes approximately 20% of its interviews and the transcripts are not accessible online.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, when *TAP* interviewees sign the British Library copyright declaration they are agreeing to put their testimony in a much more public domain than other people who have had their interviews deposited in the Sound Archive.

TAP interviewees proof-read their transcripts with the knowledge that their interview will appear on a web-site, and it is unsurprising that some of them then want to make changes to both form and content. In the former case, the majority of the changes requested are grammatical. People are unused to seeing the spoken word in its verbatim form, and interviewees often contact the Project administrator to say that they want to add in more punctuation or revise sentences because they feel that the transcript is not coherent. In terms of content, changes are most often requested in instances where there has been a mistake- for example, spelling errors or cases where the wrong name or date has been given. However, there are also instances where the interviewee feels that they missed out an important piece of information during the interview which they want to retrospectively add in. Or conversely an interviewee will sometimes decide that they want to remove

¹⁰⁹ The other Sound Archive transcripts are linked to the catalogue as PDFs and can only be accessed on-site
Information provided by British Library Sound archivist Mary Stewart, November 2008

something that they have said because they do not want it to be in the public domain. On the one hand retrospective editing undermines the views of oral historians like Ronald Grele who contend that:

...the focus of oral history is to record as complete an interview as possible – an interview which contains, within itself, its own system of narrative structures, not a system derived from the narrow conventions of written history.¹¹⁰

However, one of the central driving forces behind oral history is the idea that individuals should be given the right to tell their own histories. If this is the case, then it is arguable that they should also have the right to control how their memories appear in the archive which houses them. This has been the view that those of us working within the *TAP* team at Sheffield have taken, and the recordings and the transcripts within the archive have met with the approval of the people whose memories have created them. The process has been made as transparent as possible by the fact that any additions to content or changes to grammatical form have been marked in square brackets, so that future readers are aware that the interviewee has made changes and the transcripts will diverge from the recordings as a result. In the case of the recordings, editing has been kept to a minimum, but where it has been requested by the interviewee, information has been removed. In a small number of cases interviews have regretfully had to be withdrawn from the Collection as a result of interviewees 're-writing' their interview to the extent where the transcript no longer bore a resemblance to the original recording.

4.3. Archiving the future: Online memory

The methodological challenges that arise from these kinds of request go to the heart of the difficulties which advances in technology are forcing both the 21st century oral historian and archivist to negotiate. Whereas in the past, Collections were only available to those who either conducted the research or gained access to the libraries in which they were held, the internet moves the archive out of the

¹¹⁰ Grele, 'Movement without Aim', p. 43.

scholar's domain and into the public arena and, as a result, those who have contributed their personal memories feel the need to exercise greater control over the final archived product. The way we communicate and disseminate information has undergone a revolution in the late 20th and early 21st century as a result of technological innovation. The internet has spawned a new generation of online archives (of which the *TAP* can be said to be one). Whereas traditionally the 'public' archive was largely seen as an institutional responsibility, to be fulfilled by 'professionals' working within government, libraries, universities and the public record office, today the most widely accessed archives are the ones which are created and maintained by the public themselves; *YouTube*, *Wikipedia* and *Facebook* are current examples of this trend.

Advances in technology have meant that the individual not only has more power over the way their life is inscribed in history, but that they also have more of an understanding that this is happening, and it is arguable that our sense of history has become more immediate as a result. People are actively leaving behind a virtual record of themselves in the myriad of online passwords and identities through which basic elements of everyday modern life are increasingly negotiated. It is now common for people's social identities to be mediated through net based archival structures. Companies and institutions often publicise details about both their work and their employees online. Social networking sites are based on the premise that individuals will create written or visual information about themselves for public dissemination. Internet users are invited to pass comment on everything from their shopping to the daily news. The people whose memories have been recorded in archives like the *TAP* are, in the Western world, the last generation of people whose lives will not, for the most part, have been documented by computers, and this gives their testimony a particular importance as changes in the archival practices of daily life have the potential to alter the way in which we remember. As Derrida observes, 'The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way'.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 18.

The internet has allowed a diverse range of individuals to inscribe their view of the world in the public domain via weblogs and websites. It is the largest multi-voiced historical narrative that has ever existed. 'Private' and 'Public' narratives have always been intertwined, but the archival power that the internet has given people has made it increasingly difficult to make the once traditional distinctions between the form and dissemination methods of 'public' and 'private' narratives. Private memories are now able to occupy the most public of places and vice versa, and this arguably represents the final stages in the dissolution of the hierarchical relationship between 'public' and 'private' histories, in which the former was traditionally able to assume a greater historical authority due to its privileged access to public channels of information.

The internet has given oral history the potential to reach out to a wider audience than ever before. The fact that recorded interviews, like those within the *TAP*, have this kind of world-wide accessibility will arguably make it very difficult for future researchers to place definitive narrative interpretation on the original oral history sources, and this in turn encourages a historical acceptance of 'the presence of multiple voices, often contradictory and opposed to each other, but in dialogue'.¹¹² Our view of what constitutes 'public history' has changed, but the sense that there is a dichotomy between private and public history remains. Our sense of personal identity continues to be determined by the world we live in, and as Paul Ricoeur comments, 'we never cease to re-interpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture'.¹¹³ Oral testimony offers a means of exploring the complex relationships between personal and socio-cultural history which are at the basis of our narrative identities. As the following chapters will explore, this exploration continues to cast new light on the myriad narratives which underlie the form and content of our cultural histories.

¹¹² Alon Confino, 'Noises of the Past', *The Work of Memory. New directions in the study of German society and culture*, ed. by Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 1-21 (p.12).

¹¹³ Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20-33 (p. 33).

Chapter 2

West End plays 1945-56: Life beyond French windows?

British plays written in the 1940s and 50s have traditionally had a history of negative critical associations: anachronistic, snobbish, socially irrelevant, emotionally repressed, to name but a few of the labels which have been attached to them. However, the late 20th century ushered in a new generation of historical revisionists who began to re-write academic attitudes towards the first eleven years of post-war theatre. Charles Duff, Dan Rebellato, Dominic Shellard, Christopher Innes and Michael Billington have all written studies which allude to the impact of plays of this period, and the evident connections between pre and post-56 theatre.¹¹⁴ The myth that this was a period which did not produce plays of dramatic merit has been exploded. Yet, the list of playwrights who are written about remains select, and the criteria for admission into the critical canon often seems to rest on whether a particular play can retrospectively be made to seem 'avant garde'. Little consideration has been given to plays which had mainstream popular appeal and commercial success. It is for this reason that I would like to focus my study specifically on the different ways in which a selection of British plays produced in the West End reflected the era in which they were written.

Dan Rebellato suggests that *Look Back in Anger's* renowned status shapes perceptions of earlier drama: 'dragging a play across that date [8th May 1956] to reconsider it in the present may reveal a play of surprising interest, but it will be on the basis of its relation (precursor, forerunner, antecedent) to what came after it'.¹¹⁵ Certainly, the ESC's 1956 production of the play has become synonymous with the idea of theatrical change. However, theatrical revivals and historical revisionism continue to give plays a context beyond that of the period in which they were first produced, causing ongoing shifts in attitudes towards the theatrical

¹¹⁴ Duff, *The Lost Summer*, Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, *British Theatre in the 1950s*, ed. by Dominic Shellard (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), Billington, *State of the Nation*

¹¹⁵ Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, p. 6.

past. This chapter will consider both the relationship between the selected plays and the socio-cultural context in which they were originally produced, and the retrospective impact of revivals and revisionism.

1. Unravelling the country house mythology

1.1. The 'Loamshire' play: Setting the scene

The country house stands for a pre-war society of established values and social relations; its very fabric is the product of a uniquely English artistic tradition, and its occupants, in their family relationships, employment of servants, and ownership and rule over the surrounding countryside, reflect a secure social order.

Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60*.¹¹⁶

The country house, with its accompanying dated, class-bound, conservative associations, has become symbolic of all that was supposedly wrong with plays of this period. This idea was gathering momentum well before *Look Back in Anger* had begun to make its mark on British cultural consciousness. In 1952, in a book purportedly written to 'show the evils of theatre today', Richard Findlater argues that, 'A certain anachronism is always inherent in the theatre, but the current drama is obsessed by the world before the deluge'.¹¹⁷ In 1954 Kenneth Tynan continued in this vein with an attack on what he saw as the prevalence of the 'Loamshire' play:

Its setting is a country house in what used to be called Loamshire but is now, as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when someone must sneeze or be murdered, the sun invariably shines [...] Loamshire is a glibly codified fairy-tale world, of no more use to the student of life, than a doll's house would be to a student of town planning.¹¹⁸

Tynan's review is often quoted in studies of the period. His definition of the 'Loamshire' play arguably became almost a genre in itself, or at least a neat way to dismiss a collection of plays without having to really look beyond their settings.

¹¹⁶ Hewison, *In Anger*, p. 65.

¹¹⁷ Richard Findlater, *The Unholy Trade* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1952), p. 5, p. 112.

¹¹⁸ Kenneth Tynan, 'Apathy', *Observer*, 31 October 1954, p. 6.

By 1956, the historian Frederick Lumley was lambasting the contemporary English theatre as, 'a slave of mediocrity and gentility'.¹¹⁹ Armed with a selective sample of contemporaneous critics and the benefit of theatrical hindsight, post-56 historians continued to use the negative associations surrounding the 'Loamshire' play to dismiss pre-Osborne playwrights. As Peter Lewis observed in 1978, 'Until Jimmy Porter came along, emotional anaemia was far advanced and spiritual torment was discreetly hinted at in tones that would not transgress the bounds of taste'.¹²⁰ A little over a decade later, Brian Appleyard began a discussion of 'Art and imagination' in the post-war years that effectively dismissed pre-56 plays entirely: 'a dramatic past had been rejected in favour of something devoid of histrionics [...] the immediate past of the theatre was, above all else, well mannered and quite containable within the confines of Little England'.¹²¹ Such criticisms, combined with the hallowed reputations of many stage actors of the 1940s and early 1950s (Olivier, Richardson, Gielgud, Ashcroft to name but a few) led to a widely held perception that, 'The greatest energy in theatre in these years came through production and acting rather than new writing'.¹²²

Arguments like this have some basis in truth. West End plays were often star driven, and the standard of production and performance amongst big managements like H.M. Tennent, was high. Many playwrights did set their plays in an upper-middle-class milieu, and the people who inhabited them were characterised by an air of emotional reserve. The setting was often a drawing or dining room, the country house was frequently used as a scenic backdrop, and the French windows, for which they have been much mocked, were a common feature of the stage design. However, although West End plays of this period were often conservative, it is inaccurate to suggest that they presented either an idealised, or an anachronistic depiction of post-war British society. Generational conflict, class, adultery, sexuality, murder, religion, suicide, party politics and atomic warfare are amongst some of the themes explored in popular plays by Terence Rattigan,

¹¹⁹ Frederick Lumley, *Trends in 20th Century Drama: A Survey since Ibsen and Shaw* (London: Rockliff, 1956), p. 5.

¹²⁰ Lewis, *The Fifties*, p. 163.

¹²¹ Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and Imagination in Post-War Britain*, p. 106.

¹²² Woolf, 'In Minor Key: Theatre 1930-55', in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain*, p. 94.

Agatha Christie, Graham Greene, Wynyard Browne, J.B. Priestley, Enid Bagnold, William Douglas Home, and Charles Morgan.

As this chapter will go on to discuss, revivals and revisionism have rehabilitated the critical reputations of playwrights like Rattigan and Priestley. However, many of their contemporaries remain in relative obscurity, buried under the weight of Tynan's 'Loamshire' tomb-stone. Enduring criticism of the narrow socio-political scope of this period of theatre has arguably led to a failure to recognise that the so called 'Loamshire' play often questions the values that it is derided for upholding.¹²³ The respectable middle-class settings are frequently used to encourage an expectation of traditional order which is then undermined by the behaviour of the characters in the drama that follows. Subversive undercurrents of conflict, destruction and decay disrupt both the appearance and the concept of tradition. Many of the plays of this period are dramas of concealment, and, as a result, the constraints of class, emotion and social expectation are central to their dramatic power.

The underlying tensions within such plays arguably reflect the fragility of British identity in the aftermath of the Second World War. The emergence of the Welfare State and the introduction of progressive social reforms like the Butler Education Act seemed to promise a more cohesive, equal society. However, this presented an ideological challenge to a nation whose sense of identity had been based on firmly delineated class lines. Britain emerged from the war as a declining imperial power, and victory celebrations quickly gave way to a period of austerity.

Patrick Wright suggests that the disillusionment of the post-war years gave the country house a new status within the national psyche: 'Cultivated as a quotation from a supposedly grander age, the country house came to sparkle with new and distinctly contemporary significance as it was played off against the grey prose of the post-war settlement'.¹²⁴ Grand houses across the country continued to fall into disrepair and family seats were increasingly taken over by the National

¹²³ For more recent criticisms regarding the failure of West End plays to address contemporary society see John Pick, *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* (East Sussex: John Offord Publications, 1983), p.152, Shellard, '1950-54: Was it a Cultural Wasteland?' in *British Theatre in the 1950s*, pp. 28-40 (p. 37), and Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 85.

¹²⁴ Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*, p. 53.

Trust. Under a newly elected Labour government, the country house, far from representing the stability and security of a bygone age, became a site of socio-cultural disagreement, as Wright comments:

This polarity between traditional nation and modern society set the private values of the aristocratic house off against the public egalitarian tendencies of the reforming present. It set the ancestral continuities of the aristocratic family, off against social-democratic ideas of citizenship.¹²⁵

In this context, the genteel vantage point from which many of the plays of this period are written can be seen as an unstable façade through which playwrights could dramatise the uncertainty of contemporaneous socio-political mores.

1.2. The Mousetrap: Murder in Loamshire

Agatha Christie was one of the most successful dramatists of her generation. Between 1928 and 1977 she wrote nineteen plays, eight of which were staged in prominent London Theatres between the years 1945-56.¹²⁶ The recollections of *TAP* interviewees indicate that Christie's plays were also a common fixture in repertory theatres during this period.¹²⁷ In contrast to many of her contemporaries, her work has had a remarkable longevity. At Saint Martin's theatre *The Mousetrap* continues to enjoy the longest run of any play in British theatre history. Christie's other plays are frequently revived, and dramatisations of her novels remain a fixture on television. However, although biographers continue to delve into Christie's life, her plays are largely ignored by historians, academics and critics.¹²⁸ Laura Thompson, her most recent biographer, offers a typically dismissive account

¹²⁵ Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*, p. 59.

¹²⁶ Of the nineteen some were original stage plays and others, like *The Mousetrap*, were based on her novels and short stories, see introduction, Agatha Christie, *The Mousetrap and other Plays* (New York: Signet, 2000), p. 1. The Piccadilly Theatre, the Ambassadors Theatre, the Savoy Theatre, the Fortune Theatre, the St James theatre, the Strand theatre and the Duchess Theatre all housed her work during this period. See *The Official Agatha Christie Website* <<http://www.agathachristie.com>> [accessed 9 January 2006]

¹²⁷ See *TAP* interviews with Barry Clayton, David Coulter, Graeme Cruickshank, Colin Draper, Elizabeth Ewing, Anthony Field for references to repertory performances of Christie's plays <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/interviews.html>> [accessed 2 September 2008]

¹²⁸ For biographies of Christie's life see Thompson, *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery*, Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography*, Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*

of Christie's dramatic output, in which she describes it as 'lightweight' and lacking in 'depth'.¹²⁹

The other common complaint against her work is that it represented an anachronistic past that bore little relationship to the society in which she was writing. As Alison Light observes in a valuable re-assessment of Christie's novels: 'her settings are assumed to be inherently backward looking, her social attitudes simply snobbish and her imaginary milieux an idealised picture of 'the long summers' of the English upper-middle-class in a tightly class bound society'.¹³⁰ In 2002, the press coverage of *The Mousetrap's* fiftieth year in the West End was marked by condescension: 'the Christie oeuvre still radiates a settled Englishness that challenges neither intellect nor convention'.¹³¹ Christie's lowly critical reputation reflects the fact that theatrical history is resistant to the idea that populist works of literature deserve a place within the dramatic canon. The negative associations which surround the Christie oeuvre seem to have blinded critics to the fact that the success of her work is in part predicated on her ability to convincingly subvert the traditional order within her fictional worlds. This study will explore how the 'settled Englishness' of *The Mousetrap* is disrupted by a plot which dramatises both the deceptive power of social facades and the divisions between pre and post-war life. Consideration will also be given to the reasons behind the critical disdain surrounding Christie.

The Mousetrap opens in the grand entrance hall of Monkswell Manor. However, the opening sequence sets out to subvert the audience's sense of the familiar, and, as a result, a pervasive sense of unease tempers the appearance of genteel domesticity:

When the curtain rises the stage is in complete darkness. The music fades giving place to a shrill whistle of the same tune, 'Three Blind Mice'. A woman's piercing scream is heard then a mixture of male and female voices saying: 'My God what was that?', 'Went that way!', 'Oh, my God!'

¹²⁹ Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, p.360

¹³⁰ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 62.

¹³¹ Anonymous, 'Losing the plot- *The Mousetrap* has outlived the age of satire', leader article, *The Times*, 27 November 2002, *The Times and Sunday Times 1990-2007 C.D.* ROM Server

Then a police whistle sounds, followed by several other police whistles, all of which fade to silence.

VOICE ON THE RADIO ...and according to Scotland Yard, the crime took place at twenty-four Culver Street, Paddington.¹³²

The uncomfortably shrill rendition of 'Three Blind Mice' is removed from the safe environment of the childhood nursery rhyme by its association with the murder. When the lights go up, the cosy, fire-lit setting with its window view of falling snow creates a picturesque Christmas card image that is at odds with the gruesome murder report. As the first scene begins, the murder announcement continues on the wireless, thereby disrupting the audience's assumption of internal safety with the threat of an external menace. The confusing darkness which shrouds the murder and the grisly rhyme which introduces it, serve to focus attention on the extent to which appearance informs people's understanding of their surroundings.

The plot follows the conventional murder mystery format and is, as a result, dependent on the audience suspecting the motives of everyone but the actual murderer. Christie uses this convention to question the idea of social respectability. A house guest's opening conversation with Mollie, the owner of Monkswell Manor, draws attention to the fact that the characters should not be seen as conforming to the stereotypes associated with the country house setting:

CHRISTOPHER ...you're not at all as I'd pictured you. I've been thinking of you as a retired General's widow, Indian army. I thought you'd be terrifically grim and Memsahibish, and that the whole place would be simply crammed with Benares brass.

(I.1.5)

As Christopher's comments suggest, Monkswell Manor is not an aristocratic country home but rather, in the spirit of austerity, a newly converted guest house which is being run by Mollie and her husband. Indeed, Mollie fails to conform to the traditional expectations of the matriarchal Mrs Boyle, the only character in the play who could actually be said to correspond to Christopher's description. The

¹³² Agatha Christie, *The Mousetrap* (London: Samuel French, 1982), I. 1. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

complaints of the latter character are used in part to emphasise the changing shape of the social landscape:

MRS BOYLE Really! What an incredible young woman. Doesn't she know anything about housework? Carrying a carpet sweeper through the front hall. Aren't there any back stairs?

MISS CASEWELL (*Taking a cigarette from a packet in her handbag*) Oh yes – nice stairs. (*She crosses to the fire*) Very convenient if there was a fire.

She lights the cigarette.

MRS BOYLE Then why not use them? Anyway all the housework should have been done before lunch.

MISS CASEWELL I gather our hostess had to cook the lunch.

MRS BOYLE All very haphazard and amateurish. There should be a proper staff.

MISS CASEWELL Not very easy to get nowadays, is it?

MRS BOYLE No indeed, the lower classes seem to have no idea of their responsibilities.

MISS CASEWELL Poor old lower classes. Got the bit between their teeth, haven't they?

MRS BOYLE (*Frostily*) I gather you are a Socialist.

MISS CASEWELL Oh I wouldn't say that. I'm not a red- just pale pink.

(I. 2. 16-17)

Admittedly the above dialogue is hardly the stuff of social revolution but it does serve to emphasise the gap between Mrs Boyle's social outlook and that of the younger generation of characters. The sense of social change that underlies this dialogue also undermines the idea that Christie's drama takes place in a de-politicised conservative vacuum. Mrs Boyle's obsession with maintaining class-bound traditions is a source of annoyance and mockery throughout the first act of the play. She is referred to variously as 'a perfectly horrible old woman' (CHRISTOPHER I. 1. 10) and a 'bloody old bitch' (MISS CASEWELL, I. 2. 17). It is

hard to see *The Mousetrap* as upholding the values of a bygone age when the character who is most closely associated with them is the first and indeed only guest to be murdered. The murderer is actually a more sympathetic figure than the victim because his crimes are shown to be a direct result of an abusive childhood, for which Mrs Boyle, in her capacity as a magistrate, is partly responsible.

Christie is preoccupied with disrupting the audience's understanding of respectability and authority. The abuse sub-plot raises questions of social responsibility because it is linked to the failings of the adults whose duty it was to protect the children in their care. Mrs Lyon is murdered because she abused her foster children. Mrs Boyle is murdered because she was the magistrate responsible for the welfare of the children. Mollie is targeted because she was the children's teacher and failed to read a letter that revealed the abuse. Although Mollie is later absolved of responsibility by the admission that illness prevented her from reading the letter - in keeping with the need for a happy ending - the collective sense of blame laid at the door of these three women challenges the faith which society often invests in authority figures. Christie even subverts the stereotypes associated with her own work by revealing that the house guest Paravicini, described in the stage directions as: 'a slightly taller edition of Hercule Poirot' (I. 1. 13), is actually a small-time crook: 'I wouldn't be surprised if they found a thousand or so Swiss watches in the spare wheel. Yes that's his line of business' (GILES, II. 1. 64).

The guests at Monkswell Manor are a motley group. The retiring Major turns out to be a watchful policeman, and in a typical subversion of authority, Sergeant Trotter, who seems to epitomise law and order, is revealed as the murderer. The aloof and independent demeanour of Miss Casewell masks a history of childhood neglect and abuse. The mentally unbalanced Christopher is not an architect but a frightened army deserter. The sympathy that the audience is encouraged to feel for him reflects the extent to which concepts of military glory and heroism had been undermined by the legacy of two World Wars. Although the play remains narrow in its social scope, its characters do not represent an idealised image of middle England. Happy ending aside, for most of the play, the

relationships between the different characters are defined by a growing sense of social alienation:

MOLLIE You feel that somebody you love and know well might be – a stranger. (*Whispering*) That's what happens in a nightmare. You're somewhere in the middle of friends and then you suddenly look at their faces and they're not your friends any longer – they're different people – just pretending. Perhaps you can't trust anybody – perhaps everybody's a stranger.

(II. 1. 45)

This speech emphasises the fragility of social identity within the play. The isolated setting and murderous turn of events dislocates the characters from outside reality. The destruction of the phone lines and the onset of a snow blizzard mean that their only link with the outside world is the wireless radio, which is subsequently used - as in the play's opening - as the sound effect which covers the blackout during the murder of Mrs Boyle. The unreality of the situation creates an ideal backdrop for Christie to begin exploring the fictional quality of the narratives that the characters have constructed around themselves. The play's pre-occupation with identity taps into universal human behavioural patterns, as Daniel Dennet observes: 'our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition is [...] telling stories and more importantly connecting and controlling the story we tell others'.¹³³ It is arguable that the success of a murder mystery is dependent on its writer's ability to dramatise Dennet's point.

However, this does not explain why *The Mousetrap* has become such a theatrical phenomenon. In 1977 Christie professed herself to be surprised by the plays' ongoing success, 'Why should a pleasant, enjoyable evening's play go on for *thirteen years*? No doubt about it, miracles happen'.¹³⁴ Initially, according to Peter Saunders, the original producer, *The Mousetrap's* long run was in part the result of his reluctance to take off a play that was still attracting audiences. In his autobiography he recalls his continuing efforts to promote the play in the first few

¹³³ Cited by David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 15.

¹³⁴ Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography*, p. 531.

years.¹³⁵ However, as time has passed, the play has become a theatrical attraction primarily on the basis of its curious reputation, as Saunders observes: 'There comes, of course, a time when the length of a run makes the play something that visitors to this country put on their 'must see' list'.¹³⁶

Although the ongoing run has helped to keep Christie in the public eye, the fact that the play has remained a constant West End fixture - moving theatres only once in over fifty years - has added to a sense that both play and playwright exist in a time-less vacuum. Raphael Samuel argues that the 20th century has witnessed, 'the progressive updating of the notion of period, and a reconstruction of history's grand narrative by reference to the recent rather than the ancient past'.¹³⁷ In Samuels' view, our understanding of a seemingly ordinary past can be re-invigorated because, 'it has become, retrospectively, exotic'.¹³⁸ This idea applies as much to the literature which charted people's lives, as the lives themselves. The continuing interest in recent history has meant that literature of the 1940s and 50s has become culturally fashionable again, allowing theatre and critics to revive and reclaim early post-war playwrights who fell out of fashion in the 1960s. However, it is arguable that because Christie has never gone out of fashion, she has never become 'retrospectively exotic', and as a result, her dramatic reputation has not had the opportunity to be historically updated.

1.3. *The Chalk Garden* (1956): Decay in the country house

The chequered theatrical history of Enid Bagnold's 1956 play, *The Chalk Garden* reflects the extent to which dismissive critical attitudes towards the 'Loamshire' play can be revised by a revival. Bagnold's play represents the country house as the last vestige of a crumbling social hierarchy beset by moral decay. The play opens in a middle-class dining room complete with French windows and a view onto the garden. The character list features the archetypal matriarchal figure, a figure of public authority in the form of a judge and a couple of servants.

¹³⁵ Saunders, *The Mousetrap Man*, pp. 123-129.

¹³⁶ Saunders, *The Mousetrap Man*, p. 118

¹³⁷ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 139.

¹³⁸ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 16.

Surprisingly, given its conventional setting, Kenneth Tynan was one of the play's strongest supporters, describing it as 'the finest artificial comedy to have flowed from the English pen [...] since Congreve'.¹³⁹ It went on to run for twenty-three months at the Haymarket, making it one of the most successful plays of the year.

However, late 20th century historians remember it rather differently. Despite the fact that *The Chalk Garden* enjoyed a longer run than any of the English Stage Company plays of the same year, Robert Hewison argues that, '1956 was the year when the ground began to shake beneath the country house'.¹⁴⁰ John Russell Taylor dismisses it as 'the most anachronistic play of them all' and Kenneth O. Morgan describes it as 'a hymn of praise to middle-class middle-aged tastes'.¹⁴¹ However, in the 21st century a new revival at the Donmar Warehouse has re-written critical perspectives once again and, in the words of one reviewer, Bagnold has been 'triumphantly re-incarnated'.¹⁴² Glowing reviews have highlighted both the play's socio-historical relevancy and its emotional power; 'a bitter and hilarious obituary of the English upper-class and a heavy-duty age, an age of power, dignity and little affection' (*The Times*); 'A play about the belated passing of an era' (*The Independent*); 'The darker subtext seep[s] out' (*The Financial Times*).¹⁴³ The extent to which the tide of critical opinion has changed is illustrated by Charles Spencer, who notes the fact that *The Chalk Garden* was produced a few weeks before *Look Back in Anger*, and goes on to claim that, 'it now seems the greater play'.¹⁴⁴

Bagnold, like Christie, draws on the stereotypical assumptions associated with the 'Loamshire' play in order to dismantle them. As the action unfolds, a sense of decay is implied in the obvious metaphorical connection between the inhabitants of the household and Mrs St Maugham's beloved chalk garden in

¹³⁹ Kenneth Tynan, 'Glorious Sunset', *Observer*, 15 April 1956, p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Hewison, *In Anger*, p. 73.

¹⁴¹ O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, p. 140, Russell Taylor, *Anger and After*, p. 19.

¹⁴² Susannah Clapp, 'Everyman, superman, showman', *Observer*, 15 June 2008 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>> [accessed 21 June 2008]

¹⁴³ John Peter, 'The Chalk Garden', *The Times*, 15 June 2008 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk>> [accessed 28 June 2008], Paul Taylor, 'A period piece in full bloom', *Independent*, 13 June 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk>> [accessed 28 June 2008], Sarah Hemming, 'Blooms from a neglected plot', *Financial Times*, 12 June 2008 <<http://www.ft.com/home/uk>> [accessed 28 June 2008]

¹⁴⁴ Charles Spencer, 'The Chalk Garden: fertile ground for wit and wisdom', *The Telegraph*, 13 June 2008 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>> [accessed 28 June 2008]

which she can make nothing grow: 'You have not a green thumb, Mrs St Maugham, with a plant or a girl. This is a house where nothing good can be made of her' (MRS MADRIGAL).¹⁴⁵ As in *The Mousetrap*, the setting provides a fragile social facade which each of the characters attempts to manipulate in order to avoid facing up to outside reality. Mrs St Maugham continues to play the controlling Edwardian Matriarch despite the fact that the power of the past age is clearly slipping away: 'Loyal! Loyalty died with Queen Victoria! Disregarded in my own house! Disregarded!' (III. 69). Mrs Madrigal's attempts to perform her duty as a respectable lady's companion are marred by Laurel's repeated attempts to uncover her true identity: 'Look how she came to us- with nothing! [...] she's cut off her golden past like a fish's tail' (II. 36). Laurel avoids the reality of her mother's re-marriage by creating attention-seeking fantasies of madness and sexual abuse.

Each of the three characters is forced to accept the unreality of their behaviour. Laurel's alleged 'violation' on the night of her mother's wedding is revealed to be a lie, made up in a childish attempt to secure her grandmother's sympathy: 'You didn't stop the marriage, but you snatched the attention!' (MRS MADRIGAL III. 71). Mrs Madrigal is unmasked as a murderess after the judge who convicted her is invited to lunch. Mrs St Maugham's control of the household is undermined by the loss of her grand-daughter and the revelation of her lady companion's less than respectable past. At the end of the play, the need for change is implied not only by the departure of Laurel, the character who most clearly represents the younger generation, but also by Mrs Madrigal's offer to cultivate a new garden from the barren chalk.

The Chalk Garden dramatises the decline of the pre-war social hierarchy. The chalk garden and the matriarch who fails to cultivate it can be interpreted as a symbol of the disappearance of Old England. This idea also relates to the characterisation of the Butler, Pinkbell, which recalls that of Firs, in *The Cherry Orchard*. Pinkbell is reported to be on his death bed, yet we are frequently reminded of his presence by the appearance of his nurse. Despite the fact that he

¹⁴⁵ Enid Bagnold, 'The Chalk Garden', in *Four Plays by Enid Bagnold* (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1970), pp. 1-81 (III. 71). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

never appears on stage his influence is alluded to throughout; 'You had for me the standards of another age! The standards of...Pinkbell' (OLIVIA, I. 31); 'for forty years Pinkbell has never been corrected! He is the Butler who was the standard of all London' (MRS ST MAUGHAM, II. 48); 'When Pinkbell is dead we shall not know why we use two glasses for one bottle' (MRS ST MAUGHAM, II. 53). The gradual erosion of Pinkbell's authority after the arrival of Mrs Madrigal, and his death in the last Act emphasises the idea that we are witnessing the final demise of an age.

In 1956, the play disturbed Tynan's preconceptions of the stereotypical West End play and his review underlines *The Chalk Garden's* contemporary relevance: 'On Wednesday night a wonder happened; the West End justified its existence. One had thought it an anachronism wilfully preserving a formal patrician acting style for which the modern drama had no use [...] One was shamefully wrong'.¹⁴⁶ However, the artificiality of the play's language and plot has always divided critics. Tynan emphasised his approval by aping Bagnold's heightened linguistic artificiality: 'ornamental bridges of metaphor, tiptoeing across frail causeways of simile and vaulting over gorges impassable to the human soul'. At *The Sunday Times* Harold Hobson expressed his dislike in rather more plain terms, labelling the play: 'pretentious, obvious, irritating'. He took a particular dislike to 'the extreme artificiality of Miss Bagnold's language [...] characters rarely or never say anything straight out in natural English'.¹⁴⁷ In 2008, Michael Billington was willing to praise the production: 'I cannot imagine a snappier or more sensitively acted version'; but not the play: 'what others call its high comic style sounds to me arch, precious and exhibitionist'.¹⁴⁸

Hobson and Billington have a point; the dialogue does sound unnatural and Mrs Madrigal's murky past is alluded to throughout the first two acts, making the revelation of her criminal record less than surprising. Such criticisms reflect the traditional perceptions surrounding the unreality of the 'loamshire' play. Plays like

¹⁴⁶ Tynan, 'Glorious Sunset', p. 15.

¹⁴⁷ Harold Hobson, 'Minority Report', *The Sunday Times*, 15 April 1956, p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Billington, 'The Chalk Garden', *Observer*, 13 June 2008 <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk>> [accessed 28 June 2008]

Bagnold's and Christie's have long been a source of historical mockery, and the genre has been parodied by late twentieth century plays like *Sleuth* and *The Real Inspector Hound*. However, the idea of parody and pastiche is arguably present within the original plays themselves. Both Bagnold and Christie set out to reveal the fictional quality of their characters' identities and the worlds that they think they inhabit. The comparison that Tynan drew between Bagnold and Congreve suggests that the artificiality of the form was often a deliberate part of the dramatic structure of this genre of play.

2. Shaking the foundations: Socio-political concerns in the drawing room

2.1. *An Inspector Calls*: A socialist fantasy

To regard me, as some professional theorists of the drama appear to have done recently, [...] as a typical playwright of the naturalistic tradition seems to me so absurd that I can only imagine that it is a judgement based [...] on ignorance [...] I have so often favoured the play in one set; so that having carefully put us all in a sensible and respectable sitting-room, I could then begin playing my own particular tricks, edging away from conventional realism.

J.B. Priestley, 1948.¹⁴⁹

In the 1940s, Priestley's attack on naturalism went against the theatrical fashions of the day. Early post-war production styles had evolved out of the 19th century's emphasis on the artistic value of naturalism. In the West End, star-studded productions were renowned for the sumptuous detail of their sets and costumes. Thanks to the detailed descriptions of sets found in French's Acting Editions, theatres operating under the pressure of weekly rep often produced recent West End plays along similar stylistic lines - albeit with a lower budget. Play sets were sometimes so elaborate that there would be a break in between scenes so that a front curtain could be lowered and a new set, or scenic backcloth, brought on behind it. The scenographer Pamela Howard remembers the attention to naturalistic detail that was required at Birmingham Rep in the 1950s: 'If you could paint a bookcase in perspective with the light coming across the spines of the

¹⁴⁹ J.B. Priestley, *Plays of J.B. Priestley*, vol. I (London: William Heinemann, 1948), pp. vii-viii.

book [...] so that you could see the lettering on the spines [...] he [Sir Barry Jackson] thought that was very good'.¹⁵⁰ Against such a background it is little surprise that Priestley was dissatisfied with some contemporaneous interpretations of his plays. He argued that the limp critical reception which greeted the London premiere of *An Inspector Calls* in 1946 was the fault of a production defined by 'weighty naturalism', in which 'the play's symbolism' was 'under-emphasised'.¹⁵¹ This section will examine the play's representation of post-war society, and explore both the reasons behind the lukewarm reception of 1946, and the critical approbation that surrounds it today.

An Inspector Calls follows the mysterious Inspector Goole's investigation into the links between the suicide of a young working-class girl and the ugly secrets embedded within a socially respected middle-class family. Unusually for a pre-56 play, it probes the relationship between the working and middle-classes. Although the basic plot - seduction of the innocent working-class girl by a social superior - was a commonplace of Victorian literature, Priestley expands on the stock plotline to explore social as well as sexual exploitation. The downward spiral of Eva Smith's fortunes - factory worker, shop assistant, mistress and prostitute - is shown to be inextricably linked to the misuse of middle-class authority and power.

Mr Birling sacked her from his factory for her involvement in strike action. Jealousy motivated his daughter, Sheila, to get the woman dismissed from her shop job: 'you used the power you had, as a daughter of a good customer and also of a man well-known in the town, to punish the girl'¹⁵² (INSPECTOR GOOLE). The prospective son-in-law, Gerald, kept her as a paid mistress for as long as it suited his purposes. Mrs Birling refused the charitable aid that might have prevented the girl's suicide, ostensibly because Eva's story offended her sense of class distinctions: 'She was giving herself ridiculous airs. She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd for a girl in her

¹⁵⁰ TAP interview with Pamela Howard conducted by Kate Harris (9 November 2005) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/howard.html>> [Accessed 5th August 2007]

¹⁵¹ J.B. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1947), p. vii.

¹⁵² J.B. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls and other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2000), l. 181. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

position' (II. 199). The climax of the Inspector's investigation reveals the Birling's son, Eric, to be the drunken idler who made the girl pregnant and then stole from the family business to try and support her. The characters' final realisation that their respectability will remain untarnished if no one talks about the reality of their behaviour creates a generational divide within the family. A wider sense of social responsibility is instilled in the children, but their parents remain defiantly Edwardian and individualistic, thus allowing Priestley to subtly foreshadow the next generation's changing attitude to social values.

Priestley employs an Edwardian setting to dramatise the disjunction between pre and post-war society. The years 1912 - when the play was set - and 1945 - when it was written - were periods of socio-political change and the play makes connections between both eras. Mr Birling's view of society is defined by an Edwardian idea of laissez faire individualism: 'the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together' (I. 168). However, the Inspector is set up as a harbinger of social change:

INSPECTOR One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering, and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and say and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.

(III. 207)

The final line of this speech supports Priestley's argument that the play was 'an attempt to dramatise the history of the last thirty years or so, making everything cast a long shadow'.¹⁵³ There is a clear parallel between the socialist tone of Priestley's Second World War morale boosting radio broadcasts and the Inspector's departing words. In his famous 'Postscripts' series, Priestley clearly defined the collective impulse inspired by the war effort as the first steps towards a more equal society:

¹⁵³ Priestley, *An Inspector Calls* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1947), p. vii.

We must stop thinking in terms of property and power and begin thinking in terms of community and creation [...] Now the war, because it demands a huge collective effort, is compelling us to change not only our ordinary, social and economic habits but also our habits of thought. We're actually changing over from the property view to the sense of community.¹⁵⁴

The Inspector's socialist ethos suggests that Priestley was tapping into the post-war desire for radical change that was to sweep the Labour Party to victory shortly after the play was written. In 1945, the post-war, political landscape had yet to be reconstructed by Atlee's Labour government. However, the 1944 Butler Education Act heralded the beginning of a determined movement away from Edwardian individualism. By the time the play had its British premiere in 1946, Labour had won the election and the Inspector's socialist vision should have been as relevant to the lives of the post-war audience as it was to the characters occupying the stage. The problem for Priestley was that the 1946 critics did not seem to see it like that. Despite opening as part of the Old Vic's prestigious New Theatre season of 1946 -1947, and having a star cast which included Ralph Richardson, Alec Guinness and Margaret Leighton, the play failed to impress. The *Observer* critic, J. C. Trewin led the way with a cutting attack on both character and plot:

Is then, this omniscient inspector Priestley's idea of the angel with the flaming sword? Who can tell? [...] The play, not a long one, could have been stripped to half its length; though their offence is rank we feel that the Birlings are hardly worth this elaboration, this prolonged rattling of skeletons (and indeed, this high place in the Old Vic's repertory).¹⁵⁵

At *The Daily Mail*, Lionel Hale took issue with the inconclusive ending: 'The theatre hates indecision. Mr Priestley, not making up his mind, does not persuade ours'.¹⁵⁶ Even James Agate's positive review in *The Sunday Times* was tempered by his concluding sentence; 'it is not until you leave the theatre that you ask yourself by what magic dullness has been kept away from this modern morality in which

¹⁵⁴ J.B. Priestley, BBC radio broadcast, 21 July 1940, in *Postscripts* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1940), pp. 34-38 (pp. 36-37).

¹⁵⁵ J.C. Trewin, 'Mr Priestley Calls', *Observer*, 6 October 1946, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Lionel Hale, 'Mr Priestley is up against a dead end', *Daily Mail*, 2 October 1946, p. 3.

nobody does anything except talk'.¹⁵⁷ The responses of the early critics are important because they reveal the extent to which the play confounded traditional dramatic expectations. The fantastical omniscience invested in the character of Inspector Goole flouted the realistic conventions of the drawing-room drama. The familiar structure of the Whodunit was subverted by Priestley's refusal to provide a definitive ending. At the end of the play we do not know whether the characters will reveal their culpability in the face of a real police investigation: 'As *they stare guiltily and dumbfounded, the curtain falls*' (III. 220). Agate's evident surprise at a play 'in which nobody does anything but talk' is also interesting given that just over a decade later, Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* was celebrated for the way in which his characters sat around a table discussing socialist values. The West End run of Priestley's play was not helped by the fact that it was part of the Old Vic's repertory season in which each play had a necessarily limited life-span, in this case the play ran for just 41 performances.¹⁵⁸

Despite the dismissive reviews, Priestley's play went onto be a repertory favourite in the 1940s and 50s. However, this arguably had more to do with Priestley being a well established playwright with a tried and tested back-catalogue, than the perceived merits of the play itself. For example the fortnightly Sheffield Repertory Company put on five Priestley plays between 1945, when they re-opened, and 1948, when they produced *An Inspector Calls*.¹⁵⁹ The play went on to become a staple on Secondary School syllabuses. In 1981, John Elsom described it as 'a "period" play', adding that, 'Priestley's gentle moralising [...] recalls a period of innocent, optimistic socialism, before the Cold War set in and the trials which led to the downfall of the post-war Labour government'.¹⁶⁰

However, eleven years later, reviews of Stephen Daldry's 1992 National Theatre revival proclaimed the play's theme of social responsibility to be as

¹⁵⁷ James Agate, 'Yesterday and Today', *The Sunday Times*, 6 October 1946, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ *An Inspector Calls* ran as part of the Old Vic's repertory between 1 October 1946 and 14 March 1947. See J.P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1940-49*, Vol I, p. 442.

¹⁵⁹ Priestley plays produced by the Sheffield Repertory Company were as follows- *How are they at Home*, 5 November 1945, *I Have Been Here Before*, 29th April 1946, *When we are Married*, 22 July 1946, *Music at Night*, 3 March 1947, *Laburnum Grove*, 26 May 1947, *An Inspector Calls*, 12 April 1948, see Sheffield Repertory Programme Collection, Sheffield Local Studies Library

¹⁶⁰ Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, p. 21.

relevant to British society in the 1990s as it had been to post-war society in the 1940s. Writing in *The Times*, Jeremy Kingston wrote of the parallels between the individualist ideology of the Edwardian family, and the view of society outlined by Margaret Thatcher in an interview in 1987: 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'.¹⁶¹ Many of Thatcher's government's key policies - increased privatisation, reduced trade union power, and under-investment in public services - were antithetical to the socialist ideology at the heart of the Welfare State. Critics saw her government as actively seeking to deconstruct the post-war socialising consensus which had been supported by previous Labour and Conservative governments. This production coincided with the gradual decline of Conservative power, and, set against the recent economic depression, the anti-socialist legacy of the Thatcher years, and the increasingly scandal ridden Major Government, the themes of the play seemed timeless. Yet they were arguably only felt to be so because they seemed relevant once more to current socio-political events.

Daldry's production suggested that the events of the play could be related to a time period outside the one in which the action unfolds:

The plush curtain goes up to reveal a bleak bomb cratered expanse of cobbles, an old telephone box and young children in 1940's clothes rushing across the stage in gas masks. Dominating the stage, however, is a beautifully detailed three storey Edwardian doll's house, some 12ft high and 8ft wide, with the cast crammed inside – just visible through the doors and windows [...] the smugly complacent Birling family are firmly rooted in the Edwardian period, but the mysterious Inspector [...] is clearly from the 1940's, as are the silent thirty strong chorus who arrive on stage as the drama approaches its climax.¹⁶²

The impressionistic revival emphasised symbolic elements within Priestley's script that the Old Vic production had chosen to ignore. After all, the play's opening

¹⁶¹ Daldry's production encouraged audiences to make this parallel by including Thatcher's quote in the programme, see Jeremy Kingston, 'Old Story is Arrestingly Retold', *The Times*, 14 September 1992, *The Times and Sunday Times 1990-2007 C.D. ROM Server*. See also interview with Margaret Thatcher for *Woman's Own* by Douglas Keay, October 31 1987, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689>> [para. 3] [accessed 2 March 2006]

¹⁶² Charles Spencer, 'Playing Time Tricks with Priestley', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 1992, *Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph CD-ROM Server*

stage directions suggest that a producer, 'would be well advised to dispense with an ordinary realistic set' (l. 161). In Daldry's production, the collapse of the doll's house meant that the drawing-room drama was played out in the debris filled landscape, thereby suggesting that Inspector Goole's investigation goes beyond the confines of an individual family's drawing room and, indeed, the era in which their story unfolds.

The production went on to be a West End success and toured around the world.¹⁶³ A cursory glance through the newspaper review titles for the 1992 opening and the 2001 revival illustrates the extent to which Daldry's revival reversed traditional conceptions of the play; 'Newly revealed as a radical'; 'Old story is arrestingly retold'; 'A West End warhorse battles on'; 'Family saga still packs a punch'; 'Priestley's Inspector calls again, with a timely message'.¹⁶⁴ In subsequent theatre histories of the period, *An Inspector Calls* has emerged as a 'modern classic'. Michael Billington goes as far as to say that Priestley 'initiated the state-of-the-nation play'.¹⁶⁵ However, it is Daldry's 1990s revival, and not Basil Dean's Old Vic Theatre production, which is frequently used as the example which supports *An Inspector Calls*' status as an important early post-war play. The role of recent revivals in the creation of a post-war dramatic canon is confirmed by the recollections of actor Derek Smith. He was asked if there were any repertory plays which he had admired in the 1940s and 50s:

I think the best play I did there, and the reason it was done was because it was Easter and there was some expectation that at Easter you couldn't very well have a bedroom farce on the stage for that week, so they always chose plays with some sort of serious moral content, and this J.B. Priestley's *Inspector Calls* which you know in recent years has achieved

¹⁶³ Daldry's production transferred to the West End. It was taken off for a six month break in 2001. It re-opened in the West End in September 2001. The production recently toured in Australia see <<http://www.aninspectorcalls.com/schedule.asp>> [accessed 11 February 2006]

¹⁶⁴ Peter Lewis, 'Newly revealed as a radical', *The Times*, 11 September 1992, *Sunday Times 1990-2007 C.D. ROM Server*; Kingston, 'Old story is arrestingly retold'; Lyn Gardner, 'A West End warhorse battles on', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2001, *Guardian 1995-2007 C.D. ROM Server*; Nicholas de Jongh, 'Family saga still packs a punch', *The Evening Standard*, 28 September 2001, on <<http://www.aninspectorcalls.com>> [accessed 1 September 2006]; Charles Spencer, 'Priestley's Inspector calls again with a timely message', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 2001, *Daily Telegraph C.D. ROM Server*

¹⁶⁵ Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 43. For reference to Daldry's revival see Billington, p. 17, Shellard, *British Theatre since the War*, p. 212, Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, p. 443, Michael Woolf, 'In Minor Key: Theatre 1930-55', p. 99.

colossal esteem, a wonderful production at the National, anyway I enjoyed that play.¹⁶⁶

In this extract, Derek Smith uses the critical acclaim which greeted Daldry's production to legitimise his personal opinion. Although Smith maintains this was the best repertory play he did in the 1950s, the reason for the selection is ostensibly 'The colossal esteem' which Stephen Daldry's production received in the 1990s. The shifting historiographical perspectives surrounding this play show that an individual's memories of the theatrical past are often refracted and re-shaped through recollections of more recent experiences.

2.2. The Chiltern Hundreds: Conservative politics- fashionably funny?

An Inspector Calls was not the only play to dramatise the changing political climate of the 1940s. 1947 saw the West End premiere of William Douglas Home's *The Chiltern Hundreds*. Home offered a comic take on Labour's rise to power with his story of an aristocratic, Labour candidate who finds himself defeated at a 1945 by-election by his Conservative butler. In contrast to the limited West End run of Priestley's left-leaning play, *The Chiltern Hundreds* ran for 650 performances at the Vaudeville Theatre.¹⁶⁷ The dated political references within Home's play would make it an unusual choice for a 21st century revival. However, the fact that a play which satirised 1940s socio-political change enjoyed such phenomenal box-office success, suggests that it merits historiographical consideration in the context of the period in which it was produced.

Home's play presented a political landscape in disarray. The action takes place in the grandiose setting of Lister Castle, which is occupied by the Earl and Countess of Lister, their son, Lord Tony Pym, his American fiancée, June, the Butler, Beecham, and the maid, Bessie. The play opens with the characters awaiting the General Election results on the wireless; the magnitude of the Labour victory is emphasised when Tony loses the Conservative seat, held by the Lister family for generations, to the Labour candidate, James Cleghorn. The comedy

¹⁶⁶ Unpublished interview with Derek Smith conducted by Kate Harris (8 November 2005)

¹⁶⁷ *The Chiltern Hundreds* occupied the Vaudeville Theatre between 27 August 1947 and 19 March 1949. See Wearing, *The London Stage 1940-49*, Vol II, p. 545.

revolves around the subsequent failure of the characters to conform to class boundaries and social types, and the castle rapidly becomes a site of socio-political flux. Cleghorn, the 'workers' candidate', who thinks 'the aristocracy is out of date', is immediately given a title and moved to the House of Lords at the behest of the Prime-minister.¹⁶⁸ Tony relinquishes family tradition to stand in the by-election as the new Labour candidate. Lord and Lady Lister, the supposed representatives of upper-class conservatism, are unperturbed by the switch in family politics, and it is Beecham and June - respectively a working-class servant and an American from a new money family - who emerge as the defenders of Conservative values and English tradition. June and Tony have an inevitable fallout over her support for Beecham and, in a fit of pique, Tony proposes to the maid, Bessie. Bessie and Beecham assume their new social positions, and Lord and Lady Lister find themselves waiting on their former servants.

At the *Observer*, Ivor Brown made a point of emphasizing the unreality of the play: 'an enduring strain of peers from the stage's castles in the air [...] His piece [sic], exploration of the farcical political, is a relishing frisk; while it kicks up its heels delightedly, few will search for a moral or a message'.¹⁶⁹ *The Chiltern Hundreds* is not a political play in the sense that it has a clear ideological standpoint. However, it does make a number of jokes about the changing socio-political landscape which may well have chimed in with the attitudes of the predominantly middle-class theatre-goers of the day. In the 21st century, the concept of the Welfare State is an accepted part of British life. However, in the 1940s, attitudes towards social change and post-war living conditions were more mixed, as Kenneth O. Morgan comments:

Middle-class Britain, especially England, bore a sense of grievance and threat [...] Many middle-class people looked back nostalgically to pre-war years of domestic servants, creature comforts and elegant and available private housing [...] Newspapers and periodicals were full of the

¹⁶⁸ William Douglas Home, *The Chiltern Hundreds* (London: Samuel French, 1949), I. I. 10 and II. I. 33. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

¹⁶⁹ Ivor Brown, 'The Bard Goes North', *Observer*, 31 August 1947, p. 31.

lamentations of the middle-class consumer, deprived of choice, hemmed in by controls, alienated by a collectivised, proletarianised world.¹⁷⁰

Within the world of the play, the characters' references to 'real life' are in part used to flag up the disappearance of Old England. Lister Castle is falling into disrepair, and the lack of servants, money and modern conveniences are sources of humorous complaint throughout the play. Upon becoming Tony's fiancée, Bessie professes that the life of an upper-middle-class Lady is so uncomfortable that she would prefer to go back to being a maid: 'At least I got two pounds a week. And had an overall to wear. Now everybody wants me to keep on working – every minute – in my Sunday best, without a single penny for my pains' (III. 1. 55). Similarly, Lord Lister objects to Labour's nationalization policy not because he disagrees with socialist ideals but rather because he wants his own Castle to be taken off his hands: 'If someone doesn't take this blasted place away before I die, my wife'll [sic] have to walk the streets' (II. 1. 30).

Home is referencing contemporary issues in order to represent the disjunction between the wave of optimism encouraged by war-time victory and political change, and the emerging reality of austerity Britain. Tony's shift in political allegiance is clearly meant to be comical, but it is interesting to note that his reasons for change are motivated by a desire for improvements in the more mundane aspects of everyday life, rather than a newly found socialist zeal: 'The world moves on [...] one either moves as well - or gets moved out [...] this talk of party politics is all hot air. They all want just the same – they all want bread and beer and dollars' (II. 1. 37). The reference to dollars is an obvious allusion to the increasing power of American money within the British post-war economy. In 1945, the British Government had negotiated a \$3.5 billion dollar loan to keep the country afloat.¹⁷¹ Home's decision to give his impoverished, English aristocrat, a wealthy, American fiancée with an interest in politics is another reference to America's increasing influence on Britain. Beecham is only able to stand as a Conservative candidate representing Old England because of June's support:

¹⁷⁰ Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, p. 82.

¹⁷¹ Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, p. 57.

TONY I hope you've got a thousand quid to chuck away.

BEECHAM Crusaders never want for cash, my lord.

(He exchanges a look with June and goes out)

TONY *(furiously turning on June)* You're backing him!

(II. 2. 50)

Although the play dramatises social shifts, the ending suggests that there will be a return to traditional order. Beecham is persuaded to give up his seat, allowing Tony to stand again. June and Tony are re-united. Beecham and Bessie return to their servant positions and declare their intention to marry. However, even in the final Act, Home continues to ridicule political life by suggesting that the conventional happy ending has only been made possible because Cleghorn has convinced Beecham that a Butler has a more respected social standing than a politician: 'a politician does the odd-man jobs. He lacks the concentration and integrity to specialise [...] don't degrade yourself. A man who has a place in life should keep it' (III. 2. 66). Home's willingness to make a joke out of politics is ironic given that his brother, Alec Douglas-Home, who later became Prime-minister, suffered the humiliation of losing his Conservative seat in the 1945 Labour landslide.

Home's play opened at a time when there was increasing public dissatisfaction with the Labour government. In the winter of 1947 there was a severe fuel shortage which was then followed by a sterling crisis. By the time the play had its London premiere in August 1947, public morale was low. It is unlikely that the aforementioned issues influenced the writing of the play itself. But it is arguable that they created a situation where a predominantly middle-class theatre audience would have been more likely to be sympathetic to a play which offered a comic take on the socio-political instability of post-war life.

2.3. The Burning Glass: A Broken Peace

Charles Morgan's 1954 play, *The Burning Glass*, used the country house as a backdrop for an exploration of the impact that scientific advances were having on the world, political stage. The Burning Glass, a scientific invention which is able to harness the sun's rays to penetrate through any material, presents Christopher Terriford, the scientist who discovers it, with an ethical problem that has an obvious correlation to that presented by nuclear energy. The Terriford's country house has been partly converted into a meteorological research unit from where Christopher and his research assistant work, but the action of the play itself is set entirely in the family drawing room which is occupied by Christopher's wife, Mary, and his mother, Lady Terriford. The play's dramatic tension derives from the contrast between the known stability of the domestic environment, and the potentially destructive power of the scientific discovery that Christopher has brought into the family's midst, as Mary comments: 'Our walks, our special trees, the books we shared and the music [...] Our little things...they were our life...and the Burning Glass has changed their proportion'.¹⁷²

At *The Observer*, Ivor Brown argues that Morgan's play addressed 'the greatest problem of mankind today, the "miracles of science" and the use thereof'.¹⁷³ By 1954, scientific advances in modern warfare were becoming a potent political issue. Britain had been pursuing a covert nuclear policy since 1946 and although the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was not founded until 1958, Kenneth O. Morgan points out that, 'the agitation against Britain's possession of nuclear weapons had been mounting with the atomic tests conducted from 1952 onwards'.¹⁷⁴ In the play, Christopher's refusal to give the Prime-minister control of the Burning Glass, and his subsequent capture by an unknown foreign power, reflects both the ethical anxieties surrounding the use of the atom bomb, and the mounting Cold War concerns about foreign espionage. The fact that the play was presented by Tennent Productions Ltd., and ran for 124 performances, supports

¹⁷² Charles Morgan, *The Burning Glass* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1954), I. 16. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

¹⁷³ Ivor Brown, 'Sun Stroke', *Observer*, 2 February 1954, p. 31.

¹⁷⁴ Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, p. 180.

the argument that commercial managements and audiences were interested in new work which addressed contemporary issues.

The ideological stance of Morgan's plays is not driven by partisan political feeling; instead *The Burning Glass* pits threatening modern concerns against old fashioned religious and familial values. It is Mary's '*spiritual*' wisdom (l. 6), rather than Christopher's political beliefs, which influences his decision to refuse to pass on the workings of the Burning Glass:

MARY [...] It isn't policy. It's like deciding whether to die for something or live for something. It is deep- inside *you*. Deeper than argument. One of those decisions that just can't be made when we argue; only when we listen.

CHRISTOPHER Or pray.

MARY To pray is to listen, not to talk.

(l. 11)

The questions surrounding the use of modern warfare are turned into a spiritual debate about good and evil, in which man and wife are cast as defenders of the faith:

MARY Our private peace was something we didn't know we had to defend. Now we have to.

Almost throwing the words away because there is nothing between them that is not instantly understood

CHRISTOPHER From all the crafts and assaults of the devil.

(l. 17)

The premise of the subsequent action revolves around the idea that whilst the Prime-minister may have the use of the Burning Glass in a military emergency, only Christopher and Mary should have access to the knowledge which would enable someone to operate it. The story of the ensuing kidnap and subsequent warning strike against the mysterious enemy is told entirely through the eyes of those inside the drawing-room, thus emphasizing the importance of family values.

In Christopher's absence, Mary's faith in God and her husband is pitted against the Government official's desire for greater power:

LORD HENRY What evil is greater than war?

MARY To corrupt life [...] his science shall not corrupt it. That is what I stand out against, whether he is alive or dead.

(III. 123-4)

In the final Act, the incorruptibility of the Terriford Home is seen in the safe return of Christopher and the subsequent suicide of his untrustworthy research assistant, the aptly named Tony Slack. The latter repays Mary's faith in his 'goodness' by sacrificing his life, thereby ensuring that the knowledge of the Burning Glass's workings is only held by Christopher and Mary, whose faith, one is left to assume, has made them resistant to the temptations of corruption. Morgan's play raises interesting and important moral and ethical issues which undoubtedly relate to the governmental policies and the scientific advances of the period. However, in turning the debate into a modern morality play, in which the God fearing faithful survive and the sinful do not, Morgan moves the issues away from the post-war socio-historical context in which they were taking place.

3. A dying faith: Religion and morality in *The Living Room* and *The Holly and the Ivy*

Morgan's belief in the power that religious faith could have in post-war society was challenged by some of his contemporaries. In the early 1950s, Wynyard Browne and Graham Greene both achieved West End successes with plays that attempted to discuss the ambiguous status of religious faith in post-war society. Drama with a religious theme was popular in this period, and Christopher Fry and T.S. Eliot spearheaded a revival of Christian verse drama. Notable successes included *The Lady's not for Burning*, which premiered at the Arts Theatre in 1948 and was subsequently revived at the Globe Theatre in 1949, with a star cast featuring John Gielgud and Richard Burton. However, as Christopher Innes observes, Fry's success was short-lived: 'the unreality of [his] dramatic situations and the

artificiality of his comedy made his work seem dated, as soon as Osborne and Arnold Wesker introduced new standards of authenticity in the late 1950s'.¹⁷⁵ In contrast, in *The Holly and the Ivy* and *The Living Room*, both Browne and Greene attempted to discuss the idea of religious disenchantment in the context of socially realistic post-war settings.

Wynyard Browne wrote five plays between 1946 and 1959, four of which enjoyed West End runs. *The Holly and the Ivy*, which opened in 1950, was the most commercially successful of these four plays. After a tour of the provinces it arrived at Hammersmith on the 28th of March and then transferred to the Duchess Theatre on the 10th of May where it ran for a year and a half.¹⁷⁶ On the surface Browne conforms to Tynan's 'Apathy' criticisms by providing a middle-class family, a drawing-room setting and the obligatory happy ending. However, the play also probes darker issues of declining religious faith, alcoholism and illegitimacy.

Browne's willingness to address such subjects in 1950 may seem surprising given the conventional mores associated with both the commercial theatre and the wider society in this period. In its attitudes towards sexuality, the 1950s largely retained the values of pre-war society. As Kenneth O. Morgan comments: 'Love and marriage were officially inseparable concepts [...] illegitimacy [...] remained a badge of dishonour which accounted for less than five percent of births'.¹⁷⁷ Young women were expected to remain chaste, and pre-marital sex was strongly discouraged. Browne's characterisation of a young, single, working woman, living alone in London, having an illegitimate child, actively seeking to avoid her family and succumbing to a drink problem, was antithetical to the traditional 1950s image of woman as wife and home-maker. Admittedly, the radical edge is somewhat blunted by the fact that Browne uses the legacy of the Second World War to blur the issue of sexual impropriety and engender audience empathy:

¹⁷⁵ Innes, *Modern British Drama*, p. 482.

¹⁷⁶ Duff, *The Lost Summer*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁷ O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, p. 107.

MICK During the war she had an affair with an American airman – it was serious. I mean, she was in love with him. He was killed. And after he was killed, she found she was going to have a child.¹⁷⁸

Browne is careful to attach blame to the war and not to Margaret's personal conduct. Similarly, sympathy for Margaret's alcoholism is encouraged by a back story which reveals that the illegitimate child died from meningitis the previous year. Margaret's loss of religious faith and subsequent sense of alienation from her father is shown to be the result of her tragic circumstances rather than a defiant lifestyle choice.

The reconciliation scene between father and daughter at the end of the play, and Margaret's subsequent renunciation of her London life in favour of a return to her father's vicarage, effectively re-instates the wayward daughter in the traditional female role of dutiful daughter and housekeeper. Browne's return to conventional female roles appears timid in contrast to Shelagh Delaney's famously uncompromising depiction of single motherhood in *A Taste of Honey*. However, he was writing seven years earlier than Delaney. Furthermore he was being produced by a management which was far from sharing the radical left wing ideas that were propounded by Theatre Workshop. Nonetheless, despite *The Holly and the Ivy's* conventional happy ending, the sensitive manner in which Browne handles the controversial subject of illegitimacy, specifically the sympathetic reactions which he attributes to those surrounding Margaret, can be seen as a step towards softening the traditional assumptions surrounding female sexuality.

The play's treatment of religious faith is similarly ambiguous. It is possible to view Margaret's reconciliation scene with her father as re-awakening her Christian faith:

GREGORY This feeling ye have – if ye stick to it, if ye go through with it, if ye're honest about it – this need to make sense of the world; that's the prime essential of all religion.

¹⁷⁸ Wynyard Browne, *The Holly and the Ivy*, (London: Evans Bros, 1951), III. 83. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

(III. 87)

However, according to Charles Duff, who conducted extensive interviews with Frith Banbury (the play's director), Browne rejected such interpretations in the repertory revivals which followed the West End run:

Wynyard went to see a production at the Oxford Playhouse and came back fuming. The play in general and the father-daughter scene in particular had been heavily sentimentalised. It was played as if Margaret had been converted to Christian thinking and having seen the error of her ways, would from now on lead a moral rather than an immoral life [...] Wynyard had a question and answer session with the audience [...] he told them that what they had witnessed was a sentimentalising of his play [...] in a manner against his design [...] The audience was most indignant and person after person made it clear they preferred the tale of the Prodigal daughter.¹⁷⁹

This anecdote suggests the extent to which both practitioners and audience members in the 1950s were bound by convention and tradition. It also indicates that managements in this period were less inclined to emphasise the darker elements of a playwright's work. Browne uses the idea of concealment to suggest the fragmentation of the post-war nuclear family. The Christmas setting and the religious undertones encourage the idea of familial love and togetherness. However, a sense of familial and religious alienation pervades the opening scenes. The Reverend's three children are all concealing aspects of their lives from their father: Jenny is hiding her engagement; Mick is hiding his reluctance to follow his father's wishes and go to Cambridge; Margaret is hiding her alcoholism and the fact that she has had an illegitimate child.

A sense of wider social fragmentation is implied by the Reverend Gregory's comments about the declining influence of the church in society: 'that little tin shack of a cinema they've gone off to tonight has more influence on the lives of the people here than the church has' (II. 61). The idea of religious decline is also suggested by the Reverend's view of Christmas: 'The brewers and the retail traders have got hold of it. It's all eating and drinking and giving each other knickknacks. Nobody remembers the birth of Christ' (II. 43). Browne's allusions to

¹⁷⁹ Duff, *The Lost Summer*, pp. 77-78.

post-war religious indifference in 1950 anticipated the greater challenges which were to face the churches in the 1960s, as Grace Davie comments:

Profound changes in society prompted radical reactions in the churches [...] controversial restatements of the Christian faith, new views about morality, the extensive revision of church services, the demand for re-organisation of the parochial system, and debates about the ministry dominated the agenda. All might still be well if the church could shake off its image of belonging essentially to the past.¹⁸⁰

Interestingly, Davie's final comment echoes the Reverend Gregory's hopeful belief that the church may still play a valuable role in modern society: 'I'm sure that, even today, the church can be the centre of the life of a place. I know it can.' (Act II, p60). In contrast to *An Inspector Calls*, the end of *The Holly and the Ivy* closes the gap between the generations by re-introducing the father into his children's confidences. His easy forgiveness of the secrets they have hidden from him reveals him to be a benevolent father, in terms of both his familial and religious responsibilities: 'Do I seem the sort of man who'd turn away from the sorrows of his own daughter [...] If I do [...] I've been distorting and misrepresenting religion all me life without knowing it' (Act III, p85). In characterising the father figure as a vicar who is willing to understand and accept the uncomfortable realities of modern life, Browne offers what is ultimately a positive resolution to the Church's post-war struggle to emerge from the constraints of the past.

In contrast, Graham Greene's first play, *The Living Room*, offered a rather more bleak dramatisation of religious and moral decline in post-war society. At the heart of the play is a young Catholic girl's affair with a much older, married psychology lecturer. The girl, Rose, is under the guardianship of two elderly aunts and an ancient uncle who is a retired priest. The play charts the struggle between the religious convictions of the family and the 'sinful' actions of Rose, whose unhappiness eventually drives her to suicide. Faith and liberal humanism are pitted against one another - the former being embodied by the family and the latter

¹⁸⁰ Grace Davie 'Religion in Post-War Britain: a sociological view', in *Understanding Post-War British Society*, ed. by James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 165-178, (p. 167).

being represented by the agnostic psychologist. However, neither party generates much empathy.

In the aftermath of Rose's suicide there is a sense of collective blame. The rational psychology propounded by the psychologist at the beginning of the play has only served to emphasise his own indecisive weakness. He has been unable to either give up his lover or abandon his wife: 'I'm supposed to be a psychologist and I've ruined two people's minds'.¹⁸¹ Under the auspices of religious piety, Aunt Helen has manipulated her own sister's sense of well-being in order to compel her niece to remain with her guardians: 'I told her she was ill. She believed it' (II. 1. 60). The Priest was unable to think beyond the constraints of religious doctrine when his desperate niece asked for his advice: 'all I said was "you can pray." If I'd ever really known what prayer was, I would only have had to touch her to give her peace. "Prayer" she said. She almost spat the word' (II. 2. 80).

An atmosphere of decay pervades the play. Greene creates a sense of unease from the opening scene: '*At first sight, when the curtain rises, we are aware of something strange about the living room [...] there is nothing at first on which we can positively lay a finger on and say, "this is wrong" or "this is strange."*' (I. 1. 15). As the action unfolds it transpires that the elderly aunts live in fear of death and have locked up all the rooms in the house in which a member of the family has died: 'I'm afraid of dying James, even of thinking about death' (TERESA, II. 1. 54). The strange living room, in which the play is set, is the only unlocked communal room in the house and was once a children's night nursery. Greene turns the living room into a setting which is anything but conventional. By disrupting the audience's expectations of a safe middle-class familial environment, Greene subtly dramatises the disparity between the world of the play and the assumptions of respectability which surrounded the idea of the middle-class family.

The undercurrents of death and decay come to the surface most obviously in the characterisations of the Priest and Aunt Teresa. The former has been

¹⁸¹ Graham Greene, *The Living Room*, (London: Penguin, 1970), (II. 2.79). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text

wheelchair-bound for twenty years after a motorbike accident forced him to give up his religious duties. The latter wanders through the scenes in a state of mental confusion, and is so frail in mind and body that the suggestion of illness reduces her to a near death state. Greene draws a clear parallel between the Priest's physical infirmity and the character's sense of impotent faith in the face of Rose's suicide: 'To me it was a real vocation. And for twenty years it's been imprisoned in this chair– the desire to help [...] Last night God gave me my chance' (JAMES, II. 2. 79). There is a sense that the moral values of the aged inhabitants of the house are lost in another age: 'Don't blame him. Blame our dead goodness. Holy books, holy pictures, a subscription to the Altar Society [...] Goodness that sits and talks piously and decays all the time' (JAMES, II. 1. 61). The idea that attitudes toward sex and relationships are changing is underlined by Rose's frankness about her own conduct: 'We love each other, Mrs Dennis. It's as simple as that. This happens every day, doesn't it? You read it in the papers. People can't all behave like this. There are four hundred divorces a month.' (II. 1. 70).

Rose views the living room as a centre of stagnation: 'a wall of closed rooms - and in the middle there's this living room. Nobody will ever die in here. Perpetual motion. Nobody will ever be born here' (II. 1. 58). However, her suicide in the very same room forces the characters to re-address their behaviour. The ending of the play leaves us with a sad image of regressive childhood. As Helen prepares to lock up the living room, Teresa's refusal to leave the nursery causes a reversal of power: '*Helen collapses suddenly across the bed like a child back in the nursery. Teresa is the strong one now [...] and talks to her in the nursery language of an older sister*' (STAGE DIRECTIONS, II. 2. 82). This haunting image recalls both the innocence of childhood and the room's function in a previous life, paradoxically suggesting both a new beginning and the continuing power of the past.

Greene plays with contradictions throughout the play; the psychologist who cannot help himself; the priest who cannot provide religious comfort; the girl who rejects Catholic doctrine only to die in prayer. There is an obvious irony in the fact that 'the living room' has become the site of the death of the youngest member of the family. Kenneth Tynan took exception to this aspect of the play commenting

that Rose, 'behaves in the crisis like any discarded mistress in a Victorian melodrama. Having tied a modern Catholic knot, Greene cuts it with an old fashioned theatre axe'.¹⁸² However, given the West End's predilection for a happy ending, Greene's tragic finale in which the youngest and most attractive member of the cast is killed off is anything but predictable.

The public reaction to this far from ideal depiction of middle-class life was positive. The play had its London premiere at Wyndham's theatre in April 1953, enjoyed a long run and then transferred to New York the following year. The press were slightly more divided. At *The Sunday Express*, Beverly Baxter's review referred to the disjunction between traditional social mores and Greene's approach to his subject matter. He labelled the relationship between Rose and Dennis, 'basically revolting' but predicted the play's commercial success by commenting that: 'nothing is so appealing to a British audience as sex with an odour of sanctity and the glow of highbrowism'.¹⁸³ At *The Observer*, Ivor Brown also brought up the play's contemporary appeal, commenting that it had: 'every ingredient of current popularity, theology mixed with sex, corpse mixed with creed, theorising about sin, strange old women living in a house of squalor'.¹⁸⁴ Comments like this, combined with the commercial success of the play, suggest that by 1953 critics, and more importantly mainstream audiences, were becoming more open to, or in Baxter's case, grudgingly accepting of, plays which attempted to explore changing sexual and moral codes. Indeed, despite his qualms about the ending, Kenneth Tynan was overwhelmingly positive about the play, declaring that it was, 'the best first play of its (English) generation'.¹⁸⁵

4. Sexual mores, emotional outbursts and repressive decay

The Deep Blue Sea: Rattigan re-invented?

This section will explore Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*. The play offers a frank exploration of a relationship which has strayed beyond the boundaries of

¹⁸² Tynan, *Curtains*, p. 48.

¹⁸³ Beverly Baxter, *Sunday Express*, cited by Samantha Ellis, 'The Living Room, London, 1953', *Guardian*, 12 October 2003 <<http://www.guardianonline.co.uk>> [accessed 6 February 2006]

¹⁸⁴ Ivor Brown, 'Greene Fields', *Observer*, 19 April 1953, p. 11.

¹⁸⁵ Tynan, *Curtains*, p. 47.

conventional 1950s social mores. Discussion will focus on the way in which characters within the play are portrayed as trying to break free of social constraints. However, Terence Rattigan's ambiguous status in theatre history provides the best example of the contradictory critical discourses which surround playwrights of the 1940s and 50s, and this study will begin by considering how and why Rattigan's shifting critical reputation has informed attitudes towards his work.

Rattigan enjoyed enormous success between 1936 and 1956: 'two of his plays received more than 1000 performances in a West End Theatre [...] and three more were performed more than 500 times. At one point in the 1940s, Rattigan plays occupied three adjoining theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue for more than five years'.¹⁸⁶ Yet by the 1960s, the predominantly upper-middle-class milieu of his plays, and the conservative way in which he had publicly described his work in the preceding decade, had combined to make him the ideal representative of the old theatrical vanguard.¹⁸⁷ As Rattigan commented himself in 1963: 'Continually I am reading articles about the need to demolish the old theatre - and blow up Coward and Rattigan.'¹⁸⁸

Rattigan's image problems were in part created by the fact that he admitted that he felt it was important to keep the likes and dislikes of the mainstream theatre-goer in mind when writing a play. His box-office success reveals him to have been a good judge of this. However, his references to 'Aunt Edna', 'a nice respectable middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady with time on her hands and the money to help her pass it', served to fatally identify his work with an image of safe conservatism.¹⁸⁹ Aunt Edna became a theatrical joke, and her spectre continued to haunt Rattigan's work in later years, not least because he himself persisted in calling on her in publications.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, p. 401.

¹⁸⁷ The central example of this was Rattigan's unfortunate allegiance to 'Aunt Edna', see Terence Rattigan, *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, vol. I, pp. xi-xii. His attack on the 'Play of Ideas', was also critically damaging, see 'Concerning the Play of Ideas', *New Statesman and Nation*, 4 March 1950, pp. 241-242.

¹⁸⁸ Cited by Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, p. 333.

¹⁸⁹ Terence Rattigan, *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, vol. I, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁹⁰ On the 15th October 1955 Rattigan published a review of *Waiting for Godot* in *The New Statesman* under the title, 'Aunt Edna Waits for Godot', pp. 468-470. He also attempted to offer an updated defence of Aunt Edna in the preface to his third volume of collected plays, *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, vol. III (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964), pp. vii-xxvii.

However, by the late 20th century attitudes towards Rattigan's plays had been re-written once again, and the playwright emerged as something of a West End rebel. Christopher Innes describes his work as 'a forerunner of "Gay drama"', whilst Michael Billington argues that his plays 'endorsed defiance of convention and society's repressive rules'.¹⁹¹ In an essay on the 'avant-garde' in theatre historiography, Alan Woods makes a point about historical narratives which can be used to explain the impulse behind the revisionism that surrounds Rattigan's work:

Stressing the new implies that history is synonymous with progress [...] Charting that progress thus becomes the major task of the historian, who is charged with explicating new forms, with making patterns clear to those who otherwise are unable to discern contemporary events [...] "avant-garde," in its basic meaning, defines the process of progress: it is something ahead of its time [...] constantly at the cutting edge of the search for the new.¹⁹²

Terence Rattigan arguably became critically fashionable because social mores shifted and it became possible to publicly celebrate the covert sexual references within Rattigan's work. The gradual acceptance of homosexuality within mainstream society, and the increasing academic interest in 'queer theory', encouraged a new focus on the link between Rattigan's own sexuality and the themes of social alienation, repression, and impossible desire to which he returns within his plays. It would be inaccurate to suggest that revisionist studies do not emphasise the skilful structure of Rattigan's plays and the subtlety of his dialogue, because they do, but there is often a strong focus on the homosexual subtext within his drama. This is coupled with a tendency to transpose Rattigan's private life onto his plays.¹⁹³ When I interviewed Patricia Noble, the former wife of H.M. Tennent's financial director, she said that Rattigan's homosexuality was widely known amongst West End theatrical circles:

¹⁹¹ Innes, *Modern British Drama*, p. 77, Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 38.

¹⁹² Alan Woods, 'Emphasising the Avant-Garde: An Exploration in Theatre Historiography', in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the historiography of performance*, ed. by Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1989) pp. 166-176 (p. 167).

¹⁹³ For examples of this see Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, pp. 216-232, Duff, *The Lost Summer*, pp. 127-128, Dan Rebellato, 'introduction' in Terence Rattigan, *The Deep Blue Sea* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), p. xi, p. xix, Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 96.

KH: There is a big debate, because obviously Rattigan was himself gay and everybody thinks there was all this gay subtext in what he wrote. Was that something that you were aware of at all at the time?

PN: Yes, I was [...] yes, yes, very definitely. He was very overtly... much more overtly gay than, I think, probably a lot of other people around that time.¹⁹⁴

However, whilst Rattigan's homosexuality may have been an open secret amongst those associated with the playwright's professional and personal life in the 1950s, it was not public knowledge, and avid theatre-goers like John Sheppard had little idea:

KH: What did you think of Terence Rattigan at the time? Of his plays that is?

JS: Well people enjoyed his plays. I enjoyed his plays but I don't think we realised at the time that they were actually as good as they are now reckoned to be. And you know there's a great deal of insight and sensitivity in Rattigan that I think was often overlooked maybe when his plays were first seen, and of course you know there's been more disclosure about his personal life. [...] *The Deep Blue Sea*, we all now know was based on the fact that one of Rattigan's boyfriends did commit suicide by putting his head into an oven, you know. Well of course that wasn't known then. All these things were never mentioned.¹⁹⁵

Recollections like Sheppard's illustrate the extent to which retrospective historical narratives have re-shaped audiences' understanding and appreciation of post-war plays like *The Deep Blue Sea*. Rattigan's coded attempts to reflect homosexual experience are clearly important in a period in which the Lord Chamberlain continued to ban the subject from the British stage. However, by focusing critical attention on the homosexual aspect of Rattigan's work, late 20th century historians have removed the plays from the socio-historical context in which they were first seen, and in doing so have arguably deflected attention from the way in which Rattigan openly dramatised other elements of social change.

¹⁹⁴ TAP interview with Patricia Noble conducted by Kate Harris (18 December 2006)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/noble.html>> [accessed 1 September 2007]

¹⁹⁵ TAP interview with John Sheppard conducted by Kate Harris (29 November 2005)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/sheppard.html>> [accessed 1 September 2007]

Geoffrey Wansell argues that the play's plot - wife leaves her successful older husband for a younger man - mirrors the relationship between Rattigan and his former lover, as Kenneth Morgan (the lover), left Rattigan for a younger man.¹⁹⁶ The parallels between life and art are clearly there in the play's opening, in which Hester attempts suicide by inhaling gas from the stove. However, to suggest that 'Rattigan's own experience coloured every line of the play', as Wansell does, closes down the possibility of dramatic interpretation.¹⁹⁷ In this context, the play is re-invented as a biographical record of Rattigan's relationship with a man, when it is ostensibly a drama about the failure of two heterosexual relationships.

The fact that the play dramatises an unhappy love triangle and takes place in a dingy post-war flat, has also led to comparisons with Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.¹⁹⁸ Such comparisons reveal a tendency amongst some historical revisionists to re-make Rattigan as Osborne's 'natural precursor'.¹⁹⁹ However, whilst it is important to acknowledge that connections existed between pre and post-56 theatre, retrospectively reading Rattigan into Osborne, and vice versa, deflects attention from the individuality of Rattigan's dramatic style.

In *The Deep Blue Sea*, Hester Collyer has left behind the comfortable life that she had as wife of Sir William Collyer, a wealthy judge, for an unstable existence with an unemployed, younger man. This characterization offered a challenging representation of female identity in an era which was only just beginning to question the idea that women should be dutiful housewives, supporting the bread-winning work of their husbands.²⁰⁰ A belief in the sanctity of marriage remained powerful in post-war society. In 1950-51 Geoffrey Corer surveyed over 11,000 people's views of marriage and found that, 'half the married population of Britain, men and women alike, state that they have had no relationship, either before or after marriage, with any person other than their spouse'.²⁰¹ Those who found their norms outside this 50% were unlikely to flaunt

¹⁹⁶ Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, p. 216.

¹⁹⁷ Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, p. 217.

¹⁹⁸ Rebellato makes this point in *1956 and All That*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ See Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 60, Innes, *Modern British Drama*, p. 77-78.

²⁰⁰ Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, p. 207.

²⁰¹ Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51*, p. 375.

their liberality, as Kenneth O. Morgan observes: 'Young people conducted their private lives, with much social and sexual experiment, in a disapproving, elderly world in which the Victorian ethos still prevailed'.²⁰²

As the action unfolds, Rattigan continues to subvert traditional mores by suggesting that Hester's suicide attempt was not motivated by a guilty conscience, or her tattered social reputation, but rather because her lover does not return the intensity of her affection:

HESTER You see I was brought up to think that in a case of this kind it's more proper for it to be the man who does the loving.

Pause

COLLYER But how, in the name of reason, could you have gone on loving a man who, by your own confession, can give you nothing in return?

HESTER Oh, but he can give me something in return, and even does, from time to time.

COLLYER What?

HESTER Himself.²⁰³

The awkward formality of the relationship between husband and wife in this scene is subsequently contrasted with the sexual friction between Hester and her lover, Freddie: '*He walks forward and kisses her. Instantly she responds, with an intensity that is almost ugly. After a moment he pushes her away and smacks her playfully*' (I. 35). In the 21st century, the references to Hester's physical desire for Freddie appear unremarkable. However, the 1950s was an era in which conservative attitudes to sex prevailed, in the public realm at least. Only a year after Rattigan's play premiered, Alfred Kinsey's 1953 report, 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female', generated widespread controversy by stating, amongst other things, that women, like men, had sexual desires.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, p. 107.

²⁰³ Terence Rattigan, *The Deep Blue Sea*, ed. Dan Rebellato (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), I. 28. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in text

²⁰⁴ The Kinsey Institute <<http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/about/controversy%202.htm#publicreaction>> [accessed 2 September 2008]

Rattigan plays on the idea of Hester's non-conformity: her refusal to bring her behaviour into line with the expectations of the male characters is a source of dramatic tension throughout the play. Indeed her frequent emotional outbursts are at odds with the emotional reserve displayed by the men. Freddie is tormented by the strength of Hester's love: 'My God, how I hate getting tangled up in other people's emotions. It's the one thing I've tried to avoid all my life.' (II. 45). Philip, the upstairs tenant, lectures Hester on the importance of 'spiritual values' only to find himself 'shocked' into silence by Hester's defence of the physical: 'You've got exactly the same expression on your face that my father would have had if I'd said that to him. He believed in spiritual values, too, you know – and the pettiness of the physical side' (III. 81-82). But it is Collyer who provides perhaps the saddest example of emotional repression when his inbuilt reticence is shown to have rendered him oblivious to the problems within his marriage:

HESTER I'm not denying you married for love - for your idea of love. And so did I - for my idea of love. The trouble seems to be they weren't the same ideas. You see Bill - I had more to give you - far more.

COLLYER How can you say that? You know I wanted your love-

HESTER No, Bill. You wanted me simply to be a loving wife. There's all the difference in the world.

COLLYER [...] Hester, my darling, what you say about me and my feeling for you may be true, but I'm offering you your only chance of life. Why can't you accept? After all, it worked quite happily once.

(III. 76)

Hester's rejection of a marital reconciliation with Collyer, and Freddie's subsequent departure, leave her alone at the end of the play. However, Rattigan signals her determination to carry on by showing her lighting the gas fire as the third Act closes. Tynan felt that this resolution ruined an otherwise 'absorbing' and 'masterly' play: 'he [Rattigan] has stated the case for her death so pungently that he cannot argue her out of the impasse without forfeiting our respect'.²⁰⁵ But as

²⁰⁵ Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre*, pp. 20-21

Dan Rebellato points out, Rattigan's notes on the play reveal that his, 'decision not to have Hester kill herself, was an *explicit* rejection of the well-made tragic ending that characterises the work of earlier playwrights like Tanqueray'.²⁰⁶ Despite Tynan's complaints, *The Deep Blue Sea* was critically well received and it went on to run for 513 performances.²⁰⁷ However, the extent to which it surprised contemporary reviewers' expectations of a Rattigan play is illustrated by the repeated references to the darkness of both subject and setting.²⁰⁸ For J.C. Trewin, the stage design represented the uncompromising realism of the play:

It is one of those vast converted rooms in an old house, with dusty sash windows, a matchboard kitchen thrown up in one corner, an expanse of wall, a mantel-shelf idly tiered. The setting by Tanya Moiseiwitsch is strongly atmospheric. It might have been enough in itself to drive its occupant to thoughts of suicide [...] Most of the people in this play give the feeling that they are genuine, that we are looking in on life.²⁰⁹

This review suggests that Trewin recognised the contemporary relevance of both the people and the places Rattigan was writing about. With *The Deep Blue Sea*, Rattigan had moved his middle-class characters into a modern post-war world in which the unhappy circumstances of their personal lives initiated the breakdown of the emotional repression and social artifice which had previously glued them together. His movement away from the upper-middle class settings of plays like *The Winslow Boy* and *The Browning Version*, set respectively in an Edwardian drawing room and a public school, indicates his commitment to dramatising an increasingly broad slice of post-war life.

5. Marginalising the importance of commercial appeal?

West End plays of this period remain linked with the image of safe commercial conservatism that has traditionally been associated with powerful post-war

²⁰⁶ Rebellato, 'Introduction' in Rattigan, *The Deep Blue Sea*, p. xxvii.

²⁰⁷ J.P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1950-1959*, Vol I, p. 259.

²⁰⁸ See Beverley Baxter, 'Rattigan among the pilots' *Evening Standard*, 7 March 1952, Cecil Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 8 March 1952, Anonymous, 'The Expense of Spirit', *New Statesman and Nation*, 15 March 1952. All reviews found in 'Publicity Clippings' in the Frederick Harold Frith Banbury Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (hereafter HRHRC), University of Texas at Austin, Series I, Plays, Subseries I, individual productions, *The Deep Blue Sea*, box 14, folder 7

²⁰⁹ J.C. Trewin, 'Royal and Ancient', *John O' London's Weekly*, 24 March 1952, 'Publicity Clippings', HRHRC, box 14, folder 7

managements like H.M. Tennent.²¹⁰ However, the memories of John Moffat, who worked as an actor for both H.M. Tennent and the ESC, provide an important reminder of the strengths of West End theatre during this period:

The West End when I started in the early 50s was still a fairly glamorous place and those productions of H. M. Tennent's were beautifully mounted and directed and designed and cast, they were of a very, very high standard and they were done with very great taste. It became very fashionable, once the English Stage Company had started and that big watershed with John Osborne and Arnold Wesker and all those people, it became fashionable to deride H. M. Tennent and it was very, very, unjustifiable I think. They did wonderful work by very good writers, they discovered new writers, people like John Whiting for instance and they presented plays with great style and taste and very, very, strong casts. I am somebody who did all that West End work for H. M. Tennent, I did seven plays for them and then did seven plays for the English Stage Company and it just seemed like a normal progression to me.²¹¹

Moffat's view that his movement from the West End to the ESC was, 'a normal progression', challenges the traditional assumption that the work of the ESC playwrights heralded a radical departure from their West End predecessors. The segregation of the first ten years of post-war theatre, from the work of the new playwrights who emerged in the mid-1950s and 60s, is the result of selective retrospective re-writing on the part of academics. In the April of 1956, Kenneth Tynan, who is today seen as one of the most powerful advocates of the 'new wave', went into print praising *The Chalk Garden*, over the newly formed English Stage Company's production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. In contrast to *The Chalk Garden's* leading five paragraph position, the ESC's second production of the season is relegated to two rather less favourable paragraphs at the end of the piece in which he commented that: 'The English Stage Company's production is

²¹⁰ Obvious exceptions to this can be found in the retrospective critical approbation that surrounds the plays of Rodney Ackland and John Whiting, both of whom are retrospectively regarded as breaking theatrical boundaries in terms of form and content before it became fashionable to do so. I have not considered these playwrights in this chapter because neither of them enjoyed commercial success in their life-times, and the few plays of theirs that made it into the West End, in the period under discussion, lost money as a result of dismal reviews and short runs. For work on Ackland see Duff, *The Lost Summer*, pp. 139-168, Billington, *State of the Nation*, pp. 63-5. For work on Whiting see Duff pp. 171-182, Innes, *Modern British Drama* pp. 496-9, and Salmon, *The Dark Journey: John Whiting as Dramatist*.

²¹¹ TAP interview with John Moffat conducted by Ewan Jeffrey (13 March 2005)
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/moffat.html>> [accessed 18 March 2006]

spattered with supporting performances of an atrocious debility'. Tynan's review, and the subsequent twenty-three month run of *The Chalk Garden*, reveals that just under a month before the ESC produced *Look Back in Anger*, the West End was still producing plays in country houses which were not only achieving commercial success but also getting critical plaudits from one of its harshest critics.

It is also interesting to note that the first and fifth plays to enter the ESC's supposedly 'new wave' repertory, *The Mulberry Bush* and *Cards of Identity*, would not have seemed out of place on the commercial stage. The former presented a middle-class family saga set in a University college, whilst the latter was a dramatization of Nigel's Dennis' novel about a mysterious group of individuals who take control of a country house and assume the identities of its former servants and inhabitants.

The impact that the West End continued to have on British Theatre in the 1950s and 60s is confirmed by the Director Frith Banbury: 'now, you know, [the ESC] is seen as great revolution, and the idea has grown up that nothing then was happening in the West End, well of course the West End was going on pretty well as it always did'.²¹² Indeed, the sense of stagnation associated with this period of commercial theatre is belied not only by the variety of themes that were dramatised in the West End plays, but also by the fact that these dramas were enjoying success far beyond the confines of Shaftesbury Avenue in the 1940s and 1950s. The repertory movement was still powerful during these years and the latest West End plays were a staple of most repertory theatre programmes. As former repertory actor Alan White recalls:

Everything that was being played in repertories, and regional theatres all over Britain, emanated from the West End. They loved to see that, they'd heard about it, it was on in London, big success, next week it's on in Colchester or somewhere, you know, and then they'd flock to see it.²¹³

In the ten years following the war, television had yet to become the dominant entertainment medium. Phyllis Leggett records the popularity of weekly theatre

²¹² Unpublished interview with Frith Banbury conducted by Ewan Jeffrey (14 March 2005)

²¹³ TAP interview with Alan White conducted by Kate Harris (9 November 2005)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/white.html>> [accessed 12 September 2007]

going in this period: 'in 1952 there were over a hundred repertory companies in Britain, and the majority were weekly reps'.²¹⁴ In *TAP* interviews, both theatre practitioners and theatre-goers have testified to the loyalty of the repertory theatre audience, and Barbara Bowles' recollections provide a good example of this:

You paid for a permanent seat [...] They changed the programme every week and you went every week to it. So you got to know the people who were the main characters, so you looked forward to seeing them again in next week's performance.²¹⁵

However, the increasing popularity of television and the arrival of an independent channel in 1955 caused a dramatic reversal in the fortunes of the repertory movement and, in particular, the weekly reps.²¹⁶ In 1950 the stage year book put the number of theatres with permanent repertory companies at ninety-four. In 1955 the same publication states that the numbers had been reduced to fifty-five.²¹⁷ Although the Arts Council pumped public money into new theatre buildings throughout the late 50s and 60s, this was of little help to the predominantly commercial weekly reps. The syndicates who organised many of the weekly companies were faced with the loss of both the audience and the provincial theatre circuit, and gradually ceased operating. Somewhat ironically, the demise of weekly rep meant the more socially representative plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s were actually reaching a smaller theatre going audience than their 'Loamshire' predecessors.

The breadth of subject matter covered by the plays discussed in this chapter suggests that it is inaccurate to regard West End plays as an anachronistic reflection of dated upper-middle-class values. All of the plays discussed here, deal directly with the shifting socio-historical values of post-war Britain. This kind of drama has a historical relevance because it reflects the transition between pre and post-war society. The sense of social fragmentation

²¹⁴ Phyllis Leggett, 'The repertory movement in Great Britain', in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by John Parker (London: 1972), pp. 1687-1688.

²¹⁵ *TAP* interview with Age Concern Drama Appreciation Group conducted by Alan Lane, 22 March 2004 <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/ageconcern.html>> [accessed 1 December 2005]

²¹⁶ Rowell and Jackson, *The Repertory Movement*, pp. 86-87.

²¹⁷ Rowell and Jackson, *The Repertory Movement*, p. 87.

which underlies many of the plays anticipates the 'new wave' dramatists' more explicit attack on the values which underpinned traditional concepts of British identity.

Yet the commercial theatre seems isolated from John Osborne and his new wave contemporaries because there is a resistance on the part of both academics and theatre practitioners to acknowledge that the post-1956 British theatre was in many respects building on, as opposed to making a radical departure from, the establishment plays that enjoyed contemporaneous popular appeal. In the 21st century, the increasing number of critically acclaimed revivals of West End plays from this period suggests that theatre historians will have to make more of an effort to address the socio-cultural subtexts which are present beneath the 'Loamshire' veneer. However, whilst modern interpretations can challenge and change our opinions of the theatrical past, I would argue that it is also time for post-war theatre history to offer a broader critical consideration of the phenomenally commercially successful plays of this period primarily in the context of their relevance to, and impact on, the society of the day.

Chapter 3

Evolutionary stages: Theatre and television 1946–1956

This chapter sets out to examine the relationship between BBC television drama and theatre between 1946 and 1956. It will consider the links between the two media and discuss the ways in which their collaborations and collisions over the course of this period can be seen as influencing the evolution of post-war British drama. Television drama programmes were transmitted live throughout the 1940s and 50s and, as a result, they shared the ephemeral quality of their stage counterparts. A consideration of the programming policies of the BBC drama department suggests the extent to which their work was rooted in theatrical tradition. The Reithian ethos of the BBC, with its emphasis on the importance of culture and learning, meant that television drama was initially more inclined to look to theatre rather than film for its form and content. However, 1946–56 marks a period of remarkable change in the way in which television programmes were conceived and received in Britain. The service resumed after the war in 1946 as the poor relation to theatre, film and radio, yet by the late 1950s it had emerged as a serious competitor for national audiences. Television began to forge its own aesthetic independently of the other media. The developments in its dramatic writing and performance styles fed into the burgeoning interest across the arts in work which reflected the lives of ordinary working people. In focusing on the drama of the early post-war years, this chapter is not seeking to deny the groundbreaking importance of the later plays, films and television programmes that were produced post-1956, in what is often regarded as a dramatic golden age. Instead, it offers an analysis of the artistic shifts and tremors that were brought about by the uneasy relationship between BBC television and theatre during a period of cultural and social flux.

Research into the relationship between television drama and theatre in the immediate post-war period is hampered by the fact that television in the 1940s and

50s went out live. Recording television on film was not possible until 1947 and recording on tape was not used widely in Britain until the late 1950s.²¹⁸ As a result, there are very few recordings of the programmes produced during the early post-war years. This chapter will draw primarily on documents held at the BBC Written Archives Centre, information in the *Radio Times* and the writings and memories of television and theatre practitioners.

The impact of television on people who lived and worked through this period becomes apparent if you do a rudimentary keyword search within the oral history interviews on the *TAP* website.²¹⁹ Given that the focus of this research project is British Theatre between 1945 and 1968, it is surprising that, to date, there are more references to television, than to the West End, the English Stage Company, Theatre Workshop, John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, or Laurence Olivier.²²⁰ A close study of the references reveals that a significant number of interviewees refer to the crossover between theatre and television. Many of the theatre practitioners interviewed have experience of working in both media. Clearly, this kind of search cannot be used as reliable statistical evidence, as the process of interviewee selection is not rigorous, not all of the references refer specifically to television drama and a number of them are references to television post-1968. Nonetheless, the results are revealing because they suggest the importance of the relationship between stage and screen, and support the idea that early television played an influential part in our twentieth-century dramatic heritage.

1. Facing the problems: early prejudices and practicalities

Post-war, television was seen by many people as being inferior to the more established media of radio, theatre and film. As the theatre and film director, Tony Richardson, comments in his autobiography:

²¹⁸ John Caughie, 'Before the Golden Age', in *Popular Television in Britain*, ed. by John Corner (London: BFI, 1991), pp. 22-41 (p. 25).

²¹⁹ <<http://www.bl.uk/theatrchive>>

²²⁰ On the 25 April 2008 a basic keyword search on <<http://www.bl.uk/theatrchive>> brought up 905 references to 'television'; 141 references to 'TV'; 618 references to 'West End'; 219 references to 'Osborne'; 301 results to 'Royal Court'; 254 references to *Look Back in Anger*; 263 references to 'Theatre Workshop'; and 389 references to 'Olivier'

Television in the early 1950s, although supposedly much more advanced in the UK than anywhere else in the world, was very much the despised poor relation of the sound-radio corporation. Visual images were somehow vulgar, like comic strips in the back pages of newspapers.²²¹

The lack of importance that was attached to television within the BBC is illustrated by the fact that 'it was not until 1950 that television was promoted to the status of a Department as opposed to that of a Service'.²²² The contempt with which many theatre practitioners regarded it, is encapsulated in Colin Chambers' biography of the powerful theatre agent, Peggy Ramsay:

Peggy thought television diverted attention from the stage and fed back nothing to her or to her writers. 'My God, how difficult it is to write a good stage play and how comparatively easy it is to write for TV,' she would say. She felt the 'little box' destroyed attention after an hour and could not handle complex things 'in one go' [...] Theatre was an arena for imaginative discourse, allowing for and stimulating a multiplicity of individual responses. Television inherently stifled imaginative debate and its human connections.²²³

In the 1940s, drama had a more prominent place in BBC television programming than it does today. It normally accounted for eight to ten hours of a schedule that was only transmitting around twenty-two hours in a routine week.²²⁴ However, despite its privileged place in the programming, there was a degree of uncertainty about what the new drama department was actually supposed to be filling the time with, and television was initially heavily reliant on the theatre. As John Caughie points out:

The vast majority of the single plays and serials produced by the BBC until the 1960s were adaptations, coming to the viewer with a prior seal of approval from the West End theatre, the classics, or the best-seller lists.²²⁵

²²¹ Tony Richardson, *Long Distance Runner*, p. 56.

²²² John Caughie, *Television Drama, Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 35.

²²³ Colin Chambers, *Peggy: The Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 50.

²²⁴ John Caughie, *Television Drama*, p. 33

²²⁵ Caughie, 'Before the Golden Age', p. 27.

In a *Radio Times* article of June 1946, the BBC Television Programme Director, Denis Johnston, reflects on the theatricality of the early post-war years:

When I was Director of the Dublin Gate Theatre, I had a celebrated speech that began, 'If only you knew some of the problems that arise in running a rep'. Today I find that planning programmes for television smacks of running approximately six reps, in parallel, with a couple of variety halls and a civic institute thrown in.²²⁶

The made-for-television play was a rarity. It was only in 1959 that the BBC could claim that over fifty per cent of its material was written specifically for television.²²⁷

In a fascinating survey of the history of the stage play in television drama, Neil Taylor works out that between 1936 (the start of television broadcasting) and 1994, 'there were 2586 broadcasts of complete theatre plays on BBC television channels'.²²⁸ The popularity of the single play in the early years of television is underlined by the fact that, '1848 of these broadcasts went out in the first twenty broadcasting years'.²²⁹ This figure becomes more telling when you consider that the television service was shut down between September 1939 and June 1946.

From the perspective of theatre history, television drama is seen as the new medium which established itself by stealing theatre's plays, playwrights and audiences, destroying Britain's repertory and musical hall systems in the process. Neil Taylor's statistics show the volume of stage plays being televised by early television, and suggest that there is a basis of truth to this argument. However, in the 1930s, 40s and early 50s, theatre managements exerted a considerable amount of power over television. Managers such as Binkie Beaumont, Donald Albery and Prince Littler had a monopoly on star actors and playwrights and, as a result, had a certain amount of leverage over the television department in terms of cast, fees and rehearsal time.

The issues surrounding televised theatre performances had been creating problems for the BBC since the late 1930s. In April 1939, the Society for West End

²²⁶ Denis Johnston, 'What You Will See on Your Screens', *Radio Times*, 9–15 June 1946, p. 24

²²⁷ *The British Broadcasting Corporation Annual Report and Accounts 1958–59* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1959), p. 48.

²²⁸ Taylor, 'A History of the Stage Play on Television', in *Boxed Sets*, ed. by Jeremy Ridgman, p. 29.

²²⁹ Taylor, 'A History of the Stage Play on Television', p. 29.

Managers made a complaint to the Post-Master General about the unfairness of television being allowed to broadcast stage plays on Sundays, when theatres were prohibited from giving public performances.²³⁰ They went on to recommend that all their members should stop providing facilities for the broadcast of plays on a Sunday. In the same month, the Theatrical Managers' Association (TMA) passed a motion which opposed the televising of a play which might be toured or played in repertory.²³¹ Theatre managements disliked the idea of televised excerpts because they felt it would impact negatively on box office. Ironically, their suspicion of television prevented them from recognizing that they were missing out on the marketing opportunity of a lifetime.

The wrangling over the televising of excerpts continued after the war. In 1946, the West End Managers' Association (WEMA) decided, 'not to permit the broadcasting by television of productions, or any part of them, during their runs in London or the provinces'.²³² The members of the WEMA controlled most of the big London theatres. Bronson Albery, Jack Hylton and Prince Littler were among the great men of the theatre who refused to cooperate with the BBC after the decision.²³³ A 1949 BBC report suggested that theatre excerpts were still possible: 'there was an undercurrent of opposition to theatre OB's [Outside Broadcasts] but it was left to the individual manager or management to decide whether their shows or portions of their shows should be televised'.²³⁴ However, the powerful opposition put up by the West End managers is suggested by the report's account of an Outside Broadcast from Jack de Leon's Q Theatre, in 1948: 'As a result of the broadcast he informed us that he was asked to appear before the West End managers and thenceforward he felt he could not allow any more television Outside Broadcasts'.²³⁵

²³⁰ BBC Written Archives Centre, T16/37/1, *TV Policy: Artists, West End Theatre Managers, File 1a, 1936–9*. Printed here by kind permission of the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham (hereafter abbreviated to BBC WAC)

²³¹ BBC WAC, T16/37/1

²³² BBC WAC, T16/128/1, *TV Policy O.B. File 1 1937–1954*, BBC Report, 'Outside Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', 11 November 1949, p. 5.

²³³ BBC WAC, T16/128/1 'Out-side Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', p. 5.

²³⁴ BBC WAC, T16/128/1 'Out-side Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', p. 5.

²³⁵ BBC WAC, T16/128/1 'Out-side Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', p. 5.

The BBC was forced to seek out smaller repertory theatres that were not controlled by the West End managements. However, the TMA continued its pre-war stance against television broadcasts, and many of the smaller repertories targeted by the BBC, like the Richmond and the Windsor, were managed by TMA members.²³⁶ In 1948, Equity added to the BBC's problems by refusing to allow its members to work on television Outside Broadcasts from theatres until a standard minimum wage was agreed.²³⁷ BBC memos from the early 1950s record the ongoing negotiations between senior BBC management figures, the Theatres' National Committee (TNC) and Equity.²³⁸ In 1952, the TNC agreed to let the BBC televise theatre excerpts for an 'experimental' year.²³⁹ However, Equity sought to limit the number of theatre excerpts per annum and agree a time limit of forty-five minutes per transmission.

Both the TNC and the BBC continued to disagree over Equity's terms. A central part of the problem was that big theatre managements had their actors under contract, and the BBC negotiated with the managements rather than the performers. Actors often had no control over the fee or, indeed, whether they wanted to accept or reject television work. Equity wanted the BBC to negotiate directly with performers and provide a special minimum fee for one-off performances in theatre excerpts. According to a BBC memo of 1952, television rates of pay for many artists were still set at pre-war levels.²⁴⁰ However, the BBC, ever conscious of money, disliked the idea that it was being forced into a situation in which the actors' fee should be higher for an excerpt from a theatre production than for a performance of an in-house television production.²⁴¹ In-house productions involved more rehearsal time for actors than an already rehearsed theatre play, and the BBC was reluctant to encourage a situation where actors were pushing for higher rates in all television work.

²³⁶ BBC WAC, T16/128/1 'Out-side Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', pp. 5–6.

²³⁷ BBC WAC, T16/128/1, 'Out-side Restrictions Affecting TV Out-side Broadcasts', p. 6.

²³⁸ BBC WAC, T16/18/1, *TV Policy: Artists, British Artists Equity Association Theatre Excerpts, File 1, 1951–1954*, 'File Description List'

²³⁹ BBC WAC, T16/18/1, letter from W. L. Streeton (BBC Head of Programme Contracts) to Gordon Sandison (Equity), 16 June 1952, p. 2.

²⁴⁰ BBC WAC, T16/18/1 'Memo: Meeting with Equity Representatives', 11 July 1952

²⁴¹ BBC WAC, T16/18/1 'Memo: Equity: Minimum Fees for Artists in "Package" Shows"', 12 May 1952

Negotiations over the BBC's 'theatre ration' rumbled on from 1951 to 1954. In January 1954, a new agreement allowing more outside productions was reached.²⁴² However, Equity refused to conclude a definite agreement over the number of Outside Broadcasts to be allowed, and the BBC continued the battle to increase it. The BBC Head of Programme Contracts, the Director of TV Broadcasting, the Head of Outside Broadcasts, the Controller of TV Programmes, and the Head of TV Drama all received copies of the memos throughout this period. The fact that so many senior figures were kept abreast of the negotiations shows the importance that the BBC placed on the theatrical element of the programming.

In 1949, Val Gielgud was appointed as the Head of BBC Drama.²⁴³ Gielgud had a Reithian approach to drama production which would soon be at odds with the more populist elements of television programming that were to arrive with ITV in 1955. Nonetheless, his attitude towards the television audience reveals much about the selection process behind the plays being televised in this period:

It unfortunately appears to be a fact that the majority of new purchasers of television sets seem to have remarkably low dramatic tastes – which may be largely due to the fact that many of them have had little or no experience of the living theatre. We must, in my opinion, be extremely conscious of our responsibilities in this matter. We must in no circumstances be tempted to veer from a course which we believe to be reasonable and right, for the sake of achieving temporary listener goodwill; of avoiding trouble; or even of stimulating the purchase of television sets. If we do so we shall forfeit all hope of raising standards at all.²⁴⁴

Today, Gielgud's attitude may seem patronising, but in the 1950s the idea that the BBC should play an educative role in society was more prevalent. Gielgud disliked the populist elements of television and repeatedly argued against what he saw as a desire to 'dumb down' the programming: 'if we are to accept the lowest common denominator of viewing tastes as our yardstick or aim, we may as well throw our

²⁴² BBC WAC, T16/18/1 'Memo: Equity: Television Transmissions of Productions Cast and Rehearsed by Other Employers', 1 January 1954

²⁴³ Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, IV: *Sound and Vision*, p. 688.

²⁴⁴ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, *TV Policy Drama, File 1, 1930–54*, Val Gielgud, 'Reflections upon the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, p. 3.

hands in from the point of view of decent aesthetic standards'.²⁴⁵ The extent to which he felt that the BBC services had a duty to provide drama for the general public is underlined in his autobiography:

During thirty years of my service with the BBC, the Head of the Corporation's Drama Department was, in fact responsible for the only existing National Theatre. He had no competitors. His audience was vast and ready-made. His plans were not qualified by the demands of a box office [...] his productions could be made available to the nation as a whole. It was not until the late 50s that this position came to be taken over gradually by the Head of Television Drama.²⁴⁶

Gielgud is referring more to BBC radio than to television in this extract.²⁴⁷ However, as Head of both Sound and Television Drama, he had had a responsibility for the production of drama across the BBC services. The idea that the television drama department had a duty to showcase theatre is apparent in the minutes from a drama output meeting in December 1950: 'since television drama is the only way into the theatre for a very large number of viewers, the televising of theatre plays will remain a staple contribution to programmes'.²⁴⁸ Gielgud sketched in his plans for putting more theatre on television in a memo entitled 'Hypothetical Future Television Drama':

I am entirely in favour of representing the current output from the theatre – not only from the West End but from any place where the material is good and the management is cooperative, e.g. first-rate repertory companies such as Birmingham or York [...] At the same time, it might be worthwhile considering whether we should not do both ourselves, and the theatre in general, good by running for a few weeks every year a televised Theatre Magazine, which might include both the light and the heavy: theatrical gossip and interviews: debates on current theatrical topics between critics, actors and managers: and a selected scene from a current West End play.²⁴⁹

The commitment to specific regional repertory companies is interesting as it suggests that early television drama sought to produce the best of British theatre

²⁴⁵ BBC WAC, T5/325, 'Memo Val Gielgud to Cecil McGivern', 29 March 1950

²⁴⁶ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, p. 157.

²⁴⁷ Gielgud was appointed Head of Productions at the BBC in 1929

²⁴⁸ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, 'Drama Out-put Meeting', 28 December 1950

²⁴⁹ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, Val Gielgud, 'Hypothetical Future Television Drama', 27 June 1950

regardless of location. However, the frustration that was felt by senior members of the BBC at the actions of the West End managements is obvious in another of Gielgud's memos:

...profoundly unsatisfactory [...] I would urge that we adopt the attitude that, while we are perfectly prepared at any time to cooperate on a basis of mutual benefit, we are not prepared to accept the point of view that it is part of the business of television to act as an unpaid advertising agency for plays that, without such advertisement, would come to grief. Taking the long view [...] the theatre cannot do without television. Let us establish our own audience standards and professionalism [Gielgud's underlining], and sooner or later the managements will come to heel.²⁵⁰

2. Farce to the rescue

Gielgud's belief that theatre managements would recognise the potential of television was to be realised in 1952, when Brian Rix, the independent actor–manager of the Whitehall Theatre, became the first manager since the WEMA resolution to allow the BBC to broadcast a play excerpt from a West End theatre. Colin Morris' Army farce, *Reluctant Heroes*, had been running at the Whitehall since 1950. Rix had felt the box-office benefit of a BBC radio excerpt from the same play, the preceding year, and, as an independent manager, was willing to test the promotional impact of television: 'my production was running down and needed another injection [...] I also guessed that the first play to let the cameras into a theatre would receive a lot of publicity. We did'.²⁵¹ A BBC memo from Michael Henderson, who worked in Outside Broadcasts, reveals:

There were thirty phone calls at the box-office during the first hour after the transmission ended. The following day seven phones were going non-stop and they were stated to be taking £100 of business an hour. For the two nights following the transmission they had standing room only when, apart from Saturday nights, they have not had a full house for several months.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, Val Gielgud, 'Reflections upon the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, p. 11.

²⁵¹ Rix, *My Farce From My Elbow*, p. 116. See also TAP interview with Brian Rix conducted by Kate Harris (16 April 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/rix.html>> [accessed 12 December 2007]

²⁵² BBC WAC, T14/1392/1, *TV O.B Reluctant Heroes, File 1, 1950–2*. 'Programme Report *Reluctant Heroes* Whitehall Theatre, 14 May 1952', 19 May 1952

In the 1950s, Viewer Research Reports were used by the BBC to gain an understanding of the tastes of a sample of the television audience. Television viewers volunteered to fill in logs relating to the programmes they had watched and the Listener Research Department, renamed the Audience Research Department in 1950, used their opinions to compile reports on individual programmes. In the case of *Reluctant Heroes*, the Viewer Research Report offers an insight into the viewers' appetite for theatricality on the small screen. Five hundred and eighty families from the 'London and Midland TV panel' submitted their opinions. The 'total number of viewers per 100 families was 226 [...] considerably above the average of 166 viewers per 100 families for recent studio productions of weeknight drama'.²⁵³ *Reluctant Heroes* achieved a Viewer Reaction Index figure of 90 (100 was the top mark), and, according to the report of 1952, 'only two televised plays [had] ever gained higher Reaction Indices'.²⁵⁴ The report's comments section highlights the excerpt's success:

There is little to report save tremendous unqualified enthusiasm. Viewers unhesitatingly voted this the most entertaining programme for a very long time [...] it seemed that the atmosphere of a theatre 'got across' most effectively and that viewing conditions were perfect.²⁵⁵

Given the all-round success of *Reluctant Heroes*, Rix was keen to transmit a full-length play 'especially presented for television from a theatre'.²⁵⁶ As he was running a theatre six nights a week, the only realistic time slot for a full-length play was a Sunday night. To Rix's surprise, the move was blocked by the Deputy Head of Television, Cecil McGivern, who made it clear that whilst farce was fine for a week-day evening, it was certainly not suitable for Sunday night viewing.²⁵⁷

However, McGivern was forced to change his mind in 1956. Faced with a competitive light-entertainment programme on ITV, Rix found his earlier offer being readily taken up by the BBC. He went on to have a television career that

²⁵³ BBC WAC, T14/1392/1, *TV O.B Reluctant Heroes, File 1, 1950–2*. 'A Viewer Research Report: *Reluctant Heroes*'. 4 June 1952

²⁵⁴ BBC WAC, T14/ 1392/1, 'A Viewer Research Report: *Reluctant Heroes*'

²⁵⁵ BBC WAC, T14/ 1392/1, 'A Viewer Research Report: *Reluctant Heroes*'

²⁵⁶ Rix, *My Farce From My Elbow*, p. 118.

²⁵⁷ Rix, *My Farce From My Elbow*, p. 119.

spanned from the 1950s to the 1970s, and both he and his theatre became household names. Rix's decision to place his trust in television in 1952 marked the beginning of a sea-change in the attitudes of theatre managers towards the new medium. As Rix comments, 'West End managers swallowed their pride in dollops and hustled the BBC, like old whores, to get their productions on the screen. It was amazing. One day I was outside the charmed circle; the next its leader'.²⁵⁸ A *Radio Times* review from 1956 shows that the BBC continued to broadcast productions from theatres across the country throughout the 1950s.

Outside Broadcast units which, until a few years ago, were limited in their range and scope to dealing with great occasions and a few experimental programmes, are now a great deal more mobile [...] plays have recently been televised from the West, Scotland, the Midlands and from Wales. In addition there have been a number of theatre excerpts presented 'live' and a strengthening of links with London Theatre Managers [...] 'Television', says Michael Barry, Head of BBC Television Drama, 'owes so much to the Reps, as training grounds for authors and technicians, as well as actors, that we should do as much as we possibly can to help them [...] they can offer us much of value in new faces and in the freshness of their approach.'²⁵⁹

This article highlights both television's debt and its continuing commitment to the theatre in the mid-1950s. It is interesting to note that technical improvements in broadcasting are seen as strengthening the relationship between the two media, as opposed to distancing them. Barry's point about the ties between repertory theatre and television is also significant; the pressures of live television performances were very similar to those experienced by weekly repertory performers in the theatre. In this respect, live television programmes undoubtedly benefited from the skills that many theatre practitioners brought with them. However, historians have traditionally perceived theatrical style as having had a negative influence on early television. As Carl Gardner and John Wyver comment:

In its early days, TV drama picked up the predominant patterns, concerns and style of both repertory theatre and radio drama [...] and consisted of televised stage plays 'faithfully' and tediously broadcast from the theatre, or

²⁵⁸ Brian Rix, *Farce About Face*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 21.

²⁵⁹ Anonymous, 'Television and Repertory', *Radio Times*, 19–25 February 1956, p. 20.

reconstructed in the studio [...] Such an approach [...] precluded any innovation of TV style or any attempt to develop a specifically televisual form for small-screen drama.²⁶⁰

To the twenty-first century TV viewer, the theatricality of many early drama productions now seems laughable. However, this is not how many viewers new to television would have seen it. In the *Radio Times* from this period, television reviewers, far from denigrating televised stage plays, frequently emphasise the theatrical elements of the broadcast in order to draw the would-be viewer in. The review of *Love in a Mist*, in January 1956, provides an example of this:

Tonight, before a specially invited audience at the Whitehall Theatre, television presents Kenneth Horne's comedy, *Love in a Mist* [...] These comedies and farces (old and new) will be presented on a Sunday night about every three months, and for each of these special performances there will be an attempt to capture the happy atmosphere of this little theatre. For not only will there be an audience present, but each cast will contain many of the artists who appear at the Whitehall.²⁶¹

The *Radio Times* was a powerful advertising tool in this period, as the producer and director, Paul Rotha, observed in 1956: 'The service performed by the *Radio Times*, with its 8,800,000 circulation in Britain, is not to be underestimated. No such detailed public guide exists for any other form of mass-entertainment'.²⁶²

Brian Rix and the Whitehall Theatre were riding the crest of a wave. By the mid-1950s, attitudes towards television were changing. As Rotha commented, 'Television is no longer a luxury; to many people it is a necessity'.²⁶³ In 1949, only 126,567 people had combined sound and television licences, but by 1955 this figure had jumped to just over four-and-a-half million.²⁶⁴ These statistics do not take into account the fact that many people did not initially own their own TV sets, preferring instead to watch television in a group at a neighbour's house. Television was no longer film and theatre's poor relation, and the theatre managements began to wake up to the fact that the new medium could help them reach out to a

²⁶⁰ Carl Gardner and John Wyver, 'The Single Play: An Afterword.' *Screen*, 24/4–5 (1983), p. 115.

²⁶¹ Brian Rix, 'Laughter at the Whitehall', *Radio Times*, 29 January to 4 February 1956, p. 13.

²⁶² Rotha, 'Introduction', *Television in the Making*, p. 11.

²⁶³ Rotha, *Television in the Making*, p. 9.

²⁶⁴ Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, IV: *Sound and Vision*, p. 241.

mass audience. In 1956, the stage and television actress, Joan Miller, made the point that

Having played to full houses in a theatre seating one thousand, eight times a week for a year, an actor will have been seen by only one twenty-fifth of the number of people who potentially could watch him give a single performance in a television production.²⁶⁵

By the 1960s, television drama had gone from being a subject of mockery amongst theatre practitioners, to being seen as a serious threat to the livelihoods of many in the profession. The arrival of a commercial television channel in 1955 highlighted the influence that the television service could have over certain strands of British theatre. ITV had a more populist approach to programming than the BBC and this impacted on the commercial repertory companies in particular, as they found that much of the content of their light-entertainment seasons had become a staple of the new television channel. A confidential BBC memo from June 1956, entitled 'State of the Theatre', reflects the dismal state of affairs: 'Provincial theatre tours are now a dead loss. Up till lately they were reasonable if they had star names, but since Commercial TV started in the Midlands and North these have dropped really to nothing'.²⁶⁶ Although a number of new, purpose-built theatres went up in the late 1950s, 60s and 70s, the patterns of repertory theatre-going had changed; weekly and fortnightly rep were all but gone by the 1970s, and the regional theatres that remained were increasingly reliant on financial backing from the Arts Council.²⁶⁷

Even the indomitable Peggy Ramsay was forced to reconcile herself to the idea that television was a popular and powerful medium. Although she always maintained her dislike of television, she procured television work for many of her 'theatre' clients and acted as an agent for a number of the writers who were closely associated with the innovative style of television drama that appeared in the late 1950s and 60s, Alan Plater being a prime example.²⁶⁸ However, *TAP*

²⁶⁵ Joan Miller, 'Acting in Television' in *Television in the Making*, pp. 95-104 (p. 95)

²⁶⁶ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, *TV Policy Drama, File 2, 1955-59*, 'State of the Theatre', 7 June 1955

²⁶⁷ Rowell and Jackson, *The Repertory Movement*, p. 87.

²⁶⁸ Chambers, *Peggy*, pp.50-1. See also *TAP* interview with Alan Plater conducted by Kate Harris (7 September 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/plater.html>> [accessed 12 December 2007]

interviews reflect the fact that suspicion and dislike of television remained amongst theatre-goers and practitioners. Ian Purves, a former theatre technician, remembers some of the problems facing theatre practitioners:

It was just about the last days of popular Variety. You see, television is a tremendous devourer of talent, and you can't obviously produce the same material on television week after week if you have a series, or a spot in a series [...] you have to have new material every week. This was a huge shock to a lot of people [...] after they had done a week in Manchester they would go on and do exactly the same material in Sheffield [...] and so on.²⁶⁹

Clearly, for many practitioners, especially those working on touring material, television brought about a shift in working lifestyles. However, even after television had begun to emerge as a successful medium in its own right and no longer needed to rely on the theatre, the BBC continued to show a commitment to the older medium. A number of senior figures in the immediate post-war years had theatre backgrounds. Val Gielgud, like his famous brother, started out as an actor. He also wrote a number of stage plays. Cecil Madden, the Programme Organiser, was originally a playwright.²⁷⁰ Michael Barry, the first Head of Television Drama, had worked as a theatre director. All three men shared a commitment to the theatre and continued to use their positions to maintain the ties between the two in the mid- to late-1950s.

3. Collaborators behind enemy lines? Mid-50s shifts and tremors

The extent to which television and theatre practitioners continued to try and work together during this transitional period is revealed in a BBC memo of 1955. George Barnes, an employee of the BBC drama department, describes a lunch meeting with the West End theatre manager, Donald Albery. Barnes used the meeting to pump Albery for information about the inner workings of theatre managements.

²⁶⁹ TAP interview with Ian Purves, conducted by Charlotte Barton (9 January 2005)
<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/purves.html>> [accessed 20 October 2006]

²⁷⁰ Madden wrote revues in French and Spanish and a number of plays in English. Between 1926 and 1932 he spent holidays working in Theatre Management in Paris, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>> [accessed 12 November 2006]

1. Casting, not scripts, is the prime difficulty of the West End theatre at the present time. To make a profit a play must run for six months. Actors dislike engagements of this length unless they can be guaranteed work between the play's end and their next play or film – hence Tennent's entry into the tele-film-making world.
2. To get good scripts for the theatre, contact with agents is more useful than contact with authors [...]
3. Authors are making a great deal of money in the theatre – more, when a play is a success, than does the manager. It is necessary when buying the rights in a play to buy film and television rights as well, or an option on them. A play will sometimes be produced at a loss for a short run in the West End in order to secure saleable film rights. By working only for television rights we shall not get a succession of good plays.
4. Under the TNC agreement, we cannot stage a television production until a year after the end of its West End run. Since no West End manager can make a profit with less than a three-months run, and since so many star actors are unwilling to give up freedom for more than three months because of film commitments, BBC might well go into partnership with a West End management to produce a star in a play for a four-weeks Provincial run and then televise it afterwards [...]

I asked him why Prince Littler had gone into commercial television [...] the big financial houses [...] ordered him in. The result was to create a monopoly of talent of a certain kind so that the Littler group, already too powerful in the theatre, had a longer lever to make artists work for them and not for other managements.²⁷¹

This memo offers a fascinating insight into why the BBC drama department needed to maintain good relations with theatre managements. The important position that theatre still had in drama policy in 1955 is suggested by the fact that this note was sent to the Head of Television Drama. Barnes highlights some of the key problems that BBC staff were coming up against: lack of new scripts; availability of actors and playwrights; negotiating film, television and stage rights. The final paragraph indicates that the BBC was still struggling to cast big-name actors as a result of the contractual control exerted by theatrical managements. The memo also suggests the extent to which television was still relying on the theatre for both its programming and the evolution of its dramatic policy. Its

²⁷¹ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, 'Note of lunch with Mr Donald Albery', 25 October 1955

continuing interest in contemporary theatre productions is evidenced by Barnes's and Albery's discussion of a potential partnership between the BBC and a West End management. However, the allusions to Tennent's and Prince Littler's forays into film and television suggest that the most powerful London theatre managements were all too aware of the power that television now held and were actively looking for a way in.

The links between television and theatre in the mid-1950s were not restricted to excerpts and adaptations of commercially successful West End shows. Both television and theatre practitioners sought to use television to publicise the British stage's need for new writers and plays. In 1956, Kenneth Tynan asked Michael Barry if the BBC would produce a television trailer for the *Observer Play Competition*.²⁷² The extent to which Tynan and the *Observer* wanted television to be involved in the competition is suggested by fact that Barry was one of the judges, and the BBC was 'given the option for a television performance straight afterwards'.²⁷³ In the words of the television producer and director, Don Taylor: 'Tynan at that time bestrode the narrow world of the theatre like a colossus, and merely to be mentioned in the famous column was a sign that you had arrived'.²⁷⁴ Barry's attitude towards the request reflects his interest in new theatre writing: 'My recommendation is that a competition of this kind, which does not throw too much work upon us, opens a window upon the playwriting [sic] situation beyond the scope of our own reading'.²⁷⁵ His willingness to help theatre was not unusual. The 1956–7 Arts Council Annual Report states:

Television has an evident interest in the maintenance of the living theatre. It is an enormous devourer of drama, and in that field feeds largely upon plays which were written in the first place for the live theatre. Unless the drama it consumes is replenished by new dramatists, television will find that the material it so omnivorously consumes is no longer sufficiently there [...] it may well be argued that its dependence on the theatre as a whole, for

²⁷² BBC WAC, T16/62/2, 'Observer Play Competition', 23 March 1956

²⁷³ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, 'Observer Play Competition'

²⁷⁴ Don Taylor, *Days of Vision: Working with David Mercer: Television Drama Then and Now* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 9.

²⁷⁵ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, 'Observer Play Competition'

actors as well as plays, creates some obligation to assist in sustaining the living source of its televised drama.²⁷⁶

4. Television and the Angry Young Man: re-writing Royal Court mythology?

In 1956, the idea of television as a 'guilty' partner, which should be responsible for the support and succour of its one-time muse, arguably played right into the hands of the newly created English Stage Company, who were keen to publicise their opening season at the Royal Court. This case study sets out to reconsider the ESC's route to success by exploring the role that television played in establishing the company and their most famous play of the season, *Look Back in Anger*. BBC files relating to the Royal Court, and copies of the *Radio Times* from this period, suggest that senior BBC staff believed that television had a duty towards the theatre and were prepared to structure their drama programming policy accordingly. Furthermore, practitioners at the heart of one of the most significant post-war British theatre companies, far from rejecting the newer medium, embraced it in order to bolster their own survival.

Look Back in Anger has traditionally been seen as a watershed play, which secured the future of the fledgling ESC and launched the career of one of Britain's most celebrated post-war playwrights. The first two plays in the opening season, Angus Wilson's *The Mulberry Bush* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, had resulted in neither the full houses nor the critical acclaim that the ESC's founders had hoped for. In deciding to put on the work of an unknown playwright for the third production, the artistic director, George Devine, was taking a considerable risk. The public pressure that the company was under is illustrated in a letter from future ESC director, Lindsay Anderson, to Kenneth Tynan, after the latter's mediocre review of *The Crucible*:

I felt I just had to write to you [...] and reproach you for wanting to put me off, by your notice, supporting this venture [...] there is something here, and a young company of (I should have thought) promise, and a quite extraordinary sense of purpose, and it seems to me nothing less than criminal to dwarf their debut with long pieces of approbation for presentations by H. M. Tennent Ltd [...] Perhaps you will say that the

²⁷⁶ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, 'Twelfth Annual Report of the Arts Council, 1956/7

English Stage Company seems to you so bad that the sooner it is finished off the better.²⁷⁷

Anderson's anxiety over the effect that a single, slightly dismissive review might have on the new company offers a salient reminder that the ESC's future as an important theatre company was far from assured in 1956. The underlying anxiety which surrounded the first season at the Royal Court is often forgotten in the wake of the critical furore that surrounds *Look Back in Anger* and the new-wave dramatists who followed Osborne. Whether one likes *Look Back in Anger* or not, the sheer volume of academic books, essays, biographies, interviews and newspaper articles which dwell on it, suggest that its influential status in British theatre history is assured. The play's success was undoubtedly crucial to the ESC's survival. As John Elsom observes, 'The off-shoot income from *Look Back in Anger* (including the film) kept the English Stage Company solvent over the following years, enabling George Devine to tackle ever more ambitious programmes'.²⁷⁸

Cards of Identity was the first ESC play that BBC television publicised. It was the fifth production of the ESC's opening repertory season, and the television flash on the 22nd of July appeared just under a month after it had opened at the theatre. BBC staff often used to write to the *Radio Times* with suggestions for which programmes they might flag. It is therefore not very surprising that the article publicising the BBC/ESC collaboration was deliberately framed to create a sense of a mutually beneficent relationship. Again, the reviewer presents the theatricality of the excerpt experience as a selling point to viewers:

There are many who hold the view that the theatre and television must necessarily be in opposition to each other. The facts, however, are very different, as the number of theatre excerpts and 'theatre flashes' is continually proving. This week there will be two visits to London theatres – on Monday to the London Hippodrome [...] and on Tuesday to the Royal Court for a 'flash' from Nigel Dennis's controversial play *Cards of Identity*

²⁷⁷ The H. M. Tennent production was Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*. Letter Lindsay Anderson to Kenneth Tynan, cited in Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, pp. 265-266.

²⁷⁸ John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 81.

[...] the 'Theatre flash' in *Camera One* will be presented through the roving-eye camera at the theatre during a normal evening's performance.²⁷⁹

In the BBC files there is no record of the television extract's impact on the theatre box office. However, its marketing success is suggested by the fact that the company subsequently made a series of requests for a televised extract of Osborne's play, which had been the third play introduced into the company's repertory. Between early September and October, the BBC Programme organiser, Cecil Madden, was contacted regarding the play on at least three separate occasions, by the artistic director, George Devine, by board member, Neville Blond, and by the theatre press officer, George Fearon.²⁸⁰ Devine's personal, handwritten letter to Madden reveals both his concern for the play's flagging performance by early September and his desire to work with the BBC on future ventures:

I want to ask you if you can once more help us here. *Look Back in Anger*, which is holding the fort for us while we prepare the Brecht, is not doing quite as well as we would like, and Neville suggested that a TV excerpt, judiciously chosen, might help us a lot [...] The play is supposed to be a 'conversational must' these days, so I don't think it is an unexciting suggestion. Can you see what could be done – and naturally, the sooner the better. I have not forgotten the idea of the Brecht with Peggy.²⁸¹

In September 1956, there is little sense that Devine regards *Look Back in Anger* as a box-office hit. His description of Osborne's work as 'holding the fort' arguably implies that he expects better things of Brecht's play, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Devine's remarks suggest the importance attached to Brecht in 1956. The Berliner Ensemble was in London when he wrote the letter. On 29 November, almost a month after the play first opened, the BBC helped out again by doing an interview in the ten-minute, weekly *Highlight* programme with Peggy Ashcroft, the 'Good Woman' of the play's title. The interview did not show the production itself,

²⁷⁹ Anonymous 'Round and About the Studios', *Radio Times*, 22–28 July 1956, p. 6.

²⁸⁰ Devine wrote a personal letter to Madden on 2 September 1956. There is no record of the correspondence from Blond and Fearon, but Madden referenced Fearon's request in a memo to the Head of Television Drama on 5 September 1956 and sent a personal response to Blond on 26 September 1956

BBC WAC, T14/1002, *TV OB Royal Court Theatre Look Back in Anger*

²⁸¹ BBC WAC, T14/1002, letter from George Devine to Cecil Madden, 2 September 1956. Copyright George Devine, published by kind permission of his Estate

and Dame Peggy, although enthusiastic in her own support of the play, made a number of unfortunate comments in which she seemed to be flagging up the play's potential problems rather than singing its praises:

It's a quite naive story, with a great deal of truth, fundamental truth, underneath it. Some people think that the truth is so simple that it's pressed home too often, and is possibly boring because of that but [...] I don't find that so. I like it because Brecht uses the theatre in a way which we here, are not used to.²⁸²

The impact of Dame Peggy's interview on the theatre production seems to have been negligible. The play was neither a critical nor a commercial success for the ESC. Nonetheless, the fact that Madden secured a promotional slot for the *Good Woman* whilst continuing to put his time and energy into promoting *Look Back in Anger*, belies the view of television as aiding and abetting the decline of theatres in the 1950s. Three days after the date on Devine's request letter, Madden wrote a memo to the Head of Television advocating BBC support: 'Both Devine and Fearon are on to me about a relay of *Look Back in Anger* which is lagging a little [...] Frankly I think we should reflect current theatre and would like to try this'.²⁸³ The following day he sent a memo to all BBC production staff, outlining how the play was to be televised and, more crucially, stressing the ESC's need for 'help and encouragement'.²⁸⁴ After the production had been given the go-ahead, Madden continued to try and promote the ESC's work. His memo to the *Radio Times* underlines the influence that BBC staff were able to exert in terms of the reviews and publicity being generated for television drama.

The next play we shall televise is a short piece of this controversial play. May I suggest that, as this is an important theatre scheme (the English Stage Company) which we are trying to assist, you might care to invite George Devine to write an article for the *Radio Times*.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Geoffrey Johnson Smith interviewing Dame Peggy Ashcroft on *Highlight: Peggy Ashcroft*, BBC Television, 29 November 1956

²⁸³ BBC WAC, T14/1002, 'Memo from Cecil Madden to Head of Television Drama', 5 September 1956

²⁸⁴ BBC WAC, T14/1002, 'Memo from Cecil Madden to BBC television staff', 6 September 1956

²⁸⁵ BBC WAC, T14/1002, 'Look Back in Anger Theatre Relay on Tuesday 16 October', 17 September 1956

In a memo to *House Magazine* Madden showed himself to be a prescient judge of the ESC's potential as both a company and a home for new writing: 'George Devine who runs the theatre is a powerful personality and John Osborne, the author, is about [sic], or could be'.²⁸⁶ As a result of Madden's request, the *Radio Times* ran an extremely favourable preview of the television excerpt:

One of the most active and ambitious movements in London's theatre-land in the post-war years has been the recent formation of the English Stage Company [...] Designed to present a repertory of interesting plays both new and old, it has already been responsible for unearthing a number of new playwrights and bringing before the public some exciting new productions. The most controversial play so far has undoubtedly been *Look Back in Anger*, by John Osborne – an extract from which is to be televised from the Royal Court on Tuesday.²⁸⁷

The review picks up on the points and, more crucially, the tone in which Madden had written about the play and the company in his earlier memos. Although George Fearon, as press officer at the Court, would clearly have had a hand in the publicity for the play, Madden's role in the proceedings is arguably more important as he was an influential figure outside the Court who was prepared to vouch for both the play and the company when their success was by no means certain. *Look Back in Anger's* survival and subsequent hallowed critical reputation is often linked to the rave review from Kenneth Tynan. John Heilpern, Osborne's biographer, regards Tynan's response as 'the critical turning point'.²⁸⁸ The latter's review has been immortalised by its frequent appearance in studies of post-war British theatre. Tynan's writing was characterised by colourful descriptions of the passionate personal feelings that individual plays and performers aroused in him, and it is easy to see why his review of *Look Back in Anger* has been quoted so often:

I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages

²⁸⁶ BBC WAC, T14/1002, 'Publicity for *House Magazine*', 27 September 1956

²⁸⁷ Anonymous, 'Controversial Play' *Radio Times*, 14–20 October 1956, p. 7.

²⁸⁸ Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 171.

of twenty and thirty [...] I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade.²⁸⁹

Tynan's review is an important part of the cultural mythology surrounding the play. His identification with Jimmy Porter and his sense of a new, younger, target audience, fitted in with the mythic appeal of the new generation of Angry Young Men of literature. In reality, many of the literary figures bracketed within this group (Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, Arnold Wesker) had little in common either in terms of their writing content and style or their social backgrounds and political persuasions. The actual impact that Tynan's review had on the production is also debatable. As Heilpern observes, despite the critical support of both Tynan and his rival at the *Sunday Times*, Harold Hobson, '*Look Back in Anger* continued playing only to disappointing business'.²⁹⁰ In contrast, after the television broadcast, box-office takings at the theatre leaped from £900 to £1700 a week.²⁹¹ It is estimated that five million people watched the television extract of *Look Back in Anger* on the 16 of October 1956.²⁹² As a result, the play reached a wider audience than would ever have been possible, even with full houses, at the Royal Court. As Michael Hallifax, the ESC Stage Manager, comments in his autobiography:

I was astounded at how many people had seen the telecast and what a wide spectrum of the public came to see the play. At last young people were attracted, and it was exciting to find them in the bars and corridors and to guess from their slightly bewildered behaviour that they were in a theatre.²⁹³

In 1956, the difference that Devine felt television had made is clear in a letter that he wrote to Madden:

I have not had any opportunity, up to now, to write and thank you for your efforts on our behalf in effecting the television extract from *Look Back in Anger* [...] it has made an enormous difference to our takings in the last two weeks, and I am immensely grateful to you. It has been a real service.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ Kenneth Tynan, 'The Voice of the Young', *Observer*, 13 May 1956

²⁹⁰ Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 172.

²⁹¹ John Osborne, *Almost a Gentleman*, p. 23.

²⁹² Rebellato, *1956 And All That*, p. 109.

²⁹³ Hallifax, *Let Me Set the Scene*, p. 27.

²⁹⁴ BBC WAC, T14/1002, letter George Devine to Cecil Madden, 29 October 1956. Copyright George Devine, published by kind permission of his Estate

The play's director, Tony Richardson, was equally fulsome in his praise: 'Once again may I say a personal "thank-you" for arranging the extract from *Look Back in Anger*, as no doubt you will know it had a miraculous effect on business'.²⁹⁵ The debt that Richardson felt towards Madden belies the comments that he later made about the BBC in his autobiography:

The BBC has always been an out-front-and-proud-of-it bastion of mediocrity and its pensioners: an aggressively complacent and Philistine bureaucracy; the lowest common multiple of talent and intelligence; a world of self congratulating, the would bes [sic] – whether they're journalists or politicians or interviewers or directors – who think they're ace.²⁹⁶

Unsurprisingly, given his attitude towards the BBC, Richardson did not credit Madden in the discussion of *Look Back in Anger* in his autobiography. He did, however, refer to the impact of the television production: 'I did a TV version of Act 2 that created enough interest to sell out those three weeks. On later revivals we did OK, but not sensational, business'.²⁹⁷ Richardson's comment belies the idea of *Look Back in Anger* as a run-away success, as it suggests that business dipped again once the effect of the television excerpt had worn off.

Brian Rix had already proved television could work promotional wonders for theatre productions. However, the ESC, retrospectively described by Richard Findlater as offering, 'a more exalting, improving, aesthetically enriching and socially valuable experience than Shaftesbury Avenue can ever hope to provide', was not putting on populist West End plays.²⁹⁸ With its mix of novelists, poets, European playwrights and newcomers, the first season at the ESC had a rather different intellectual cachet to 'Laughter at the Whitehall'. The fact that George Devine was willing to market his serious theatre via television is an indication that the small screen was no longer seen as 'lowbrow'. The *Observer* Play Competition of 1956 and the BBC collaborations at the Royal Court, show that the drama department was moving away from the adaptations of canonical work and dated

²⁹⁵ BBC WAC, T14/1002, letter Tony Richardson to Cecil Madden, 29 October 1956

²⁹⁶ Richardson, *Long Distance Runner*, pp. 56-7.

²⁹⁷ Richardson, *Long Distance Runner*, p. 79.

²⁹⁸ Richard Findlater, *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1981), p. 10.

West End favourites which had filled the screen in the early days. Television had, in fact, been attempting to foster new writing since it resumed service. However, internal division and outside suspicion had not made this easy.

5. Dramatising the box: the struggle towards a new aesthetic 1945–56

Early post-war television was chronically underfunded, 'The BBC Board of Governors fixed the operational costs of television for 1946/7 at a level below that of 1939 [...] the pressure on space, equipment and people increased, particularly as the length of programmes had expanded'.²⁹⁹ The television drama department initially operated from Alexandra Palace and, with only two studios, Val Gielgud later observed that 'two full-length plays a week was beyond our capacity if a professional standard was to be maintained'.³⁰⁰ However, finances aside, Gielgud believed that one of television drama's biggest problems was its lack of an aesthetic:

I am not yet convinced that television drama is sure of its target. Does it aim to be no more than a photographed stage play? Does it dream of competing with the film? Or should its principle aim be that of illustrating broadcasting? [...] as far as any genuine theory of television is concerned, a question mark is still the most appropriate symbol.³⁰¹

BBC memos and policy documents show that television had begun to move towards its 'target' by 1950. Although documents from Gielgud's time as Head of Television Drama suggest that he was happy for the BBC to continue collaborating with theatres, he was always committed to the evolution of a genre of new plays specifically written for television. His worries about the lack of new material in television drama are made clear in his 1950 report, 'Reflections on the present state of television drama':

...it has to be recognised – and I am convinced it is insufficiently recognised at present – that this source of material [the theatre] is by no means inexhaustible, and that in a recognisable future we shall have to depend largely upon new material and the new writer, if the service is to develop

²⁹⁹ Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen*, p. 79.

³⁰⁰ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, p. 131.

³⁰¹ Val Gielgud, 'Policy and Problems of Broadcast Drama' *BBC Quarterly*, 2/1 (1947), p. 23.

beyond the state of an efficient repertory company with an unusually wide audience.³⁰²

Gielgud's dogged commitment to the setting up of a television script department marked the beginning of a new writing policy at the BBC. The 'instigation and encouragement of original material' was point number two under the projected activities that he felt the new script department should undertake.³⁰³ He wrote another memo to the Controller of Television entitled 'Hypothetical Future of Television Drama', again highlighting the need for new material: 'Proportion of plays specially written for television – This should be thought of in terms of progressive increase up to 50%'.³⁰⁴

In April 1950, Gielgud had envisaged that out of the BBC's approximately one-hundred-and-ten yearly productions, twenty would be classics or plays by established writers like G. B. Shaw; thirty would be written specifically for television by outside writers; and sixty would be based on scripts developed within the department itself.³⁰⁵ The sixty in-house scripts could be based on original stage plays or novels, but would be substantially re-worked by the BBC script unit or contracted writers to suit the medium of television: 'Plays need much more radical adaptation than we have been able to give them, to the extent of being literally taken to pieces and put together again'.³⁰⁶

It is difficult to verify Gielgud's figures in relation to the number of new and in-house plays being produced, but there was a definite BBC policy in the 1950s regarding the commissioning of new writing. Minutes from a drama output meeting record that it is the Head of Drama's 'task' to attract 'writers and adaptors to television [...] in order to build up an inexhaustible number of television scripts'.³⁰⁷ In 1951, the Head of Copyright produced a document entitled 'Productions: Points of Procedure', in which he outlined plans for the centralisation of all drama

³⁰² BBC WAC, T16/62/1, Val Gielgud, 'Reflections on the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, p. 2.

³⁰³ BBC WAC T16/62/1, Gielgud, 'Reflections on the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, p. 5.

³⁰⁴ BBC WAC T16/62/1, Gielgud, 'Hypothetical Future of Television Drama', 27 June 1950

³⁰⁵ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, Gielgud, 'Reflections on the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, pp. 6–7.

³⁰⁶ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, Gielgud, 'Reflections on the Present State of Television Drama', 28 April 1950, p. 7.

³⁰⁷ BBC WAC T16/62/1, 'Drama Output Meeting', 28 December 1950

commissioning within a single script organisation.³⁰⁸ This document gives an idea of the different writers that the BBC was employing. Writers are divided into two groups: established playwrights or those already affiliated to television, and new writers. A group of over ten 'established' playwrights, including B. A. Young and Clemence Dane, are listed in the document, and it is revealed that each of them has received a £100 commission for new television work. The commissioning procedure was dependent on the status of the writer: 'In general, the higher the status an author, the less we shall be able to ask him to submit at his own risk'.³⁰⁹

The BBC was desperate for material and, by the mid-1950s, had begun to make use of regional studios. Elaine Morgan, who began writing for television in this period, remembers the impact of regional developments:

They were taking one live play a month from Cardiff and it was going out live all over the country and that was a great thing, I think [...] for Wales as a country because, up until then, the only Welsh people appearing in drama were always the maids and the [...] comic policemen. So I could write plays about life around here and the heroes and heroines would be Welsh.³¹⁰

However, progress in developing new material was initially slow, as Michael Barry observes in a report in 1957:

The task of writing original work, or making adaptations for the screen, demands considerable skill. Our failures showed that there was no quick way to success. The process has been a slow and laborious training of individuals which first bore fruit in the script of *1984* and the *Quatermass Serials*.³¹¹

Today, *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953), and *1984* (1954), are widely regarded as ground-breaking drama programmes in terms of both their style and content. Lez Cooke reflects this view in his history of British television drama: 'the two productions which were to mark television drama's decisive break with "filmed theatre"'.³¹² *Quatermass* was a six-part science-fiction serial written by Nigel Kneale and produced by Rudolph Cartier. *1984* was an adaptation of George

³⁰⁸ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, 'Productions: Points of Procedure', 19 September 1951

³⁰⁹ BBC WAC, T16/62/1, 'Productions: Points of Procedure', 19 September 1951, p. 1.

³¹⁰ Unpublished interview with Elaine Morgan conducted by Kate Harris (19 March 2007)

³¹¹ BBC WAC, T16/62/2, Michael Barry, 'Television Drama', 1 August 1957, p. 2.

³¹² Cooke, *British Television Drama*, p. 17.

Orwell's novel of the same name, and was again the product of collaboration between Cartier and Kneale. Both men represented the new era at the BBC. Kneale had been one of the first BBC staff writers hired to produce new television material, and Cartier had been appointed as a producer by Michael Barry in 1952.

The sci-fi/futuristic content of *Quatermass* and *1984* heralded a departure from the domestic realism of the traditional stage play. Their plots tapped into real concerns within contemporary society about the Cold War, the threat of invasion and totalitarian regimes. The status of the two productions has arguably been enhanced because, unusually, tele-recordings were made of the first two episodes of *Quatermass* and the repeat performance of *1984*. Both productions were celebrated for their innovative use of the television medium, *Quatermass* for the achievement of special effects and creation of dramatic tension; and *1984* for its use of filmed sequences, which were seamlessly inter-cut into the live broadcast.

However, these programmes were exceptions rather than the norm. The selection of plays being broadcast on television in the 1940s and early 1950s remained very traditional. Shakespeare, G. B. Shaw, J. B. Priestley, Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan had more of their stage plays produced in the first thirty years of post-war television than any of the new-wave playwrights who followed.³¹³ Production choices were as much about the prevailing conservatism within the BBC hierarchy as they were about the constraints of finance and technology. In 1950, the Director of Home Broadcasting produced a drama policy document in which he commented: 'Sunday plays should not only be plays of a generally acceptable nature, but should also, as far as possible, contribute something positive and, for want of a better word, "noble" in terms of the human spirit'.³¹⁴ The BBC's ability to respond to the changing socio-cultural climate was put to the test later that year when a TV broadcast of Val Gielgud's stage play, *Party Manners*, generated an unexpected public controversy.

³¹³ Neil Taylor has compiled a table detailing the most broadcast theatre playwrights between 1936 and 1994. On the basis of total broadcasts, including extracts, the top ten were Shakespeare, G. B. Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, J. B. Priestley, Anton Chekhov, Noël Coward, J. M. Barrie, Eugene O'Neill, Terence Rattigan and James Bridie. Taylor observes that 'the top ten dramatists [...] clocked up the bulk of their broadcasts in the first 30 years of television'. See, 'A History of the Stage Play on Television', pp. 33–4.

³¹⁴ BBC WAC T16/62/1, 'Note on Drama Policy', circa March 1950

6. The threat of the 'real': *Party Manners* opens the door to scandal

Unlike the theatre in this period, television drama was not officially censored. However, the BBC board of Governors faced issues of dramatic content and control, similar to those which were endlessly debated by the Lord Chamberlain and his play readers before the end of theatre censorship in 1968. In October 1950, the BBC television drama department found itself at the centre of a media row about freedom of speech after the Chairman of the Governors cancelled a repeat broadcast of *Party Manners*, due to alleged political pressure. This case study will examine the furore surrounding the play in order to explore the contradictory attitudes to drama in this period. Consideration will be given to the extent to which evolutions in dramatic art are often more about shifts in the surrounding socio-political landscape, than the content or style of a particular work.

Given the level of moral responsibility that Val Gielgud invested in the BBC drama department, it is ironic that a television production of one of his own plays should become the subject of a public scandal. In 1950, despite having written a number of plays and novels, Gielgud was not a revered literary figure, as he commented himself: 'my record as a dramatist in the English Theatre had been neither happy nor distinguished. I had written some half-a-dozen plays. But while all had been performed only one had reached the West End of London'.³¹⁵ Gielgud's dramatic style was unremarkable for its period. He had turned out a number of thrillers and light domestic comedies, which for the most part adhered to a traditional three act structure and featured characters from an upper-middle-class social background. *Party Manners* was one of his domestic comedies and, having already appeared as both a stage and a radio play, appeared an unlikely target for controversy when it was produced for television.

A basic knowledge of the play's plot is necessary to understand the nature of the scandal that developed around it. An ex-Labour Party minister becomes head of the National Atomic board and finds himself confronted with a report which

³¹⁵ Val Gielgud, 'Introduction' in *Party Manners* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1950), p. viii.

reveals how significant amounts of money can be made from atomic energy. A Labour cabinet member tries to persuade the chief of the atomic board to release the report in order to rally support for the government in the general election. However, if the report is published, secrets might be revealed which would threaten national security. The head of the Atomic board saves the day by threatening that his son, a candidate for the Tory party, will report the Labour government to the House of Commons.

The political content of the play proved to be its undoing. On the Monday following the broadcast *The Daily Herald* went into print with the front page headline: 'We don't want any more of this, Mr Gielgud'.³¹⁶ *The Herald* and *The Tribune* both ran stories complaining that the play misrepresented the current government and was effectively a piece of anti-government propaganda that should not have been allowed to be put on. The reviews suggested that Gielgud's decision to make a comedy out of the serious issue of national security, undermined government policy and could unfairly prejudice members of the general public. Unbeknownst to Gielgud, one of the BBC governors, Dr Ernest Whitfield, had written to the Director General prior to the broadcast raising very similar objections to those that appeared in the *Herald*. His complaints had been ignored as the *Radio Times* listings had been printed by the time the letter was received.³¹⁷ In the face of negative press coverage and dissent from within the BBC board, the Chairman of the Governors, Lord Simon of Wythenshaw, cancelled the repeat broadcast without consulting the other Governors.

Wythenshaw's actions increased the furore surrounding the play as newspapers up and down the country added their voices to a story which became more about freedom of speech within the BBC, than the play itself. A head-line from the *News Chronicle* provides an example of the damaging press coverage: 'Labour Pressure forces BBC to scrap TV play'.³¹⁸ There is no evidence to suggest

³¹⁶ Herald Reporter, 'We don't want any more of this, Mr Gielgud', *Daily Herald*, 2 October 1950. Press cutting in BBC WAC, R34/345, *Policy Editorial Control, Party Manners, 1950*

³¹⁷ BBC WAC, R34/ 345, 'Some points raised at the informal meeting of some governors on 5th October to discuss the cancelling of the second performance of "Party Manners"', 5 October 1950

³¹⁸ J.P. Thomas, 'Labour pressure forces BBC to scrap TV play', *News Chronicle*, 4 October 1950, press cutting in BBC WAC, R34/ 345

that the Government did intervene in this case, but suspicion persisted nonetheless as Wythenshaw had been a member of the Labour Party before his BBC appointment, and the *Daily Herald* was a Labour Paper. The play could be said to have had a subversive edge as Atlee's labour government had been pursuing a covert nuclear weapons programme since 1946. However, this was not widely known and it is arguable that the scandal surrounding *Party Manners* was more a product of the surrounding political climate, than anything to do with the dramatic content of the play itself. As David Wilby observes:

The political landscape was changing. The first performance [in the theatre] came before the February 1950 general election, when Labour still had a big majority in the House of Commons. After the election, the Labour party was much more sensitive. The landslide winner of 1945 had now lost 78 seats and seen its majority cut to five.³¹⁹

The level of interest in the controversy surrounding the television broadcast was such that it was discussed in both Houses of Parliament, suggesting that by 1950 television had begun to establish itself as a powerful force in post-war society which was capable of reaching mass audiences and shaping national opinions. Lord Wythenshaw was forced to issue a public statement denying the BBC was in favour of censorship, rather feebly arguing that 'I thought I was carrying out my responsibilities as part of the process of selection and rejection'.³²⁰ Interestingly, despite the apology the cancelled repeat was never re-instated. Nonetheless, *Party Manners* was an important test case which, according to Gielgud, led to the 'relaxation of restrictions regarding TV drama'.³²¹ As a result of the press furore, the BBC decided to ignore the complaints about the 1954 screening of George Orwell's *1984*, a drama which arguably offered a much more radical critique of Government policy in relation to the Cold War climate of the 1950s.

However, in terms of form and content, *Party Manners* was really another example of a play which fitted within the parameters of the popular 'country house'

³¹⁹ David Wilby, 'Party Manners 1950' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/heritage/in_depth/pressure/manners.shtml> [accessed 4 January 2007]

³²⁰ BBC WAC, R34/ 345, 'Party Manners: Personal Statement by Lord Simon of Wythenshawe', 23 October 1950

³²¹ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, p. 153.

genre discussed in chapter 2. Gielgud, like William Douglas Home and Charles Morgan, set out to present post-war politics through the familiar safety of the country house setting. Whilst the political dilemma is unravelling, various comedic and romantic sub-plots develop within the country house, which has been newly transformed into the Atomic Board's head quarters. The ancient aristocratic owner and his beautiful daughter remain as domestic servants in their old family home, and the son of the Chief of the Atomic Board supplies the necessary element of 'young romance' by obligingly falling in love with the daughter of the ancient aristocrat.

The play's political content was unusual for its time but it was written as a comedy and there were no references to any real people involved in government. In 1949 the play had passed through the Lord Chamberlain's office almost without comment and was recommended for licence on the proviso that, 'there will be no doubt, no making up of the political characters as living people'.³²² The reviews of the theatre production were favourable but not outstanding and the unavailability of a West End venue meant that it did not transfer from the Embassy Theatre after its initial run. The Home service broadcast subsequently went out with similarly little fuss. In his autobiography, Gielgud himself freely admitted that he had viewed it as, 'a trivial little comedy' and 'did not think much of it'.³²³ The extent to which public attitudes were shaped by the press reaction to the 1950 BBC production, rather than the play itself, is suggested by Gielgud's description of the subsequent West End revival: 'Audiences went, expecting to be shocked by an explosion, only to find themselves mildly titillated by a squib [...] the run only lasted just over three months'.³²⁴ Gielgud's point about media distortion is also supported by the BBC's Viewer Research Report for *Party Manners*:

This was a popular production, the play itself making a strong appeal to the majority of viewers who saw it. They appeared to accept it as amusing and

³²² British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Play Correspondence, Reader's Report by H.C. Game on *Party Manners*, 15 August 1949, License number 665

³²³ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, p. 150.

³²⁴ Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror*, pp. 153-154.

pleasantly light hearted entertainment without attaching any particular significance to the political satire.³²⁵

The play received a 'reaction index' of 78, 'a good figure, well above the current average (67) for televised plays'³²⁶. Evidence like this suggests that audiences were sometimes far more relaxed in their attitudes to dramatic content than the authoritative figures within the BBC hierarchy believed them to be. As Michael Barry later commented in his autobiography: 'The attitudes of this growing audience changed with the whole nature of post-war society. It sometimes felt as if the responses to our dramatic programmes registered these changes with the exactitude of a thermometer'.³²⁷ However, whilst *Party Manners* remains an important landmark in television history it is arguable that one of the most radical movements towards a new genre of post-war social realism, on television at least, had been developing rather more quietly since 1946, with the work of the small Drama Documentary Unit.³²⁸

7. Reality bites: Drama documentary sets the agenda?

The remit of this unit was to produce dramatised documentaries that represented the lives of ordinary British people in post-war society. The writer and producer (often the same person) would conduct extensive location research over a number of weeks. The final script would be based on the research but the storyline would be fictional and the characters played by actors. The *Radio Times* billed them as 'Story Documentaries'. The practitioners involved in the documentary group prided themselves on the verisimilitude of their programmes. The actors' names were deliberately withheld from the *Radio Times* billings until 1952, meaning that potential viewers were unlikely to be aware that they were tuning into a heavily constructed version of reality.³²⁹ Robert Barr, a documentary writer and producer,

³²⁵ BBC WAC, R34/ 345, 'Viewer Research Report: *Party Manners*', 11 October 1950

³²⁶ BBC WAC, R34/ 345, 'Viewer Research Report: *Party Manners*', 11 October 1950

³²⁷ Michael Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*, p. 69.

³²⁸ Paul Kerr lists 1946 as the year in which the Unit began in his article 'F for Fake? Friction over Faction' in *Understanding Television*, p. 77.

³²⁹ On 4 February 1952, Robert Barr wrote a memo to Cecil Madden to complain that the current issue of the *Radio Times* contained a billing for a documentary programme which, for the first time, included a cast list: 'For four years or more we have fought to keep our billings free of actors' names. It has been our argument

saw the hybrid make-up of the early post-war documentaries as being integral to the genre:

[Documentary's] nature is to select, edit, synthesise, and present its own conclusions. Documentary is concerned with action; its form is the dramatisation of facts, reconstruction of events [...] It will use (and devise) any technique that will give force and clarity to the information it seeks to convey.³³⁰

However, as post-war television documentary developed, there was a growing awareness within the BBC drama department that what was being produced by the group was breaking formal genre boundaries. In 1951, Michael Barry wrote a memo to the Controller of Television Programming entitled, 'Attempted definition of Documentary':

I would hesitate to draw too fine a barrier between true television drama and true television documentary [...]. The successful true television play seems to take it ever more closely towards documentary, and certain types of documentary come close to the true television play.³³¹

This document suggests that the work of the Drama Documentary Unit had a significant influence on the way in which original writing for television drama developed. It suggests that in 1950, realism was central to what Michael Barry saw as 'successful and true' television drama. The drama documentary group's concern with televising the lives of ordinary people throughout the 1950s represented a significant departure from the depictions of upper-middle-class milieus that were common to many of the stage plays of this period. Drama documentary practitioners were producing programmes about different social groups from different parts of the country. In the early 1950s, this called for a radical change in acting styles for stage actors who were used to playing middle and upper-class characters who often spoke in the same RADA-trained RP

that this type of billing kills the reality of the programme.' BBC WAC, T4/35, *Drama Documentaries, Memos, 1946-54*

³³⁰ Cited by Elaine Bell, 'The Origins of British Television Documentary', in *Documentary and the Mass Media*, p. 73.

³³¹ BBC WAC, T4/35, 'Attempted Definition of Documentary', 15 August 1951

accent, regardless of the play's location. As Caryl Doncaster, a writer and producer of a number of 'story documentaries', comments:

An actor cannot 'get by' by playing the character [...] He has to 'be' the person he is portraying. And to do this he has to forget most of the skills he has learned – his voice-production technique, his movements, the projection of his own personality – everything by which he becomes a little larger than life must go.³³²

However, dramatised documentaries were arguably presenting as much of a challenge to the viewer as they were to the actor. In his autobiography, Michael Barry recalls the powerful and controversial subject-matter at the heart of many of the programmes: 'writers like Duncan Ross, Caryl Doncaster, Arthur Swinson and Colin Morris [...] began exploring subjects of social moment such as crime, alcoholism, prostitution and poverty. This was long before the theatre's crusading began'.³³³

One such example of this is Barr's 1952 documentary, *Dangerous Drugs*. The *Radio Times* described it thus: 'A midnight accident in the West End of London brings casualties to a London hospital. Among the injured is a girl who seems to feel no pain. This is a study in drug addiction as seen through the eyes of a young physician, the girl, and the man who supplied her with drugs'.³³⁴ Although the *Radio Times* listing credits the producer, script-writer and director in small print, care is taken to emphasise the verisimilitude of the programme by allowing the script-writer, Cormac Swan, to write an article detailing how the programme was based on his own experiences of working with drug users as a GP:

The central incident is, in fact, a true story and around it had to be woven a lot of factual information illustrating the main theme, the use and abuse of habit-forming drugs. We talked for an hour, hammering out a central theme and rough plot. That night I began work at midnight and soon I seemed to be back in the hospital where I had trained, amid characters who had long since departed to the corners of the earth.³³⁵

³³² Caryl Doncaster, 'The Story Documentary' in *Television in the Making*, pp. 44–8 (p. 48).

³³³ Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*, p. 67.

³³⁴ *Radio Times*, 6–12 April 1952, p. 43.

³³⁵ Cormac Swan, 'Drugs: The Two Edged Sword', *Radio Times*, 6–12 April 1952, p. 41.

Dangerous Drugs, like many early television programmes, no longer exists, so it is difficult to comment on the impact of the story on the screen. However, some of the later 'story documentaries' that were produced by Colin Morris have survived. *Without Love*, which was broadcast in December 1956, depicts a young teenage girl's descent into prostitution after she leaves home in search of excitement in London. One of the most striking things about the programme is its refusal to adopt a moral high-ground. The women who work the clubs and streets are depicted with compassion and understanding. The blame for the problem of prostitution is placed firmly at the door of society, which is depicted, for the most part, as turning a blind eye to both the harsh reality of the world that the women inhabit, and the socio-economic conditions which help to sustain it. The only real salve to middle-England's conscience is the sympathetic, middle-class, female probation officer who is put to work on the protagonist's case. As with *Dangerous Drugs*, the *Radio Times* for that week featured an article underlining the fact that the programme was depicting real issues within contemporary society:

It is not a pleasant story but because of the source it springs from, it is not a story to be disregarded. For it is based on a composite picture of the women of the streets, of the five thousand girls in London alone, who are to be found every night waiting on the busy thoroughfares of Paddington, Victoria or Piccadilly or as hostesses in tawdry smoky basements of Soho.³³⁶

The fact that these programmes were dramatising real lives arguably gave them a greater feeling of authenticity than that of the purely fictional television play. They could push the boundaries of what was seen as acceptable dramatic subject-matter precisely because people accepted them as documentaries about 'real life', as Barry comments:

Many of the subjects that were chosen and the frankness with which these were explored, crossed the brittle frontier of acceptance by the play-watching audience of that time. However, if transmitted as drama

³³⁶ Gordon Summers, 'A Challenging Documentary', *Radio Times*, 9–15 December 1956, pp. 38–9.

documentary, the subjects obtained, and held, the objective and interested attention of a substantial audience.³³⁷

Barry's idea that 'drama documentary [...] led directly to the new socially conscious playwriting, which exploded in television, as well as in the theatre, towards the end of the fifties'³³⁸, is a contentious and largely unexplored argument. There are very few recordings of early drama documentaries, and viewing figures are not known. The new wave of original television drama that emerged in the 1960s can be seen as drawing on documentary drama in terms of its socially realistic scope. *Z Cars*, which was developed from a drama documentary, and the *Wednesday Play*, provide two examples of this.³³⁹ The theatre argument remains more difficult to prove, as there is not such a clear link. Barry's argument remains unconsidered in books about the evolution of post-war British theatre. The early post-war, ground-breaking, socially realistic plays that academics now celebrate nearly all appear towards the mid-to-late 1950s: Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* in 1954, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* in 1957, and *The Trilogy* 1958-60, and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* in 1958.

To a certain extent, the British stage's burgeoning interest in new writing and social issues in the late 1950s marked the beginning of the theatre's attempt to catch up with what the dramatised documentary had been pioneering for almost a decade on television, and longer on radio. Drama documentary work introduced a growing 1950s audience to a view of contemporary society that many of them would have been unlikely to have encountered in visual form before, as Michael Barry comments:

There was an occasion, many years later when Sir Peter Hall said during a public address that: 'If it had not been for *Look Back in Anger*, there could have been no *Z cars*'. An assertion to which I replied that, 'If it had not been for the audience prepared by the television drama documentaries, *Look Back in Anger* would not have found its moment'.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*, p. 71.

³³⁸ Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*, p. 68.

³³⁹ David Rose, producer of *Z Cars*, discusses the series' documentary heritage in *TAP* interview conducted by Kate Harris (24 October 2005) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/rose7.html>> [Accessed 10/12/06]

³⁴⁰ Barry, *From the Palace to the Grove*, p. 71.

Michael Barry's anecdote reflects the circularity of socio-cultural movements. However, the emphasis that he places on *Look Back in Anger* and *Z Cars* also shows how a desire to establish narratives of cause and effect can result in individual events within history becoming isolated from the surrounding context. The relationship between television and theatre in the 1940s and 50s had a greater impact on the evolution of British drama than historians have thus far acknowledged. However, it is an interdisciplinary history which cannot be neatly slotted into the traditional cultural mythology that surrounds the arrival of the 'new wave' of British Theatre in the late 1950s and 60s. The fact that a growing national television audience was being introduced to new styles of drama from the early 1950s onwards illustrates that the celebrated golden age of British Theatre and television was the result of a gradual process of development across different dramatic media.

Chapter 4

Breaking with tradition: Theatre Workshop 1945-54

Theatre Workshop is best remembered in the context of its work at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, from the mid-1950s onwards. The academic interest in this period of the company's history is unsurprising given the impressive range of new plays produced at the Theatre Royal. By the late 1950s, West End transfers of plays like *A Taste of Honey* and *The Quare Fellow* had generated media interest and the company had begun to make an impact on British cultural consciousness. However, in 1953, when Theatre Workshop moved to London, it was already in its eighth year as a company. The foundations on which the work of the late 1950s and 60s was built had been laid by the founder members, most of whom had left by 1956. Between 1945 and 1954 Theatre Workshop had an ambitious programme which saw them experimenting with production methods and performance styles that had rarely been seen on the British stage. Their commitment to creating theatre for new audiences, in unconventional venues, was equally ground-breaking.

This chapter will consider the company's work between 1945 and 1954 in the context of its impact and influence on the evolution of Theatre Workshop and, more broadly, its place within the shifting socio-cultural landscape of 1940s and 50s Britain. Rather than focusing on Joan Littlewood, Theatre Workshop's director, and best remembered figure, this study will explore the ways in which the ensemble company has been remembered by its members. Particular consideration will be given to the pivotal role played by the company's in-house playwright and musician, Ewan MacColl. This study will draw on *TAP* oral history interviews, autobiographies, biographies, the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive, the Theatre Workshop Stratford East Archive and the Joan Littlewood Collection at the Harry Ransom Research Centre.

1. Autobiographical material and methodology

The *TAP* interviews with former Theatre Workshop members are the largest collection of publicly archived oral history recordings about the company.³⁴¹ The testimonies are diverse, giving insights into the company's work from the 1930s to the 1960s. Many of the original contacts were passed on by the Theatre Royal archivist, Murray Melvin, who was particularly keen that there should be a record of the people who were involved in the company in its early post-war days. As a result of Melvin's help, the *TAP* has been able to interview the majority of the surviving Theatre Workshop members from the 1940s and early 1950s. In addition to the oral history testimony, Harry Greene, a member of the company between the years 1950 and 1955, gave the *TAP* a copy of the detailed sketch-book diary which he kept throughout his time with the group. Collectively, the interviews and images offer a rich and complex insight into Theatre Workshop's post-war history.

However, a comparison of the testimonies reveals that they also contain narrative ambiguities and discrepancies. To a certain extent such inconsistencies are inevitable, as Maurice Halbwachs comments: 'One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realises and manifests itself in individual memories'.³⁴² Narrative ambiguity is not just a problem within the *TAP* interviews; the published autobiographies of both Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl give different accounts of their involvement with Theatre Workshop.³⁴³ MacColl's biographer, Ben Harker emphasises the extent to which he read between the lines of his subject's autobiography when he comments that: 'The book's most illuminating moments are its silences'.³⁴⁴ The same observation can also be applied to Littlewood's book, which is similarly affected by chronological gaps and

³⁴¹ To date interviews have been conducted with sixteen former company members- Pearl Goodman, George Cooper, Harry Greene, Julia Jones, Josephine Smith, Jean Newlove, Marjie Lawrence, Murray Melvin, Brian Murphy, Barbara Young, Peter Rankin, Donald Sartain, Jean Gaffin, Thelma Barlow, Barry Clayton and Shirley Dynevor. Transcripts of the interviews are available at <http://www.bl.uk/theatrearchive>

³⁴² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and translated by Lewis A Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 40.

³⁴³ See Littlewood, *Joan's book*, and MacColl, *Journeyman*

³⁴⁴ Harker, *Class Act*, p. 251.

cursory references. Narrative contradictions must also be taken into account when looking at visual records of the past, as Raphael Samuel observes:

People do not simply 'consume' images in the way in which, say, they buy a bar of chocolate. As in any reading, they assimilate them as best they can to pre-existing images and narratives. The pleasure of the gaze – scopophilia as it is disparagingly called – are different in kind from those of the written word but not necessarily less taxing on historical reflection and thought.³⁴⁵

In terms of Harry Greene's drawings of Theatre Workshop, Greene is clearly the 'creator' rather than the 'consumer'. However, as Samuel points out, images are subject to the same interpretative processes as written accounts and the context in which they are produced can be historiographically important. Most of Greene's drawings were completed during, or shortly after the events they illustrate. However, they often contain information which relates to different occasions over different days, and, in a couple of instances, Greene has even produced drawings which depict incidents which pre-date his time with the company. Although the sketch book is subject to the same processes of historical distancing as both the *TAP* interviews and the aforementioned autobiographies, it remains the case that the diary is one of the few detailed accounts of Theatre Workshop which was produced close to the period in which the history was unfolding. In this chapter I will be looking at a selection of the images, not as a means of compiling an accurate chronological record, but rather as a means of exploring the way in which the Group's narrative identity began to impress itself on its members at the time.

Recent biographies on Littlewood, MacColl and Theatre Workshop demonstrate that hard facts- dates, times, names and places - can often be corroborated by comparing archival material.³⁴⁶ However, personal opinions and interpretations cannot be proven, and for this reason, 'mastery of the past is always incomplete; it can't be expected because the distortions, lies and evasions that remain are the building blocks of social and individual identities'.³⁴⁷ This chapter does not seek to disprove and thereby discount strands of narrative

³⁴⁵ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 271.

³⁴⁶ See Harker, *Class Act*, Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, Leach, *Theatre Workshop*

³⁴⁷ Confino and Fritsche, 'Introduction: Noises of the Past', in *The Work of Memory*, pp. 1-21 (p. 12).

difference. Instead it will use different accounts to re-evaluate Theatre Workshop's place within early post-war theatre history. Discrepancies and differences in opinion will be discussed in the context of what they reveal about both the company and the period in which they worked. Sections two to eight will explore the impact that different individuals and socio-cultural movements had on Theatre Workshop, whilst sections nine and ten will consider the extent to which, by 1953, the company had fulfilled the aims set out by the founder members in 1945.

2. Revolutionary tremors

When the small and cash-strapped Theatre Workshop company began in the north of England in 1945, their determination to fuse together techniques from 20th Century foreign theatre movements and older theatrical traditions was unusual. The shifts in European, Russian and American theatre that had been brought about by the work of 20th theatre practitioners like Lee Strasberg, Bertolt Brecht, Victor Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator, had made little impact on the professional British stage of the mid 1940s. By the 1950s, the rise of star American actors like Marlon Brando and Paul Newman was forcing British theatre practitioners to acknowledge the importance of method acting. However, Brecht's theory of epic theatre, and the expressionistic techniques advocated by Piscator and Meyerhold, only began to dent mainstream British theatre's love affair with naturalism in the mid 1950s. The Berliner Ensemble did not visit London until 1956, by which point Brecht had died.

In 1945, the founding members of Theatre Workshop - Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl, Gerry Raffles, Howard Goorney and Rosalie Scase - wanted to create a trained company that would be able to act, sing and dance their way through different dramatic genres and styles, ranging from Commedia dell' Arte and classical Greek theatre, to more modern concepts of Epic and Documentary Theatre. In his autobiography, Ewan MacColl described the company's vision thus:

We still believed in the necessity and the possibility of creating a popular theatre with a broad working-class base [...] Such a theatre would take all that was best from the theatres of the past and, at the same time, would create a new repertoire, incorporating all the new theatrical forms which

were expected to evolve in the course of our work. An ambitious programme!³⁴⁸

The Workshop's refusal to work within the constraints of 19th century naturalism, combined with their pledge to create socially relevant theatre for ordinary working-class people, set them apart from the mainstream theatre of the day. Julia Jones remembers being struck by the contrast between her RADA training and Littlewood's methods when she joined the company in 1948:

She [Littlewood] really did start the big revolution in the theatre, and she was doing things like *Look Back in Anger* long before *Look Back in Anger* was written. About working people, you know. The theatre was very much a middle class affair, you know 'Anyone for tennis?' and things like that! But Joan changed it [...] It really opened my eyes to a great many things, especially after the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art which was very, very conventional.³⁴⁹

Both Jones' and MacColl's comments show that Theatre Workshop committed themselves to productions of new writing, European drama, and re-interpretations of classical works, over a decade before the advent of George Devine's almost identical vision for the English Stage Company at the Royal Court in 1956. According to Philip Roberts, an ESC brochure produced two years before the company's launch stated that:

The aims were to present plays by modern authors; to present 'from time to time' a London season; to visit other festivals; to play at other venues which could not support a theatre; to tour contemporary English plays abroad; to stimulate new unity; to 'encourage the theatre of imagination and poetry as against the theatre which predominated today'.³⁵⁰

By April 1955, the ESC's artistic sub-committee had decided that the new company would produce a repertory programme consisting of, 'three original plays by British authors, a British revival, two translations, a mixed bill of short plays and

³⁴⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, p. 255.

³⁴⁹ TAP interview with Julia Jones conducted by Helen Temple (30 March 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/jones.html>> [accessed 5 May 2008]

³⁵⁰ Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28.

a classic'.³⁵¹ By this point in Theatre Workshop's history (with the exception of a 'London season') the company had been fulfilling both the ESC's original and revised aims since 1945. Harry Greene remembers initially regarding Devine's company as distinctly old-fashioned: 'They were lucky - they were able to hire top designers. But then top designers you see were West End trained. And it was still a box set'.³⁵²

3. Background: Education and Equality?

Theatre Workshop members prided themselves on the fact that the company's production aesthetic developed over time through collaborative working practices. This section will explore the impact that the group's collectivist ethos had on both the company's work and the attitudes of individual members. It will also consider how the founder members' belief in co-operative equality worked in practice.

A company report from 1946 states that the idea of the theatrical ensemble was at the heart of the training programme that the group members wanted to create:

Continuous training and education is an essential part of everyone's life in the company. This training is very extensive and includes not only physical education, dancing, voice production, singing and acting, but also prescribed study courses in history of the theatre, dramaturgy, literature, philosophy, politics and many other subjects [...] TW is run on a co-operative basis and all members receive the same salary [...] Nearly all of the members are primarily actors but in addition they all have other duties such as décor, lighting, sound, secretarial.³⁵³

The emphasis on education meant that Theatre Workshop was, in effect, formed as a theatre training school, as much as a theatre company. Actress Barbara Young, who joined the company in 1949, found the way in which the group sought to nurture the talents of its members refreshing:

³⁵¹ Roberts, *The Royal Court and the Modern Stage*, pp. 28-29.

³⁵² TAP interview with Harry Greene conducted by Kate Harris (20 September 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/greene7.html>> [accessed 20 July 2008]

³⁵³ Theatre Royal Archive, Stratford East, *Theatre Workshop pre-1953 box*, 'Company Report'. This is a four page undated, anonymous, typed document which sets out the Company's objectives and recent history. It is likely to have been written in 1946 because the document details a recent Company move to Ormesby Hall which took place in the spring of that year.

It felt it [Theatre Workshop] mattered - and you mattered, oddly enough. Unlike what happens very often when you're young and you go into the commercial theatre and you literally are chosen, sometimes, for the size you are, or the colour of your hair, or whether you match up with the man who's going to play your father [...] You have to be lucky in the commercial theatre, I think to be chosen for your ability and your talent. But Joan actually respected that, and that's what she used.³⁵⁴

The group's apparent commitment to co-operative working conditions was also in stark contrast to the hierarchical structure of most professional theatre companies of the time. As George Cooper comments, 'We were certainly a really cohesive company. There were no stars, I mean that was a dirty word to be 'a star' or anything like that'.³⁵⁵ Littlewood's personal belief in the necessity of group collaboration is made clear in an essay within one of her notebooks which she entitled 'Report on Acting'.

The more the actors bring to the play the better will be the production. But this does not operate in reverse; a production sustained only by the producer is an empty shell. No, we must stimulate each other. People say this is impossible, it is not [JL's underlining], it happens every day in a scientific laboratory, where one person's discoveries lead to another's progress. It is impossible without communal effort [...] It is the only great way to human creativeness. A company of artists creating between them something greater and finer than the efforts of any single one of them. I am convinced that we can achieve this.³⁵⁶

The sense of a community working together, and motivating one another, runs through the report, indicating that one of Littlewood's great skills as a director was her ability to mobilise other people's talents. By 1950, the working practices outlined in the report and essay of 1946 had become an ingrained part of company life and, for Harry Greene, the benefits of the ensemble approach were clear: 'we enjoyed working and playing together [...] there was a trust that grew up from this

³⁵⁴ TAP interview with Barbara Young conducted by Ruth Lumsden (4 December 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/youngb.html>> [accessed 5 May 2008]

³⁵⁵ TAP interview with George Cooper conducted by Kate Harris (17 April 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/cooper4.html>> [accessed 4 January 2008]

³⁵⁶ HRHRC, Michael Barker, collector, Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop Collection, ca. 1937-1975, Series I. Joan Littlewood, 1937-1975. Subseries A: Notebooks. Box 1, folder 3, 'Report on Acting'. The piece is undated but references to the *Flying Doctor*, *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235*, suggest that it was written circa 1946.

teamwork. And that became the essence of Joan's approach to theatre work'. The reference to the producer's 'empty shell' seems to belie the later Stratford East mythology that Theatre Workshop's production style was primarily down to Littlewood's creativity.

The collectivist ethos was also central to the way in which Ewan MacColl remembers his role as in-house playwright and musician in his autobiographical writing. Between 1945 and 1953 he wrote five new plays and revised a number of his early dramatic adaptations.³⁵⁷ However, he frequently writes about his work for the company in the first person plural 'we', rather than 'I'. His apparent willingness to relinquish individual control for the benefit of the group is shown by his reference to the creative 'ideal' as being 'the anonymous author, the anonymous song-writer'.³⁵⁸ According to MacColl, 'anonymity' could only be achieved by 'becoming part of the whole'.³⁵⁹ Barbara Young remembers the improvisational nature of Theatre Workshop's style as being central to the writing process: 'Ewan was writing- very often writing on the spot – so he could write for the people he had there and their particular abilities, and their talents'.³⁶⁰ Unusually, for a playwright, MacColl seems to have rejected the idea of the absolute text. The variation within the scripts held at the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger archive reveals that MacColl continued to re-work many of his plays after the original productions had been mounted.

However, for some members the equality that was promoted by Littlewood and MacColl was belied by the hierarchical reality of the group dynamic. Pearl Goodman, who joined the company for a year in 1945, remembered a distinct divide between the founder members and the newer recruits: 'I was annoyed quite often when they were all in one carriage – that crowd – and I was with all the

³⁵⁷ According to the chronology in Leach's, *Theatre Workshop*, MacColl wrote the following new plays between 1945-53- *Johnny Noble* (1945), *Uranium 235* (1946), *Rogue's Gallery* (1947), *The Other Animals* (1948), *Landscape with Chimneys* [also known as *Paradise Street*] (1951) *The Travellers* (1952). The following adaptations were also revised or written by him for Theatre Workshop's post-war repertoire: Molière's *The Flying Doctor*, (1945); Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* [also known as *Operation Olive Branch*] (1938); and Jaraslov Hasek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1938). See Leach, pp. xiii-xviii and p. 37.

³⁵⁸ Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 254.

³⁵⁹ Samuel, MacColl, and Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left*, p. 254.

³⁶⁰ TAP interview with Barbara Young

younger ones [...] and the ones that I wasn't learning anything from'.³⁶¹ According to Jean Newlove, who joined a year later, age and experience played a key part in the group dynamic:

Joan had flights of fancy which were sometimes in cloud cuckoo land. And Ewan would bring her down to reality. And he was the only one who had the sort of capacity to do that, that she would respect, because most of us were that much younger. You see I was eight years younger – eight or nine years younger – and my background had been very different.³⁶²

Newlove's recollection suggests that MacColl was a key figure within Theatre Workshop in the pre-Stratford East years. Her reference to 'background' also offers a reminder that MacColl and Littlewood had a shared history which went back to their involvement in the Worker's Theatre Movement in Manchester in the early 1930s. MacColl had been a member of the Manchester Clarion Players and subsequently the Red Megaphones.³⁶³ The Red Megaphones turned into Theatre of Action in 1934, then Theatre Union in 1936. Littlewood had moved to Manchester in 1934 and, alongside MacColl, became a pivotal member of the pre-war companies. The closeness of the bond was sealed when they were married during this period.

The socio-political upheaval of the 1930s and the episodic structures and didactic and declamatory techniques of agit-prop were to influence both the plays and production style of Theatre Workshop's work. The links between the pre and post-war work were further strengthened by the fact that founder Theatre Workshop members Gerry Raffles, Howard Goorney and Rosalie Scase were also members of Theatre Union. Many of the *TAP* interviewees who joined the company in the 1950s and 60s referred to the Workshop's 1930s antecedents in their interviews, suggesting that the memories and experiences of the 1930s were passed on over the years. The extent to which the pre-war past became a part of Theatre Workshop's post-war story is illustrated by the way in which events from the 1930s were re-imagined in Greene's sketchbook.

³⁶¹ *TAP* interview with Pearl Goodman

³⁶² *TAP* interview with Jean Newlove

³⁶³ This history is more fully documented in Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, Holdsworth, Joan Littlewood, Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, and MacColl, *Journeyman*



FIGURE 1: This drawing, produced in January 1953, depicts Ewan MacColl performing with the Red Megaphones. Greene's annotations around the sketch reveal it was produced from an old photograph with the help of MacColl's memories. The detailed quality of both the drawing and the annotations give the image a verisimilitude which makes it difficult to believe that it has been produced sixteen years after the event, by an artist who never saw the performance taking place.³⁶⁴

MacColl and Littlewood's pre-war experiences made them authoritative figures within Theatre Workshop. Newlove, who became MacColl's second wife, once described the early years of MacColl and Littlewood's post-war working relationship as 'a benign dictatorship'.³⁶⁵ Greene's sketchbook contains images and annotated references which reflect their creative partnership.

³⁶⁴ Harry Greene's sketchbook, drawing is reprinted here by kind permission of Harry Greene. All subsequent images in this chapter are taken from this sketchbook.

³⁶⁵ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, p. 50.

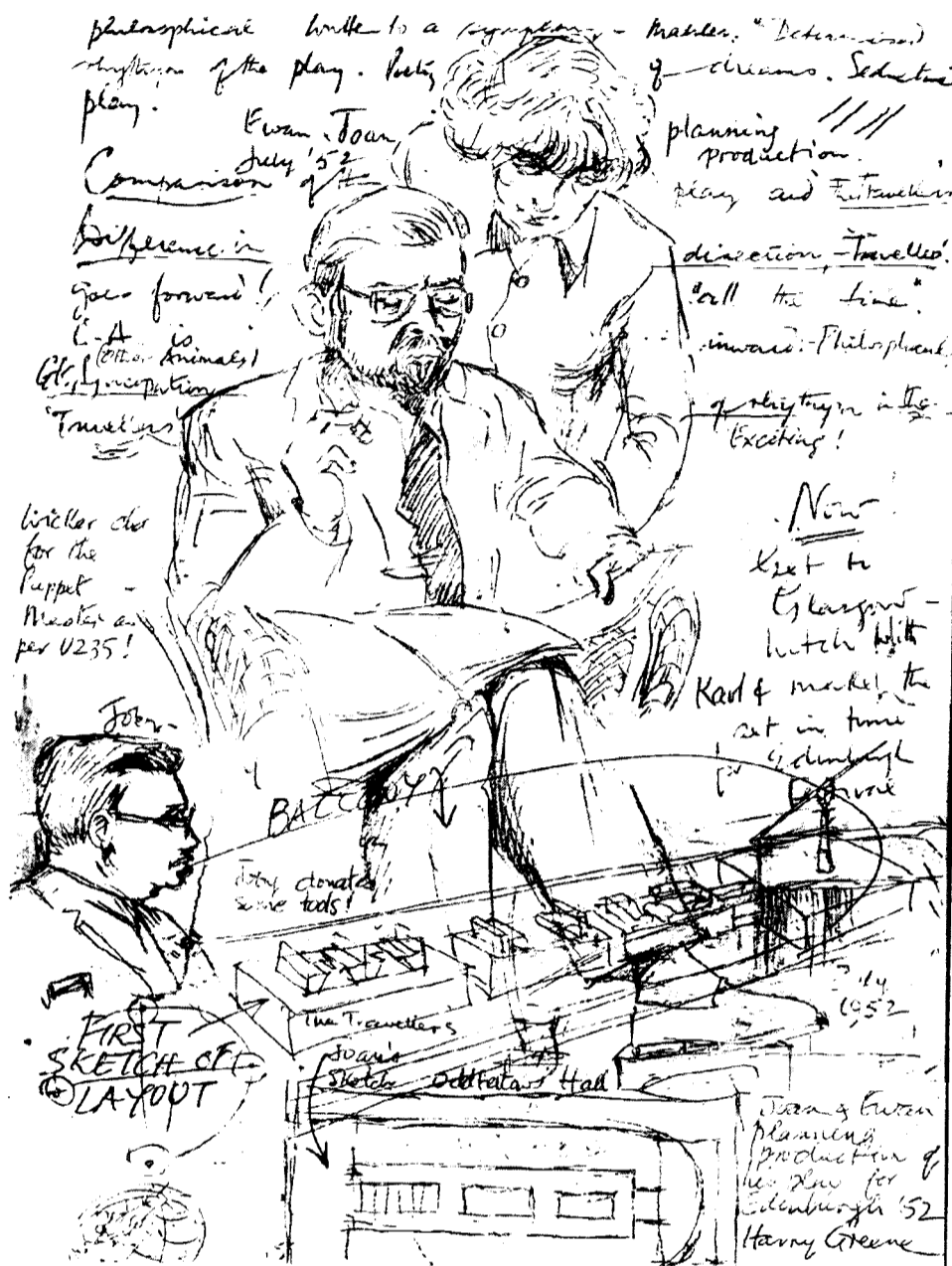


FIGURE 2: Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl working together on *The Travellers*. The bottom of the drawing shows Harry Greene's sketch of the set for this play which was designed to be performed on a traverse stage.

However, it is interesting to note that when I interviewed Greene in 2007 he remembered MacColl as Joan Littlewood's 'inspiration', but described Littlewood herself as the company's leader: '[she] devised, wrote, edited and in inverted commas, 'produced'. That was it. She was the boss'.³⁶⁶ Greene's memory illustrates Littlewood's importance within the company and seems to contradict Newlove's view of MacColl's authoritative role. Newlove's account could be said to have been shaped by her personal involvement with MacColl, however, it is also important to acknowledge that, in comparison to Greene, she had greater

³⁶⁶ TAP interview with Harry Greene

knowledge of the early years of the company, having joined three years earlier than him. Nonetheless, Greene was not the only group member who suggested that MacColl had less authority than Littlewood. When interviewees were asked about the working practices within Theatre Workshop they often identified Littlewood as the authoritative figure behind the company. Today MacColl's theatre work is largely forgotten and he is best remembered as a folk singer. Only three of his plays were ever published, and they are now out of print.

It is arguable that MacColl's reputation within the company itself was damaged, in part, because he often blurred the line between working and personal relationships. He was married three times, twice to women within Theatre Workshop, and is widely alleged to have had affairs with other company members. George Cooper highlights the tensions that were caused by MacColl's complicated personal life when he recalls the uneasy relationship between MacColl and Gerry Raffles, Theatre Workshop's business manager and Joan's lover:

We found, actually, over the years in the company that you either were a MacCollite or a Rafflite - you know, these were the two alternatives sort of thing. I was a little bit uneasy with Ewan MacColl [...] He had, in his opinion, some God given right to get any young actress in the company into bed as soon as possible – that was his thing. You know he was married to Joan pre-war? And I think Joan had got a little bit cheesed off with... you know, he was off again with some other little lady or whatever [...] Ewan never seemed to accept the fact that Gerry could influence Joan in any way in terms of what she did etc, etc. He seemed to have, in his opinion, some God given right that he could still have influence over Joan, and ignore Gerry altogether, sort of thing. So there were quite a few hot exchanges between Ewan and Gerry from time to time. I always thought Gerry – who was a very, very strong powerful man – he could have sort of picked up Ewan and flung him across the room, but he was always very calm and cool about various things. So there was always that in the background, it wasn't a sort of, 'Oh isn't everything wonderful in Theatre Workshop' or lovey-dovey by any means, there was always this undercurrent: Ewan MacColl wanting to be top dog.³⁶⁷

Raffles became Joan's lifelong partner and was one of the driving forces behind the decision to move to Stratford East, a move which, as the final section of this chapter will explore, MacColl objected to. By the time Theatre Workshop began to

³⁶⁷ TAP interview with George Cooper

receive national attention in the mid-1950s, Littlewood was Theatre Workshop's director, Raffles was the manager and MacColl had left the company. However, whilst the aforementioned issues may explain why Theatre Workshop members have a tendency to prioritise Littlewood's impact over that of MacColl's, they do not alter the fact that during the years that he was with Theatre Workshop, he was responsible for both the writing and the adaptation of the majority of plays that they produced. The following case study will explore MacColl's dramatic representations of British socio-political life and examine the extent to which both his plays and his ideas can be seen as marking an important stage in the development of Theatre Workshop's production style.

4. Ewan MacColl: Breaking the theatrical mould

In post-war history, the theatre of the 1940s is best remembered for the glamour of H.M. Tennent productions and the arrival of colourful American musicals like *Oklahoma!*. Theatre Workshop's manifesto emphasised the importance of creating a new voice: 'We want a theatre with a living language, a theatre which is not afraid of the sound of its voice and which will comment as fearlessly on Society as did Ben Jonson and Aristophanes'.³⁶⁸ Between 1945 and 1953, it fell to Ewan MacColl, in his capacity as in-house playwright, to capture that voice. In contrast to the middle-class focus of many West End playwrights, MacColl was interested in dramatising the concerns and experiences of working-class people.

His plays sought to dismantle the working-class caricatures that were prevalent in early 20th century British literature, theatre and film. In *Landscape with Chimneys* (1951), which focused on a group of people living on a working-class street, he simultaneously satirised the hierarchy of the British stage whilst offering a critique of the English class system.³⁶⁹ In a dream sequence, Jessie, a young mill worker, is dressed in evening wear and dances across the stage imagining herself as a leading lady on the arm of a well dressed young suitor. However, the

³⁶⁸ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 42.

³⁶⁹ This play was also known as *Paradise Street*

fantasy is punctured by the condescending comments of the watching stage manager:

STAGE MANAGER You're not cut out to play the leading part, Jessie. Your background is all wrong. The customers wouldn't like it. The most you can hope for is a comic-servant role, an adenoidal slattern with a cockney accent. You should know that. Don't you ever go to the theatre? But of course, you're not interested in art.³⁷⁰

MacColl believed that working-class voices should be heard in the theatre, and understood that he needed to reflect the different cadences of the spoken word if his dialogue was to achieve any quality of realism:

It was not enough to drop a few aitches in order to characterise a worker on the stage, one had to study and analyse the way people spoke, their rhythms, patterns of breathing, the way they used metaphors and similes, their use of constantly changing tenses and so on.³⁷¹

MacColl thought that the playwright's use of language was central to the rehabilitation of the contemporary theatre: 'the problem of creating a truly revolutionary theatre lay in solving the problem of creating a theatrical language out of everyday speech.'³⁷² His belief that contemporary British theatre needed voices that reflected a world beyond the voice production classes of the classically trained actor was, as with much of Theatre Workshop's early work, ahead of its time. The late 1950s and 60s ushered in a new generation of theatre, film and television writers who were celebrated for their depictions of working-class life. Arnold Wesker, in particular, garnered critical acclaim for putting regional accents centre-stage in his Trilogy. *Roots*, produced in 1959, is the best example of this as it ignores received spelling in order to replicate as closely as possible on the page the Norfolk dialect in which the characters speak. However, MacColl had done

³⁷⁰ Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive, Ruskin College Library, Oxford, (hereafter abbreviated to EMPSA), Ewan MacColl, *Landscape with Chimneys*, unpublished manuscript, p. 34. Hereafter all quotations from this play are taken from this manuscript

³⁷¹ EMPSA, MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript', p. 30.

³⁷² EMPSA, MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript', p. 30.

something similar when he updated *Operation Olive Branch* in the late 1940s, adding a deserter who spoke in the Scottish dialect, Lallans.³⁷³

MacColl saw himself as writing for, and about the working-classes, and his politics defined his attitude towards both his subject matter and the idea of theatre itself. Julia Jones went so far as to describe his plays as 'a sort of political message'.³⁷⁴ MacColl had been a member of the Manchester Young Communist League in his teens and remained sympathetic to the party's Marxist doctrines until the end of his life.³⁷⁵ The way in which he describes the Red Megaphones' aims illustrates the extent to which his post-war views on life and art were shaped by the writings of Karl Marx:

The long-term objective was to forge an efficient weapon which could be used to bring about fundamental changes in society. All of us agreed that society needed changing and all of us subscribed to the Marxist theory that such changes could only be brought about by the working-class. In the half century which has passed since that time, nothing has happened to make me alter that point of view.³⁷⁶

The impact of the pre-war years on MacColl's writing went beyond an education in Marxist theory. The socio-political upheaval of this period became the backdrop to his first post-war play, *Johnny Noble*. The life story of the young working-class protagonist, *Johnny Noble*, unfolds against a broad historical canvas which encompasses the depression of the 1930s, the Spanish civil war and the beginning and end of the Second World War. *Johnny Noble* returns from war expecting life to have changed for the better, only to find that his fellow men have been re-absorbed as anonymous cogs within the capitalist system of mass production:

...the first Roaring boy produces a whistle and blows a sharp blast on it. The chorus turn stiffly and go through the motions of clocking in. Each time one moves a bell rings. When they have all clocked in he blows another

³⁷³ EMPISA, Ewan MacColl, *Operation Olive Branch*, unpublished manuscript

³⁷⁴ TAP interview with Julia Jones

³⁷⁵ MacColl, *Journeyman*, p. 385.

³⁷⁶ Howard Goorney, Ewan MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop: Political play-scripts 1930-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

blast on the whistle. The Chorus dance a machine which the two Roaring boys accompany with the rhythmic reiterations of:

R BOYS Time! Time! Time! Time!³⁷⁷

MacColl subscribed to Marx's view that economic and social forces shape human consciousness.³⁷⁸ He explores this idea in *Johnny Noble*, and *Landscape with Chimneys*. In both plays, the wider socio-economic conditions create a chain of causality which results in personal misfortune in the lives of one or more of the working-class protagonists. The systems which constrain the communities within the plays are illustrated by episodic narrative glimpses into the lives of individual characters. In *Landscape with Chimneys* the housing shortage drives former soldier, Hugh Graham, to fight against the country he went to war for: 'this time I'm fighting for myself, my wife and kid' (p82); whilst *Johnny Noble's* struggle through unemployment and war becomes representative of that of the working-class everyman: 'I've discovered that everything worth looking at in all the towns and cities was built by people like us. I don't feel lonely any more because I know there's a man in Madrid just like me [...] There's a million like me in China' (p.57). A Greek chorus is used to link the different turns in Johnny's life to the events taking place on the world stage. They are the unemployed workers accompanying him on his search for work; the political activists imprisoned within the Nazi work camps whilst he fights the war; and, at the end of the play, the working-class manpower driving forth the post-war economy.

MacColl's agit-prop days had instilled in him a belief that theatre could be used to effect socio-political change: 'We saw ourselves as guerrillas using the theatre as a weapon against the capitalist system. That system had made it perfectly clear that the authorities regarded us as production units which could be used, then thrown away'.³⁷⁹ In line with Marxist theory, both *Johnny Noble* and

³⁷⁷ Ewan MacColl, 'Johnny Noble' *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. 35-72 (p. 64). Hereafter all quotations from this play are taken from this edition

³⁷⁸ Marx wrote that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness', see Karl Marx, 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, pp. 774-775 (p. 775).

³⁷⁹ Gorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. xxvi-xxvii

Landscape with Chimneys show working-class protagonists gaining an understanding of their place in the world and asserting their right to shape the future. The scope of MacColl's writing was broad and he was not content to critique issues which only affected his own countrymen. In *Uranium 235* (1946) MacColl's concerns moved onto the scientific advance which was increasingly shaping global politics of the period: The atomic bomb. This play charted the history of nuclear physics from the ancient Greeks to the atom bomb in order to show the powerful impact that nuclear energy could have on the post-war world. MacColl represents the development of nuclear power as a history defined by the perversion of applying scientific learning for anti-humanitarian and capitalist ends.

Uranium 235 was written in the wake of the Smythe report on Hiroshima, at the behest of company members who thought that it would be a good subject for a play.³⁸⁰ MacColl had left school at fourteen but he was an autodidact. In order to write *Uranium 235* he undertook a series of lessons on nuclear physics given by company members with scientific backgrounds. The way in which the play was conceived clearly informed the didactic style in which it is written. This was seen as no bad thing by Littlewood: '*Uranium 235* was likely to become a sermon or an illustrated lecture. Well, both forms had provided great entertainment in their day'.³⁸¹ Littlewood's comments indicate that MacColl's writing embraced a diverse range of performance traditions. He enjoyed exploring the possibilities of language and was not content to write within a single style. His scripts traverse the differing linguistic structures and constraints of verse, prose and song in the same way that they blur dramatic genres and techniques.

The cinema and Variety Theatre were also important influences on his theatrical style. MacColl had his introduction to drama through films and music hall and variety shows. He describes his early visits to the theatre as 'exceptional experiences', remembering instead the performances of street entertainers, Variety performers and film stars.³⁸² He felt that Hollywood films of the 1930s and

³⁸⁰ MacColl, *Journeyman*, p. 245.

³⁸¹ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, p. 185.

³⁸² Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xv.

40s played an important role in introducing the British public to a new genre of drama:

Film actors and actresses [...] were frequently called upon to act working-class roles and could do so convincingly. They were certainly more like the audiences who watched them than were the average hero and heroine of the English Stage play.³⁸³

At a time when thrillers, drawing-room dramas and classical revivals dominated the mainstream British Stage, Hollywood was unleashing a new genre of crime films. Movies like *The Public Enemy*, starring James Cagney, depicted a seedier side of life, well beyond the genteel middle-class vantage point of many British plays. The extent to which the cinema informed MacColl's writing can be seen in *Uranium 235* when MacColl humorously parodies the Hollywood movies of the 1930s by re-imagining the process of atomic fission in the style of a gangster film:

MIC VOICE Calling Energy 235! This is the electron guard calling Energy! A flash neutron dame known as 'Chadwick's neutron'. Alias Lola the Smasher has penetrated the outer ring and is heading for the nucleus. Signing off! Signing off!

Enter Lola. Wolf whistles from the protons.

LOLA Hello boys ... Swell set up you got here.³⁸⁴

MacColl described film as 'one of the most important artistic influences in [his] life' and it is arguable that his interest in social realism and montage techniques were informed by his exposure to the films of Sergei Eisenstein.³⁸⁵ MacColl admired the pace of film: '[it] belonged to the age of the internal combustion engine and the assembly line, the age of speed and through the use of montages, rapid cross cutting and speeding up of the projected visual images, it could reflect that speed'.³⁸⁶ His plays' episodic structures and frequent shifts in place and time emulate filmic technique.

³⁸³ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. xviii-xlix.

³⁸⁴ Ewan MacColl, 'Uranium 235', *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. 36-130, (p. 113).

³⁸⁵ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xv.

³⁸⁶ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xviii.

The colourful exuberance and variety of the music hall tradition can be traced in plays like *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235*. In both plays MacColl employed song and dance to tell the story. *Johnny Noble* was subtitled 'an episodic play with singing'. The narrators' folk songs and ballads frame the action and are integral to the way in which the audience relates to the play:

2ND NARRATOR (*Singing*)
 But back in the home town,
 Where time passes slow,
 There Mary sits waiting
 For Johnny, her Jo.

Her trust has not faded,
 Though they are apart,
 And the love has not withered
 That grows in her heart

(p. 49)

Songs are used to narrate the personal aspects of Johnny's story, creating a sense that it is still possible for a culture which places human traditions and values at its centre, to exist within society. With reference to the dance element within his plays, MacColl was greatly helped by the in-put of Jean Newlove who choreographed Theatre Workshop's plays from 1947 onwards. Over fifty years after *Uranium 235* was first produced, she gave a vivid description of the way in which she choreographed MacColl's atomic explosion using little more than human physicality:

I was the Lola the Smasher that went over the line that blew the thing apart. There was Alpha Particle, and there were protons and neutrons [...] You've got a whole pile of these people altogether and there's a leg sticking up there, and they're all intertwined with each other. I mean I can see Harry Corbett's face sticking out somewhere, and somebody else's leg sticking out somewhere else [...] And then they'd be a loud bang and they exploded. Now it was bad enough to get into those very difficult positions, but to have an orchestra that suddenly explodes, and then you have to explode on the dot – it's not 'oh I've got to get my leg out before I can leap, you know' [...] But they did, because it was expected of them they did it.

And it was very exciting because with the lighting and the sound, and then the next movement you see people leaping high in different directions.³⁸⁷

Newlove's memory demonstrates that Theatre Workshop's production style relied on company actors who were highly trained in a variety of dramatic techniques. Newlove, herself came to Theatre Workshop as a trained dancer who had worked under Austro-Hungarian choreographer Rudolf Laban, who is today widely recognised as one of the founders of modern dance. The knowledge and experiences that Newlove brought to Theatre Workshop provide just one of many examples of the way in which the work of foreign theatre practitioners and worldwide theatre movements influenced the group's evolving production aesthetic. The following sections will explore how some of these different theories were adopted and employed by Theatre Workshop members.

5. Introducing foreign influences

In the 1930s MacColl and Littlewood had kept abreast of foreign Theatre Movements through their Workers' Theatre Movement connections to Germany, the US and the Soviet Union.³⁸⁸ They also read Theatre Magazines like *Theatre Arts Monthly* and *New Theatre* which contained information about new directions in theatre.³⁸⁹ MacColl and Littlewood were avid readers, and both their autobiographies make reference to the time that they spent ploughing through plays and theatre history books in Manchester Central Library. According to MacColl, Theatre of Action had been aware of the work of Meyerhold, Vachtangov and Stanislavski in the early 1930s.³⁹⁰ They had also been in written contact with the Workers Laboratory Theatre in New York.³⁹¹ MacColl acknowledged the extent to which Leon Moussinac's 1931 book, *New Movement in the Theatre*, informed his early understanding of contemporary European, Russian and American Theatre: 'a veritable treasure trove of concepts and ideas. It was through

³⁸⁷ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

³⁸⁸ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xxxiv.

³⁸⁹ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xxxiv.

³⁹⁰ Samuel, MacColl, and Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left*, p. 243.

³⁹¹ Samuel, MacColl, and Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left*, p. 245.

Moussinac's book that we had our first real introduction to Meyerhold's Theatre'.³⁹² Derek Paget argues that *New Movement in the Theatre* went on to influence the evolution of Theatre Workshop's post-war work: 'Littlewood, MacColl et al. may never have seen a groundbreaking European production, but they had an unparalleled theoretical and practical grasp of the ideas of Meyerhold, Brecht, and Piscator – acquired to a considerable extent through Moussinac's book'.³⁹³

5.1. Adolphe Appia

Moussinac's book was not the only text to shape Theatre Workshop's production aesthetic. Pre-war Theatre Union's approach to lighting and set design had been informed by a library book on the revolutionary Swiss theatre designer Adolphe Appia, and in the post-war years Theatre Workshop continued to employ his ideas.³⁹⁴ Appia rejected the two dimensional backcloth sets of the naturalistic theatre. His view that the theatre needed a three dimensional stage capable of fusing together movement, space and light was, as MacColl recorded, central to Theatre Workshop's set designs:

As far as settings were concerned we would continue to develop the ideas we had been exploring in the years before the war. We still found the idea of naturalistic theatre unattractive and felt that lighting and sound could do far more to help an actor and an audience to imagine this or that scene than any amount of furniture and painted backcloths.³⁹⁵

The fact that Theatre Workshop was a touring company with no Arts Council subsidy, and very little financial backing beyond that of the group members themselves, meant that it would have been impractical for them to adopt the more elaborate stage designs used in the better funded repertory theatres and the West End. The designs for Theatre Workshop's early post-war productions were often minimalist. Most of their plays from this period were staged on rostra and

³⁹² Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xxxiv.

³⁹³ Derek Paget, 'Theatre Workshop, Moussinac, and the European Connection', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XI (1995), 211-224 (p. 223).

³⁹⁴ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xxxi.

³⁹⁵ EMPSA, Ewan MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript', p. 26.

'transitions in time and space were made by sound, light and sung narrative' as opposed to set changes.³⁹⁶

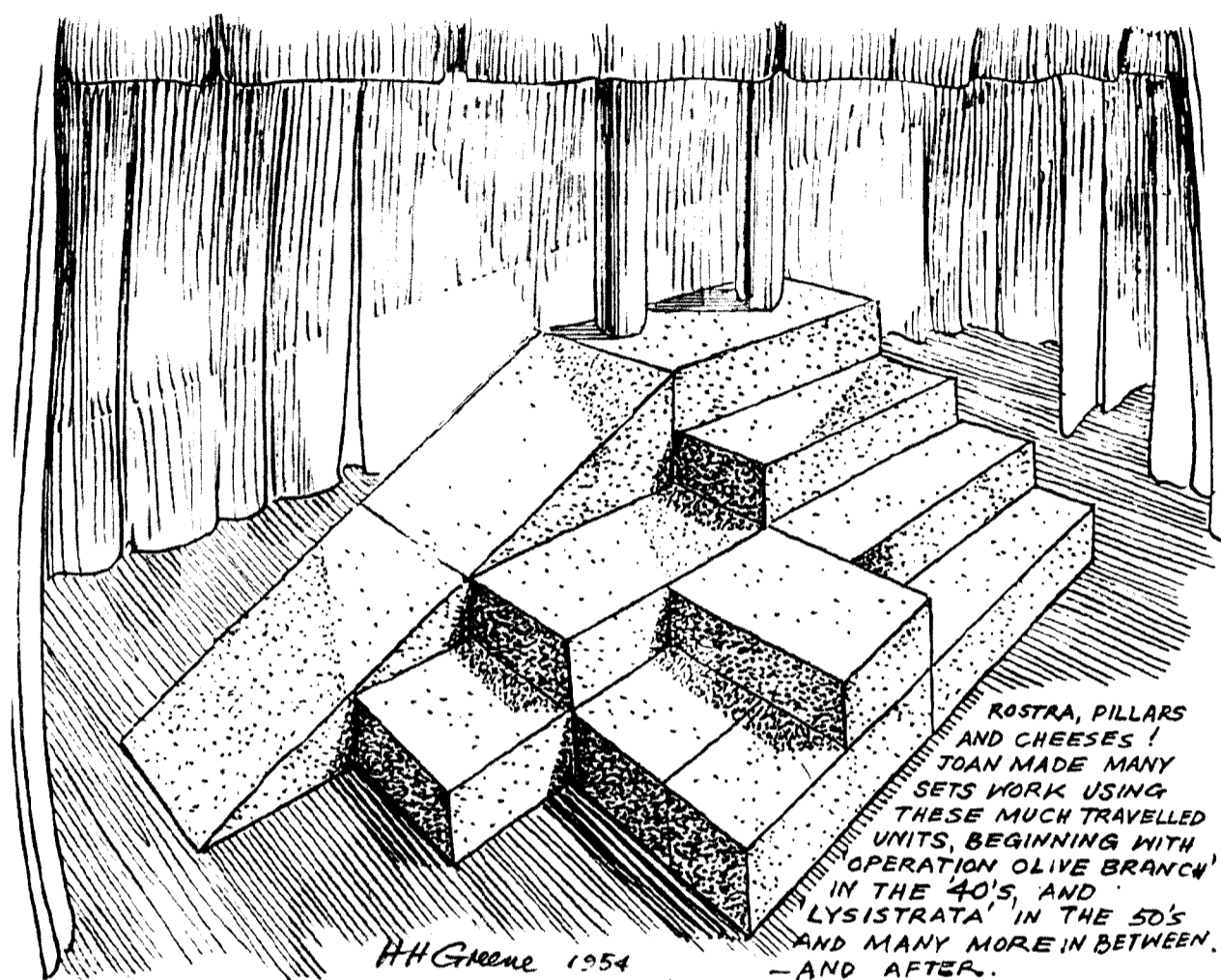


FIGURE 3: Harry Greene's sketch of the rostra that Theatre Workshop used in many of their productions.

Working on a limited budget forced the company to be creative. On his first visit to see *Uranium 235*, Harry Greene recalls being struck by the aesthetic contrast between Theatre Workshop's style and his previous experiences of theatre:

John Bury, an extremely clever lighting technician [...] would create a scene, not with props, not with staging or furniture and so on, but with lighting. There was no furniture, only props that each of the actors brought on. And this...all of this, of course thrilled me. I'd been brought up with a

³⁹⁶ Howard Goorney describing the staging of *Johnny Noble* in Goorney, MacColl, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 42.

straight set, painted or wall-papered. And we, the audience were the fourth wall of the room- dull [...] this was different, totally different, and for me as a designer, illustrator, painter, what I saw then was something that excited me beyond measure.³⁹⁷

As Greene's recollection suggests, the simple visual appearance of Theatre Workshop's plays was belied by the complexity of the technical side of the productions. This is illustrated by Ewan MacColl's description of stage design for *Johnny Noble*: 'We finished up with a fifty-nine and a half minute play with 180 odd lighting cues, nearly 200 sound cues, and a bank of six turntables'.³⁹⁸ Greene's sketches also reflect the fact that although the company often worked with minimalist sets, attention to detail was lavished on the scenery and props that were used.

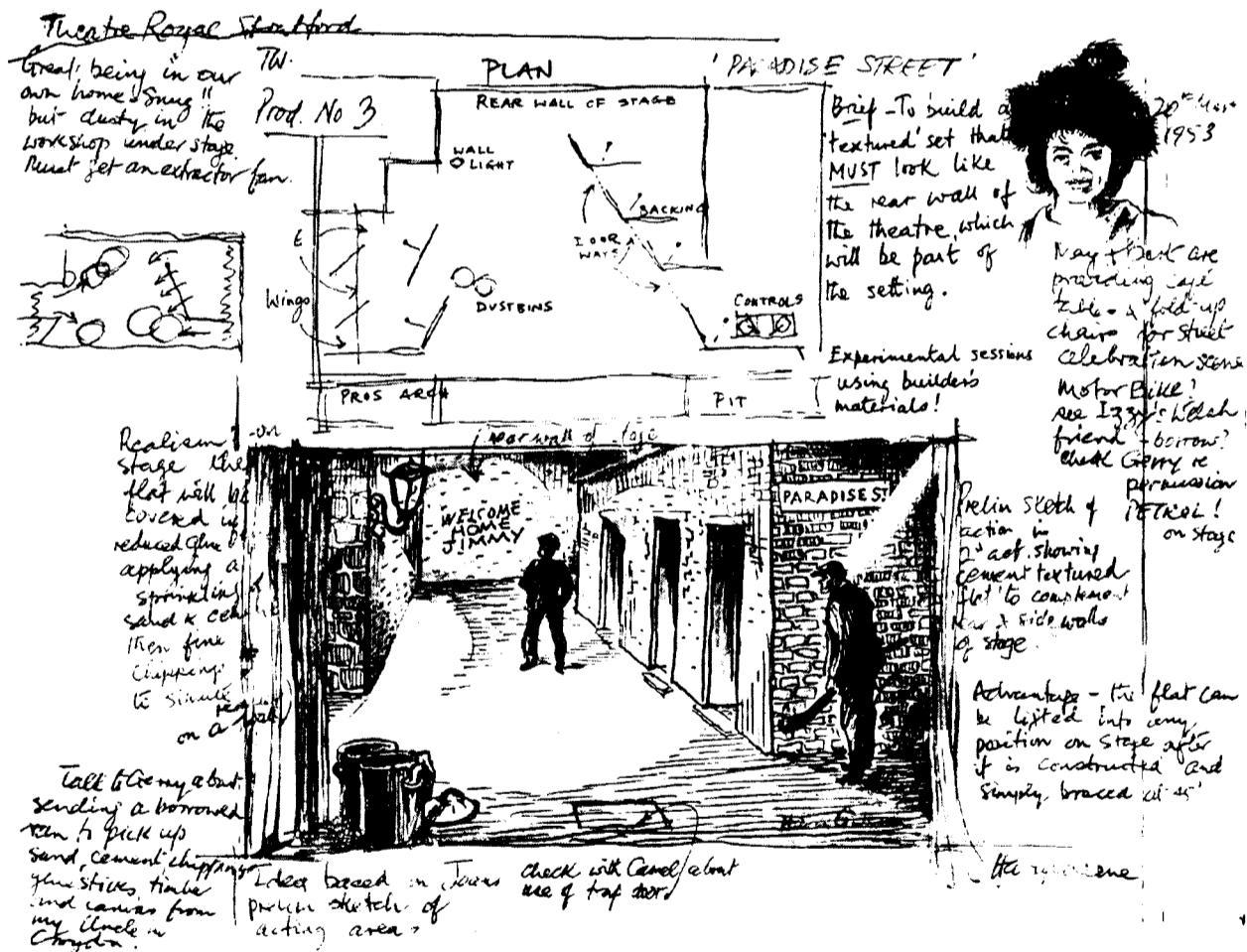


FIGURE 4: Harry Greene's design for *Landscape with Chimneys*, also known as *Paradise Street*.

³⁹⁷ TAP interview with Harry Greene

³⁹⁸ EMPSA, 'Transcript of interview with Ewan MacColl talking about his work in theatre and radio', undated, marked as 'Tape 1'

When I interviewed Greene, he gave a detailed description of his set design for *Landscape with Chimneys*:

For this particular play, all I did was one flat, as we call it, in perspective. From the proscenium arch, you had this one flat at an angle from the proscenium arch, at about 30 degrees back to the back wall. So you saw part of the back wall, but this flat was probably about 15 feet high at the proscenium arch end, and going back to about 10 feet. Built, as it were, in perspective which gave the effect from the stalls, or from the auditorium, that you were looking at a long street. And then I cut into the flat doorways – all in perspective – and one window each. And then we laid the flat on stage, painted it with what was then called Unibond, which is a very strong adhesive, and then sprinkled sand on it, and then aggregate – like pebbles. So we created what looked like a real wall. That was allowed to dry over night, and propped up and then braces on the back. And it looked, with the lighting on it, like a real street, similar to the back wall of the theatre.³⁹⁹

Theatre Workshop became known for their innovative staging and the creative brilliance of their main lighting designer, John Bury, at Stratford East. However, as Harry Greene's recollections and sketches demonstrate the same lighting and staging techniques were in evidence well before the move to a permanent base.

5.2. Laban and the dancing theatre company

In 1946 Littlewood introduced the company to the European dancer and theorist, Rudolf Laban, who had a movement school in Manchester at that time. Jean Newlove joined Theatre Workshop shortly afterwards and thereafter Laban's theories of movement became a central part of the company's training. George Cooper, who met and worked with Laban in the early days of Theatre Workshop, describes how the latter's systems of movement informed his own acting style:

...he used to talk [...] about the door plane [vertical movements] [...] the table plane [horizontal movements], and all these things about the room. He developed a system of writing down movement so you could get a script with a notation thing which enabled you to interpret it and say, 'Oh I see, yes, you stick your left leg there [...] you put your arm up there [...] Laban invented – I think that's the proper word – this icosahedron which he later found out is a crystal [...] And what it provided; if you think of those geodesic domes; it made little points where you could [...] say, 'Oh that joint

³⁹⁹ TAP interview with Harry Greene

there, that's the door plane [...]. In other words it provided a reference map for all his movement.⁴⁰⁰

Littlewood constructed a life size model of Laban's icosahedron for her actors to practice in.⁴⁰¹ According to Cooper, the company spent 'half an hour every morning' doing Laban movement exercises, under the tutelage of Jean Newlove.⁴⁰² Cooper's comments illustrate the creative influence that the young choreographer had within the company. Newlove's training gave her the authority to forge her own theatrical aesthetic, as she comments herself:

I was left to do my movement entirely on my own. I was never ever given any [guidelines] [...] I was completely free to do what I wanted, which is great. And I would work with Joan and if she would be doing something I would just ... well we got to know each other so well working like this that I would say to her 'look if so and so did this', you know, and she would take it up, and she would try it out [...] She was willing to learn because she wanted to learn about Laban too.⁴⁰³

Newlove's dance classes encouraged Theatre Workshop actors to focus on how they moved in the space around them and how, in turn, their movements could help to create their on-stage situation and character. The movement work that began in the 1940s remained integral to the company's later work at Stratford East. In a recent lecture to undergraduate students at Sheffield University, Murray Melvin, who joined the company in the late 50s, described how Laban training was used in Theatre Royal productions:

With Joan you very rarely touched [...] on stage. [Melvin gesticulates] You have your space [...] you have got your square and I have got my square. There is that moment of tension.[...] Now if you went through [gestures towards the imaginary wall defining his individual space] I'd either stab you, or punch you, or kiss you, if it was a love scene. But I very, very rarely went through your wall.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁰ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴⁰¹ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, p. 88.

⁴⁰² TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴⁰³ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

⁴⁰⁴ Unpublished Interview and Lecture with Murray Melvin conducted by Dominic Shellard at the University of Sheffield (2007 specific date unknown)

Melvin's recollection suggests the extent to which the fluid style of stage movement for which the company was critically praised in the 1950s and 60s, was reliant on the complex movement training in which Jean Newlove had been training group members since the mid-1940s.

5.3. A Brechtian influence?

In his writing on Theatre, MacColl makes little reference to Brecht, or the influence his work may have had on Theatre Workshop. However, according to Littlewood, MacColl had been aware of the German playwright's work from the early 1930s: 'He had the only typed copies of Brecht's early plays, in German. It was to be another twenty years before Ken Tynan discovered Brecht for readers of the *Observer*'.⁴⁰⁵ Like Brecht, Theatre Workshop saw themselves as working against the naturalistic production styles which dominated the Stage, and this attitude informed the dramatic construction of many of MacColl's plays: 'we said but we're against the theatre of illusions so we must initiate the audience into the techniques we are using. We must make it absolutely clear that there is no illusion here'.⁴⁰⁶

There is an obvious correlation between MacColl's ambitions and Brecht's theory of epic theatre. Like Brecht, MacColl uses external narrative devices to remind the spectators of their position as an audience watching a piece of dramatic action. *Johnny Noble*, *Landscape with Chimneys*, and *Uranium 235*, all employ narrator figures who offer commentary on the stage action in the form of song or dialogue. MacColl also achieved an 'alienation' effect through a technique that he referred to as 'acting-out episodes': 'These were scenes within scenes in which actors were called upon to step out of a role they were playing in order to assume a completely different role'.⁴⁰⁷ This device is central to the structure of *Uranium 235* in which the performers frequently step in and out of different historical time frames and characterisations. In some places they play the actors who are supposedly creating the scene before the audience:

⁴⁰⁵ In her autobiography Littlewood writes that MacColl had met Brecht. However, MacColl's biographer, Ben Harker argues that MacColl made this meeting up. See Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, p. 89, and Harker, *Class Act*, p. 41.

⁴⁰⁶ EMPSA 'Transcript of interview with Ewan MacColl talking about his work in theatre and radio', undated, marked on transcript as 'Tape 1'

⁴⁰⁷ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xlvi.

BUSINESSMAN: This jumping about from one character to another is bloody confusing. One of these performances I'm going to come on in the Greek scene dressed as a Manchester business man. That'd shake 'em!' (p. 94).

Audience attention is frequently drawn to the use of theatrical devices in MacColl's plays. The opening scene of *Landscape with Chimneys* provides an example of the way in which MacColl sought to dispense with the naturalistic theatre:

The curtains rise on an unlit stage on which only the merest suggestion of a set is visible. The stage manager is discovered checking wing openings. This done, he looks up at the lights.

STAGE MANAGER Lights all checked?

ELECTRICIAN All except the front of house lights. I'll bring them up.

The front of house spots are faded up

STAGE M They're a bit gaudy aren't they?

ELECTRICIAN It's meant to be sunshine.

STAGE M The sun never shines as bright as that in this street. This is an Industrial town and smoke pollution is about 75 percent.

(p. 3)

The play's theatricality is apparent from its beginning and, as the action unfolds, the stage manager becomes a narrator-like-figure who frequently interrupts scenes to make comments on the characters' behaviour and the passing of time. *Johnny Noble* adopts a similarly self consciously theatrical structure, this time opening with two narrators who go on to guide the audience throughout the rest of the play:

1st NARRATOR (*Singing*) Here is a stage –

2nd NARRATOR (*Speaking*) A platform twenty-five feet by fifteen.

(p. 36)

The effect of this technique fits in with Brecht's theory and practice of epic theatre which argues that the audience should be encouraged to become critical observers rather than unthinking spectators: '[Epic theatre] appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things'.⁴⁰⁸ MacColl subscribed to Brecht's belief that the theatre should arouse the audience's 'capacity for action'.⁴⁰⁹ In *Johnny Noble* the protagonist returns from fighting in the Second World War to discover that wealth and power remain with the lucky few and the life of the ordinary working man is still subject to pre-war inequalities:

MAN It's time you remembered why the war was fought. There's job to be done, Johnny.

JOHNNY But what can I do?

MAN You've two hands and a brain and there's plenty of you. Take the world in your hands, Johnny, and wipe it clean. It's up to you Johnny.

(p. 66)

The ending of *Johnny Noble* is hopeful: the protagonist rallies the Chorus to action, suggesting that the oppressed are going to be able to take decisive action against their oppressors and make changes. MacColl took the impetus for individual action one step further in his next play, *Uranium 235*, by using the ending to suggest that the onus for change rested with the audience watching the play, rather than the characters on the stage. In the final scene the audience is presented with a stark choice; the development of nuclear science for war, or a concerted attempt to promote it as a force for peace.

ENERGY There are two roads. It is for you to choose and me to follow.

The Crowd Hesitates

Which is it to be?

⁴⁰⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. by John Willet (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 23.

⁴⁰⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 37.

ALL Where are you going?

(p. 126)⁴¹⁰

Ultimately, the extent to which MacColl and Theatre Workshop's techniques were informed by their knowledge of Brecht will probably never be known. It is arguable that the politics and production aesthetic of the plays could equally have been the result of MacColl and Littlewood's interest in and experience of the Worker's Theatre Movement. However, it remains the case that MacColl was one of the first British playwrights to employ the techniques of epic theatre within his plays. This was over a decade before the importance of Brecht began to be recognised by the mainstream commercial theatre.

5.4. Meyerhold and 'The Stylised Theatre'

Meyerhold's idea of 'The Stylized theatre' fitted in with MacColl's and Littlewood's desire to move away from what they perceived as the staid naturalism of the established Theatre.⁴¹¹ Theatre Workshop was particularly interested in Meyerhold's work on the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In a typed manuscript within his archive, MacColl refers to the inspiration provided by the traditions of the Italian theatre: 'we had all fallen in love with the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the Andreini's had become heroes in our book'.⁴¹² Meyerhold held the *Commedia dell'Arte* up as an example of the true theatre of improvisation. Translated literally the name means 'Comedy of the artists'. However, the tradition's origins are referenced in one of its other names; 'commedia improvviso'. *Commedia dell'Arte* utilised masked performance, and as a result the actors' use of movement and gesture was central to the creation of meaning. Plays were created around the personalities and

⁴¹⁰ When a selection of his early plays were gathered together for *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, MacColl added an alternative ending to *Uranium 235* which reflected the change in his political stance on nuclear power. MacColl's decision to re-work this play was in keeping with the way in which Theatre Workshop revised play texts over the course of rehearsals and revivals to reflect socio-cultural changes. The new ending suggested that nuclear energy was causing damage to human life and the environment and condemned the spread of nuclear reactors in Britain. See Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. 126-130.

⁴¹¹ Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. by Edward Braun (London: Methuen, 1969; repr. 1991, 1998), p. 58.

⁴¹² EMPSA, MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript', p. 32.

behaviour of a series of stock characters, each of whom would have an individually recognisable style of movement in the same way that they had an individual mask, or style of make-up and costume. These ideas exerted a strong influence on *The Flying Doctor*, which was produced, with *Johnny Noble*, as part of Theatre Workshop's opening double bill in 1945. MacColl saw this production as an important marker in Theatre Workshop's development:

In many ways *The Flying Doctor* became the model for a style of acting which became associated in the mind of audiences with Theatre Workshop. It was highly stylised, full of movement (often grotesque movement) and attempt [sic] to create potent caricatures rather than characters. The Commedia dell' arte type script, of course, lent itself to this treatment.⁴¹³

Littlewood's appraisal was rather less fulsome but it does give a good sense of both how the production was put together and the different dramatic influences that fed into it: 'Molière with a touch of *Il Medico Volante* and some of his own jokes thrown in, Marx Brothers' style. With some musical-box tunes and a ballet it would pass a merry hour'.⁴¹⁴ Over sixty years later Pearl Goodman remembers the physicality of the production: 'it had a dance prologue which was lovely. All the characters came in and did a very slow motion dance, which [...] directed you into the type of play it was'.⁴¹⁵

5.5. Stanislavski

Of all the Foreign Theatre Practitioners who influenced the Theatre Workshop, it was arguably Stanislavski's theories on acting which most obviously shaped Littlewood's views on direction. In one of her theatre notebooks from the period she makes concise notes on his writing which give an idea as to the elements of the system which she felt were most applicable to her own work. The following comments appeared under the heading 'notes on imagination from Stanislavski':

There is no such thing as actuality on the stage- to act is the product of imagination. The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the

⁴¹³ EMPSA, MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript' p. 34.

⁴¹⁴ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, p. 158.

⁴¹⁵ TAP interview with Pearl Goodman

play into a theatrical reality- in the process IMAGINATION [JL's capitalization] plays by far the greatest part⁴¹⁶

The extent to which Littlewood incorporated Stanislavski's System into her rigorous training programme can be seen in one of the structured rehearsal plans within her notebooks:

Monday	Voice Production Classes 6.30-7.45 Drill 7.45-8.30 Sonnets 8.30-10.00
Tuesday	Stanislavski units and objectives 7.00-7.45 Mime to music 'Little Town Gal'
Wednesday	Two chapters on Catherine de Medici R & J Act II Sc IV Units and Objectives Act II Sc IV " "
Thursday	Agamemnon and Aeschylus R & J Balcony Scene- Clare Howard Act III Sc IV Have units and objectives worked out. ⁴¹⁷

This plan is dated as week beginning December 2nd and there is unfortunately no accompanying year. Dating the notes within Littlewood's notebooks is difficult as they contain different sections of writing which don't always feature a traceable reference to a production or person. In *Theatre Workshop*, Robert Leach argues that it refers to Theatre Union rehearsal/ training pre-war. However, Stanislavski's techniques continued to inform the way she directed Theatre Workshop in the early post-war years, as Harry Greene, who joined the company in 1950 points out: 'Her approach to acting derived from her own beliefs and those of Stanislavski. She often said that the notion that drew us together was the exploration of a method of work'.⁴¹⁸

Littlewood's rejection of 19th century naturalism was as much about experimenting with acting methods, as it was about forging a new style of writing and staging, and the actor was expected to play an important role within that. Greene recalls the typical beginning of the rehearsal process: 'She never ever came to first rehearsals with a script. She'd allow us to improvise the entire scene.

⁴¹⁶ HRHRC, Series I. Joan Littlewood, 1937-1975 Sub-series A: Notebooks. Box 1, folder 6

⁴¹⁷ HRHRC, Joan Littlewood. Series I. Joan Littlewood, 1937-1975. Subseries A: Notebooks. Box 1, folder 3

⁴¹⁸ Harry Greene, *My Theatre Workshop Story* (Unpublished manuscript given to author by Harry Greene)

We were encouraged to behave as real people'.⁴¹⁹ The idea of actor as auteur can also be related to Meyerhold's theories about improvisation:

The actor may get bored with perfecting his craft in order to perform in outdated plays; soon he will want not only to act but to compose for himself as well. Then at last we shall see the re-birth of the theatre of improvisation.⁴²⁰

Littlewood continued to believe that improvisation was central to the creation of a vital new theatre after the move to Stratford East. In a radio interview in 1959 she outlines her thoughts on the rehearsal/writing process:

I believe very much in a theatre of actor/artists. I feel that playwrights have got to be in the theatre and if they are there working with the fabric and problem of theatre every day, perhaps out of the type of play we put on; we've put on about four now, which have used a great deal of improvisation in them; we shall get better plays, plays related to theatre, related to actors working, as well as to life.⁴²¹

The improvisational style of working that evolved in the pre- and early post-war years remained central to the development of some of Theatre Workshop's most successful Stratford East productions, notably Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*. In the case of both of these plays, debates continue to rage about how much of the final text was written by the author and how much was created by Littlewood's company. Ewan MacColl's willingness to continually re-write and re-shape his work at the behest of company members, arguably set a precedent, which later writers, who were not long serving group members, found more difficult to deal with, as Jean Newlove comments: 'We'd obviously been used to Ewan's perfectly crafted playwriting. And because he was an actor in the company he wouldn't mind if things needed changing a little bit'.⁴²²

⁴¹⁹ Greene, 'My Theatre Workshop Story'

⁴²⁰ Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 127.

⁴²¹ EMPFA, BBC recording on tape, *The Story of Theatre Workshop Presented by Howard Goomey*, Presented by Stanley Williams: BBC Radio 4, January 1995. Revised version of a programme first heard in 1978.

⁴²² TAP interview with Jean Newlove

6. Forging a documentary aesthetic: Radio influences

Littlewood and MacColl's interest in improvisation and non-naturalistic performance styles ran alongside a strong interest and working background in documentary. The blurry boundary between fact and fiction was central to both the form and content of MacColl's plays, and the medium of radio played a significant role in the development of Theatre Workshop's unique style of 'documentary drama'.

The use of a disembodied 'microphone voice' was one of the stylistic devices used in Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop plays which can be traced back to MacColl and Littlewood's work in regional BBC radio documentary. In pre-war plays like *Last Edition*, MacColl used Microphone voices to create breaks in naturalistic scenes with newsroom style announcements of facts and figures. This technique was also used in early post-war plays like *Johnny Noble*:

JOHNNY What's wrong with the world? What's wrong with me? Don't people need clothes and shoes and houses any more? Don't they need fish out of the sea and coal out of the earth?

MIC VOICE The unemployment figures can now be said to be stabilised at two and a half million. No immediate deterioration is expected.

The Chorus begins to march, marking time

MIC VOICE Two hundred Scottish hunger marchers set out from Glasgow.

(p. 45)

The microphone announcement moves the scene swiftly from the personal viewpoint to the public, whilst the news broadcast style of such interjections gives the play a documentary feel. Pre-war, both MacColl and Littlewood had worked on radio documentary feature programmes about the north of England for the Manchester controller of features, Archie Harding and his assistant, the producer and poet, D. G. Bridson. Bridson and Harding shared a belief in the importance of hearing the voices and viewpoints of working-class people on the radio. George Cooper remembers listening to one of Littlewood's features years later when he was working on a post-war BBC radio production of *Mary Barton*:

A lot of the actors were not really familiar with the Lancashire cotton town accent. So they turned up from somewhere in the BBC records, part of her [Joan Littlewood's] production about the cotton industry, which she'd done for the BBC, I think in the 1930s. And it was fascinating to hear because she was interviewing cotton workers, you know getting them to be relaxed and in front of the microphone – there was no vision of course, no television – there was just the microphone. And they were using it to say, 'now this is how you get'... you know it's that very distinctive Lancashire [puts on Lancashire accent] 'no don't put it down th'er' this sort of thing like that.⁴²³

This memory provides an interesting insight into the formative years of Littlewood's career as a director. It also suggests the link between the early radio work, and Littlewood and MacColl's determination to present theatre plays which put the lives of ordinary people on the stage. Harding and Bridson's early feature programmes about working-class life occupy the same blurry boundary between real and re-created actuality, as the drama documentaries that were made by the BBC television drama department in the 1940s and 50s:

The BBC insisted that there had to be a script [...] Producer writers like Bridson and Dillon would go out and talk to potential contributors and take notes of their views. They would then return to the studio and write a script composed from these notes, which the contributors would then have to enact in the studio at the time of the broadcast.⁴²⁴

Harding's programmes took on the narrative techniques of drama in order to overcome the difficulties of location recording, and meet with the requirements of the BBC. MacColl and Littlewood's 1930s radio documentary experience can be seen as influencing the development of Theatre Workshop's dramatic output, in terms of both its form and content. The idea of a narrative frame, in which the voice of a narrator or presenter creates a link between a series of different and sometimes disparate individual voices, was central to the dramatic structures of both *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235*. In the former play, MacColl recalls the way in which Theatre Workshop used documentary technique to evolve their own style of theatrical drama documentary:

⁴²³ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴²⁴ Ian Rodger, *Radio Drama* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 45.

A very stodgy affair it was at first. The first treatment of the thing was straight forward factual accounting and then we began to say but all these other ideas of ours, these ideas of synthesising dance and song and acting, they are not being exploited at all [...] It's not enough we said to have a chunk of documentary kind of acting followed by another song [...] The thing is artificially joined together. Let us see if we can't make it completely fluid. A fluid production which [sic] the audience are never conscious of whether you are singing or whether you are using instrumental music, or whether you are dancing or whether you are acting.⁴²⁵

MacColl's attitude towards what he described as 'documentary techniques' underlines the extent to which early post-war practitioners in radio, television and theatre regarded 'documentary drama' as a flexible genre that didn't necessarily have to use real people, places, or even, in the case of Theatre Workshop's plays, realistic techniques, to depict real life.⁴²⁶ Theatre Workshop broke naturalist boundaries through their imaginative recreations of historical and contemporaneous reality and, in doing so, they reflected Brecht's comments in 'The Popular and the Realistic': 'In the theatre reality can be presented in a factual or a fantastic form. The actors can do without (or with the minimum of) makeup, appearing 'natural', and the whole thing can be a fake; they can wear grotesque masks and represent the truth'.

Johnny Noble, like *Uranium 235*, had a basis in factual reality. MacColl refers to a newspaper cutting which inspired *Johnny Noble*: 'a woman had taken a young man to court because he had run away with her daughter and she had nothing against the boy, but she had with his occupation [Johnny Noble is a fisherman], Her husband had been drowned at sea.'⁴²⁷ With the exception of the court, this is a more or less accurate summary of how MacColl began the play. Littlewood's recollection of her own influence on the play's genesis suggests how the sequence in which Johnny is bombed at sea may also have been based on a real story:

⁴²⁵ EMPSA, 'Transcript of interview with Ewan MacColl talking about his work in theatre and radio', undated, marked on transcript as 'Tape 1'

⁴²⁶ EMPSA, 'Transcript of interview with Ewan MacColl', undated, marked as 'Tape 1'

⁴²⁷ EMPSA, 'Transcript of interview with Ewan MacColl', undated, marked as 'Tape 1'

I had some good material collected from Hull during the War, including the story of a merchant ship which survived an attack by Nazi war planes. Add a simple human story, set it against the traditional music of the North-East with some new songs of Jimmy's [Ewan MacColl] and we'd have a winner.⁴²⁸

This description emphasises the extent to which Littlewood drew on her earlier radio documentary work. Ben Harker argues that two of Littlewood's programmes in particular - *Sailors Wives* (1941) and *Women at War* (1944) - provided material for *Johnny Noble*.⁴²⁹ Littlewood's description also suggests the extent to which she may have helped to shape MacColl's writing. As a director she often used real-life experiences to shape elements of performance within a production. David Scase recalls how Littlewood used his memories of his life as a merchant seaman during the war to develop the scenes in which Johnny Noble is on a war ship:

Five men and a gun, fighting off an attack on their convoy. Joan asked me to show what each member of the gun crew did. By repeating the movements over and over again, the orders and the shouts, Joan actually created a ballet, a dance sequence out of it.⁴³⁰

These anecdotes reflect Littlewood's ability to take small elements of narrative and envisage a theatrical whole. This skill was crucial to the success of later plays like Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*, which began life as little more than a series of anecdotes and songs, as told by the play's frequently drunk author.

7. Forging a documentary aesthetic: Theatrical influences

Theatre Workshop's documentary aesthetic also drew from 20th century Theatre. An important influence came from 'Living Newspapers'. The idea of creating a story from different pieces of narrative was something that Littlewood and MacColl had worked on in plays like *Last Edition*. This play dealt with the rise of fascism. It was based on the Living Newspaper productions which had been developed by experimental theatres in the Soviet Union in the late 1910s, and had subsequently spread to America and Britain in the 1930s. 'Living Newspapers' were created by

⁴²⁸ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, p. 159.

⁴²⁹ Harker, *Class Act*, p. 71, p. 278.

⁴³⁰ Goorney, MacColl, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, pp. 45-46.

adapting newspaper cuttings into theatrical pieces. The performers devised improvisations that depicted current events and social problems. There was a strong didactic element in order to suggest how the situations might be rectified, as John Casson observes: 'The aim was propaganda: to incorporate the individual in the greater good of the mass movement.'⁴³¹ MacColl's and Littlewood's interest in *Living Newspapers*, and the 1930s work on *Last Edition*, influenced the concept of 'Documentary Theatre' that was to evolve in the Theatre Workshop years. As MacColl writes:

We were beginning to learn that inside the documentary form everything didn't have to be in the same dimension [...] We began to think of seeing things, documentary as not merely a chronological sequence of events dealt with in any consistent form but using, exaggerating the possible inconsistencies that might be inherent in a situation. It was this kind of play, *Last Edition*, that was really to inform most of the early work of Theatre Workshop.⁴³²

In 1963, Theatre Workshop returned to the drama documentary format that MacColl had helped to develop with *Oh What a Lovely War*, one of the company's most celebrated productions. As in *Uranium 235* the historical events of the play are seen from different vantage points and through different media, showing that one of Theatre Workshop's strengths was their theatrical creativity.

8. Beyond documentary

In a period in which the British Theatre was defined by its adherence to the naturalistic theatrical conventions of the past, Theatre Workshop refused to work within the dictates of specific genres and traditions. This can be seen in the diversity of the plays that they produced pre-1953. *Johnny Noble*, *Uranium 235* and *Landscape with Chimneys* all developed from socio-historical premises which were then intermixed with elements of expressionistic and imaginative fantasy that incorporated music, song and dance.

⁴³¹ John W. Casson, 'Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy', *TDR* (1988-), Vol. 44 No 2. (2000), 107-122. (p. 115).

⁴³² EMPSA, 'Transcript of Interview with Ewan MacColl', undated, marked as 'Tape 1'

However, MacColl also wrote plays which moved outside the domain of the drama documentary. *Rogue's Gallery* is a lightweight comedy in which a group of petty crooks and an impoverished theatre company, plot to steal diamonds from a wealthy upper-class family. As the plot summary suggests, the themes of meta-theatre and class warfare remained central. *The Other Animals* dramatises the mental turmoil of a tortured, political prisoner. This play abandons realism altogether. MacColl's exploration of the inner psychological world is reminiscent of the ideas and theories in vogue in the German expressionist theatre of the 1920s. MacColl's last play for Theatre Workshop, *The Travellers*, tells the story of a seemingly disparate group of individuals from across Europe, who find themselves travelling together on a train which is heading towards a project that could herald the beginning of another World War. MacColl uses the travellers' different cultural backgrounds to explore the legacy of the Second World War. As in *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235*, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that the individual can achieve socio-political change.

Adaptations, and productions of works by classical and canonical dramatists, formed the other strand of the company's work. The idea of reviving and re-invigorating the classics was central to Theatre Workshop's approach. Their classical and European repertoire often featured works that were rarely performed in England. Between 1945 and 53 the company performed *Operation Olive Branch*, an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*; *The Flying Doctor*, a commedia dell'Arte inspired piece taken from Molière's *Le Médecin Malgré Lui*; and *The Good Soldier Švejk*, an adaptation of Jaroslav Hašek's novel of the same name. Plays by Lorca, Lope de Vega and Shakespeare also feature in the company's repertoire. On the surface, MacColl's style of work seems divorced from that of Shakespeare. However, in its manifesto Theatre Workshop described itself as working towards a 'popular theatre'⁴³³ which followed in the footsteps of the theatres of the past:

The great theatres of all times have been popular theatres which reflected the dreams and struggles of the people. The theatre of Aeschylus and

⁴³³ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 40.

Sophocles, of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, of the Commedia dell'Arte and Molière derived their inspiration, their language, their art from the people.⁴³⁴

Theatre Workshop sought to revitalise the way in which older plays were presented. Littlewood wanted to move away from the mannered performances of celebrated classical actors like John Gielgud. In an era in which an ability to produce a standardised upper-class accent was a pre-requisite for any budding professional actor, Theatre Workshop was unperturbed by actors with regional accents. As MacColl observes: 'In the company which formed in those months after the end of the war we had a whole lot of different accents and dialects, Geordie, Glasgow, Manchester, London, Leeds, York, Huddersfield, Irlham, Suffolk, but it didn't worry us in the least'.⁴³⁵ This attitude was typical of Theatre Workshop's approach to classical theatre, as Nadine Holdsworth observes: 'Littlewood was never interested in poetry or trying to preserve museum pieces, instead she wanted to see works with fresh eyes, to concentrate on the action as well as the verse and [...] bring out their contemporary relevance.'⁴³⁶

As with Theatre Workshop's productions of new plays, improvisation around the play was central to the way in which Littlewood brought about fresh interpretations of oft produced canonical texts. George Cooper's recollection of the rehearsal background to the Workshop's critically acclaimed 1954 production of *Richard II* emphasises the impact of Littlewood's improvisatory techniques.

For the first couple of weeks we just talked about the period of the drama – about the times of *Richard II*. Working from paintings and things like that, written accounts of what things were in those days. In other words, trying to get ourselves into the mood of that period [...] we'd rehearse in clothes as near to the costume that we were going to eventually wear, just to see how it affected your movement. [...] All these little details, so you'd finally get around to learning the lines which seemed to be... again I don't know whether we were deceiving ourselves, but seemed to be so much easier because we'd got sympathetic to that period. [...] Joan would say, 'Look you are wanting the throne aren't you? You've got to get rid of this

⁴³⁴ Gorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 41.

⁴³⁵ MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript' p. 31.

⁴³⁶ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, p. 25.

homosexual freak, this Richard II, so what are you going to do to achieve that end?⁴³⁷

Cooper's recollection suggests how Littlewood worked to achieve a sense of realism in her productions. By beginning with improvisatory rehearsals around background and character, Littlewood gave her actors the confidence to re-interpret the historical figures behind Shakespeare's famous verse. Harry Corbett's effeminate portrayal of Richard II astounded critics. The production was one of Theatre Workshop's early critical successes at Stratford East. The group's fledgling reputation was bolstered by the fact that the Old Vic Theatre was producing the play at the same time. Critical column inches from Kenneth Tynan, whilst not particularly favourable, highlighted the innovative quality of the Theatre Workshop production, when compared to the classical grandeur of the established, star-driven, Old Vic Company:

Theatre Workshop keeping well off the beaten path, offers instead a beaten psychopath [...] The part is played in a frenzy of effeminacy. This Richard is a senile Osric, a flutter of puff-pastry, his voice a quavering falsetto [...] Whimpering with rage he flies at Gaunt's throat and hurls him to the ground; recoiling at once with tremulous lips, like a child caught in the pantry and torn between defiance and contrition [...] Richard must begin headstrong and arrogant; a spirited tyrant rather than a spiritless colt [...] Mr John Neville, at the Vic, takes firm steps in the right direction. He overweens, rejoicing in the manipulation of power; his sneer is steely and unforced, and his voice, like Sir John Gielgud's in the same role, 'feels at each thread and lives along the line'.⁴³⁸

Tynan's review shows that the move to London in 1953 brought the company's work to national critical attention. The permanent base marked a turning point in the history of the group. The final part of this chapter will explore how the transition from touring to resident company changed Theatre Workshop. It will begin by considering the extent to which the pre-Stratford East period fulfilled the company's early aims and objectives, and conclude with an exploration of the group members' differing attitudes towards the London base.

⁴³⁷ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴³⁸ Kenneth Tynan, 'Pair of Kings', *Observer*, 23 January 1955

9. A People's theatre?

According to MacColl, the founder members of Theatre Workshop were passionate about creating a theatre which could, 'win working-class audiences'.⁴³⁹ The traditional middle-class focus of the English Theatre had enraged MacColl since his Red Megaphone days: 'Our hostility was towards the kinds of plays that were being presented in the theatre, towards the kind of people depicted in those plays, to the triviality of the themes and to the kind of audience being catered for'.⁴⁴⁰ Robert Leach argues that MacColl's working-class origins were central to the way in which he wrote: 'Almost instinctively he seems to have realised that his mission was to articulate the aspirations of his class, to help to delineate and even shape working-class identity and working-class understanding'.⁴⁴¹ However, the question of whether Theatre Workshop actually created a 'People's theatre' in this period remains debateable.

The biographies of Littlewood, MacColl and Goorney reveal that the company did get some good local reviews across this period. However, they were continually on the move, and one town's regional recommendations did not have much of an impact on another's, especially in the case of a new play written by an unknown writer and performed by an unknown company. Although they had had a number of critically acclaimed foreign tours in Sweden and Czechoslovakia, their 'people's theatre' had arguably not made much of an impact on the contemporaneous British Stage by 1953. This point raises an important question about how theatre historians retrospectively quantify a theatre company's success. Pre-1954, Theatre Workshop were not running sell-out tours on the regional theatre touring circuits, nor were they on the radar of influential London critics like Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson. However, this was, in part, because they had not set out to appeal to the traditional middle-class London-centric theatre audience keen to see the latest West End offering.

⁴³⁹ EMPSA, Ewan MacColl, 'Untitled Typescript', p. 30.

⁴⁴⁰ Goorney, MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. xxxii.

⁴⁴¹ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, p. 61.

Between 1945 and 1953, Theatre Workshop toured across the UK, taking theatre to regional theatres, arts clubs, University halls and more unconventional venues like village church halls and working men's clubs.



FIGURE 5: A sketch of a typical touring venue

On many occasions they were performing for people who had little experience of theatre. Pearl Goodman provides an example of this in her description of an audience in the port town of Workington, on the West coast of Cumbria: 'the men wore flat caps and they always had a scarf [...] all they ever were interested in was a bit of Vaudeville, if you had one of the comics that came round, and the dogs [...] I always said it was like presenting a French novel to someone who could hardly read English'.⁴⁴² Goodman was not alone in her assessment of the group's success with the working-classes, as Julia Jones' recollection of a Barnsley

⁴⁴² TAP interview with Pearl Goodman

audience's surprised reaction to the 1950 Christmas production of *Alice in Wonderland* reflects:

We went up to open in Barnsley, in Yorkshire, which is a mining town! It was quite incredible! Because on Boxing Day we opened, and the theatre was packed with miners and their families and what they were there for was a leg show. They were not there for a very beautiful production of *Alice in Wonderland* and that is what we gave them! [...] They clapped slowly, and they joined in [...] Howard Goorney was playing the Dame. They were throwing coins at him on stage, and he was getting so cross he began to throw them back!⁴⁴³

Even more dispiriting than the audiences' sometimes unexpected responses to Theatre Workshop's well-crafted productions were the occasions when the group turned up and found that there was not much of an audience to play to. George Cooper highlights one such memorable night: 'we were playing in Tonypandy, the Judge's Hall in Tonypandy – and 11 people turned up for the audience. We were 19 people in the company'.⁴⁴⁴ Cooper remembers the one-night-stand tours as having failed:

They weren't paying and Joan's objective of taking the theatre to the people of the country who'd been 'robbed' of their theatre so to speak, as far as I could see it didn't really apply because there were so few people interested in coming to see us that you know, they obviously couldn't care less.⁴⁴⁵

However, other people remember the 'People's theatre' differently. Barbara Young believes the Welsh tours did meet with some success: 'A lot of the men, I think, thought it was a bit daft, a bit silly. But after a while, after they realised the content and what we were actually saying to them and showing them, we did get audiences'.⁴⁴⁶ Over fifty years later, Jean Newlove remains convinced that the group fulfilled their aim of reaching out and engaging working-class audiences:

...people were very excited by it [Theatre Workshop] [...] they may not have always understood, or liked what we did politically, but they loved the way we did it. They loved the movement, they loved the music, the singing [...] |

⁴⁴³ TAP interview with Julia Jones

⁴⁴⁴ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴⁴⁵ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴⁴⁶ TAP interview with Barbara Young

felt that it was different to anything else they'd see. And of course many of the people up North just loved the politics.⁴⁴⁷

Newlove's comments act as a reminder that Theatre Workshop did enjoy notable successes with their target audience in the early years. MacColl recalls *Uranium* 235 meeting with great success with an audience at a Butlin's holiday camp in Filey, in 1946:

...we were doing three shows a day and we were packed out- we were playing to about 800 people a performance and of course people were coming day after day- the same people [...] By the third day the all-in-wrestlers had packed up because they weren't getting any audiences.⁴⁴⁸

MacColl's memories are supported by the *New Chronicle* journalist, Ian Mackay, who wrote an ebullient review about his experience of watching one of the group's Butlins' performances:

Of all the bizarre and unexpected things you come across in this amazing phantasmagoria of a place there is nothing quite so surprising – not even the legless man who dives into what looks like a saucerful of water from a seventy five feet tower- as the brilliant band of young strolling players who have been packing the giant camp theatre this week.

My eminent colleague, Alan Dent and his compere, Mr Agate – the Great Mogul – who are always bemoaning the fact that our young experimental acts are not given a chance in the Commercial theatre should raise their critical caps to Mr Butlin of all people.

For where else in the world would you find a theatre owner who would take a chance on a young company whose repertoire consists only of Aristophanes, Lorca, a fishing folk ballad drama, a symbolic play on the atom bomb and a delightful bawdy version of one of Molière's earliest comedies *The Flying Doctor*

This gifted little troop of North Country Players, under the brilliant directorship of Joan Littlewood, call themselves the 'Theatre Workshop' and they are making important experiments both in lighting and stage effects.

[...]

⁴⁴⁷ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

⁴⁴⁸ EMPSA, Ewan MacColl, 'Transcript of Ewan MacColl talking about his work in theatre and radio', undated, marked on transcript as 'Tape 4'

Just like the Molière team, the Theatre Workshop carries its own playwright around, young Ewan MacColl (a Scot with a Lancashire accent) who is by way of being quite a dramatic portent in his own way. Just as GBS in his twenties, MacColl has a flaming beard and a tendency to lapse into lecturing, but the play he is putting on here is undoubtedly a theatrical event of first importance.⁴⁴⁹

However, the enthusiastic reviews of critics like Mackay, who happened to catch Theatre Workshop on their whistle-stop tours, were not enough to generate audiences across the diverse places where the group toured. By the 1950s, despite the critical and commercial success of the foreign tours, eight years of extensive touring without Arts Council subsidy had left Theatre Workshop in financial ruin. In his autobiography, MacColl argues that, 'The Arts Council were either deaf or establishment plus'.⁴⁵⁰ The bitterness which he felt towards the funding body is clearly apparent:

Over the years, no rich heiress was ever courted so assiduously as we courted the Arts Council. We fawned, we beseeched, we petitioned, we pleaded, we crawled on our knees, not for thousands of pounds but for a few hundred to tide us over until things got better.⁴⁵¹

Theatre Workshop were touring unconventional plays in unconventional venues. Their ambitious programme was at odds with the ethos of the Arts Council at the time, which, as Nadine Holdsworth observes, 'rejected cultural pluralism and fought to secure centralised, metropolitan dominance and the reinforcement of prevailing notions of artistic practice'.⁴⁵² Money worries forced the group to temporarily disband for a short time in 1950, and the company gradually began to see a permanent base as their only hope for survival.

⁴⁴⁹ Ian Mackay, *New Chronicle*, 25th May 1946, Theatre Royal Archive Stratford East, press cuttings for *Uranium 235*, pre-1953 box.

⁴⁵⁰ MacColl, *Journeymen*, p. 252.

⁴⁵¹ MacColl, *Journeymen*, p. 252.

⁴⁵² Nadine Holdsworth, 'They'd have pissed on My Grave': the Arts Council and Theatre Workshop', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 57, (Feb 1999) 3-16 (p. 3)

10. The shift to London: A divided collective

By 1952, Theatre Workshop was once again struggling financially after touring and, according to Newlove, 'living in an awful house which was subsiding down a hill'.⁴⁵³ The Theatre Royal could be rented cheaply and offered the potential for a regular audience. According to Harry Greene 'everybody' was in favour of the move:

Who wants to tour? If you had a permanent base at least you were going to build an audience. And we all believed we should try. Ewan was all for this, he tried...we tried to get an old church in Glasgow.⁴⁵⁴

However, the deal in Glasgow fell through and Jean Newlove remembers attitudes towards the move to London rather differently:

There were many people who felt we shouldn't come to London. That we'd established ourselves up North and we should stay there, and Ewan was one of them. And Joan despised the West End. Ewan despised the West End, so why were we coming down to London.⁴⁵⁵

MacColl's working relationship with Littlewood was effectively over, and he began to distance himself from Theatre Workshop. Donald Sartain, who joined the company for one production in 1954, remembers MacColl's occasional visits as fraught occasions: 'she got Ewan to come in and oh my God, they used to fight like cat and dog! It didn't work at all, because she didn't agree with what he said'.⁴⁵⁶ MacColl believed that company members were gradually giving up the principles on which the Workshop had been founded:

Almost everyone was imbued with a genuine desire to work in and for a better theatre, and though not everyone shared the same Marxist vision, there was enough goodwill around to make its realisation a feasible proposition. Goodwill, of course, is not an adequate substitute for political understanding. And so, almost imperceptibly, the objectives changed. There was less and less talk of a revolutionary theatre and more and more

⁴⁵³ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

⁴⁵⁴ TAP interview with Harry Greene

⁴⁵⁵ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

⁴⁵⁶ TAP interview with Donald Sartain conducted by Kate Harris (26 April 2006)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/sartain2.html>> [accessed 5 May 2008]

talk of being discovered and transported on a magic carpet to the never-never land of board-treading, greasepaint-smelling success.⁴⁵⁷

The shift in political ideology was difficult for MacColl as he had seen Theatre as a vehicle for political change since the 1930s. He saw the move to London as further evidence that Theatre Workshop wanted to serve the critics and their own vanity, rather than the working-class people whose lives his plays had sought to represent.⁴⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the Theatre Royal was in a predominantly working-class area of London, and company members in favour of the move still maintained that they were going to be creating a theatre that would be accessible to ordinary people. However, the question of whether Theatre Workshop was providing entertainment for the local residents became contentious as the 1950s wore on and attention from critics brought increasing numbers of theatre goers from outside the area. As Cooper comments:

Joan liked to think of us as taking the theatre to the people who were robbed of their theatre – dispossessed sort of thing. I didn't really think there were all that many locals in the audience. And this would be now, what 1953. Peter Brook actually made a comment that we were getting a Chelsea audience rather than a Stratford East 15 audience.⁴⁵⁹

The increasing interest in the company's work caused tensions amongst some of the older members of the company. Julia Jones recalls being one of a number of people who voted against transferring the 1954 production of *The Dutch Courtesan* to the West End:

The company was still Theatre Workshop in which everyone was supposed to have a say. There was a sort of meeting held to decide if we would do this. It was decided by the company not to go into the West End because every time they did this, they took the company away and had to get another company for Stratford East. It was killing the local theatre - this wasn't what we were here for! We were here for the business of creating a theatre for the local people [...] So we voted against it, but I am afraid that didn't go down very well at all. People who had been active in that were sacked.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁷ MacColl, *Journeyman*, p. 255.

⁴⁵⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, pp. 265-266.

⁴⁵⁹ TAP interview with George Cooper

⁴⁶⁰ TAP interview with Julia Jones

Jones' recollection shows that the company's ethos was beginning to change. Despite the fact that she was a long serving member of the company, Littlewood wrote to her after the meeting asking her not to go back for the next season.

The issues surrounding the theatre's location and its audience were also causing problems outside the company in relation to a continuing lack of Arts Council funding. Nadine Holdsworth argues that 'in the climate of the cold war, Littlewood and Theatre Workshop's left-wing perspective and communist sympathies made them incompatible with the ethos and prevailing cultural conservatism of the Arts Council'.⁴⁶¹ However, when I interviewed Tony Field, who was finance director of the Arts Council during this period, he recalls that the Council's concerns were more to do with the audience that the Workshop were setting out to appeal to:

there was always a slight worry [...], that they were so near the London conurbation they weren't necessarily servicing a region in the way that, say, Birmingham Rep was or Bristol Old Vic. And I think in a way they lost out by being on the fringe of the whole of the West End.⁴⁶²

The success of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* in the late 1950s pushed Theatre Workshop further into the world of West End Theatre, which the founder members had originally defined themselves against. The West End transfers brought in much needed financial revenue and alerted a national audience to the Workshop's innovative production style.

However, they also gradually destroyed the nucleus of the company. Success created stars within the ensemble, and the group began to haemorrhage core members. As a result of both commercial offers and company disagreements, Harry Corbett, Harry Greene, Julia Jones and George Cooper had all left the permanent company by 1955. Only Greene and his wife, Marjie Lawrence, returned on request for productions in subsequent years. This damaged the collaborative working methods which were central to the production style that the

⁴⁶¹ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, p. 23.

⁴⁶² TAP interview with Anthony Field

company had been putting into practice since 1945. When I interviewed Jean Newlove, she gave a number of detailed descriptions of the complicated choreography she would put together for MacColl's plays, but went on to explain that this kind of work became more difficult in the late 1950s and 60s:

You see later on in West End you couldn't do things like that. People didn't have the training. And there was a time when it was a mixed bag, you'd get people who had worked with you, [in] Theatre Workshop...they were in demand, because they could move well [...] We were sort of the new kids on the block, and everybody thought we were great. And you couldn't blame the actors for wanting to go and earn some money. Normally we didn't earn any money you know, and so they would go off and get well paid. And good luck to them. Then they'd probably come back for a show. And I remember they all came back one Christmas to do *A Christmas Carol*. And I was able to do a lovely [...] skating scene [...] we had actors who were acting as though they couldn't skate. And they were being slid along by people. There were others who were good skaters, and we got them turning, you know, and others that were racing. And it was fantastically good. [...] But I couldn't have done that with newcomers from the West End. I mean they just couldn't move. They'd all done their bits and pieces in movement, but the thing was, it didn't... whatever they'd done, it didn't help them improvise; it didn't help them use their bodies with ease in everything that they did. And there was always a discrepancy between their movement and their voice. The voice would always be beautifully trained, but the bodies would let them down. And I think that Joan got fed up in the end.⁴⁶³

In his history of Theatre Workshop, Howard Goorney refers to the shift that was brought about by the influx of new actors in the late 1950s: 'the emphasis was now on learning from Joan rather than learning together as previously'.⁴⁶⁴ Littlewood remained at the helm of Theatre Workshop, on and off, until the 1960s, during which time she became pre-occupied with ambitious plans for a 'fun Palace' which would provide local people with access to a diverse range of educational, cultural and leisure activities under one roof. She directed her final shows at the Theatre Royal in the early 1970s, by which point the theatre company she and MacColl established in 1945 was long gone.

⁴⁶³ TAP interview with Jean Newlove

⁴⁶⁴ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 103.

The first ten years of Theatre Workshop were not a success in commercial terms, but then neither were many of the English Stage Company's early productions. However, it is arguable that Theatre Workshop's early post-war work has been marginalised by a post-war narrative which has a tendency to forget the importance of theatre outside the capital. The scope and ambition of the pre-1953 work, in terms of the audience it tried to reach out to, and the form and content of the plays, trod new ground on the British Stage well before the arrival of the so called Angry Young men of the theatre. The commitment and creativity of the individuals who made up Theatre Workshop during this time was central to the pioneering work of the company at Stratford East, and the innovations in staging and performance styles which they helped to develop, went on to become a celebrated part of the new wave of British Theatre in the late 1950s and 60s.

Chapter 5

The Old Vic 1944-52: A lasting legacy?

This chapter will focus on the history of the Old Vic Theatre Company between 1944 and 1952. It will consider both the impact of the company's work at the time and the way in which it has subsequently been remembered by theatre goers, practitioners and historians. Case studies of specific personalities, productions and events will explore how memories of the company have been redefined over time. The previous chapters have highlighted the ephemeral nature of theatre by focusing on areas of its history that have been forgotten or disregarded. This chapter focuses on the Old Vic's work in the late 1940s, in part to consider why it is that such a relatively short period of theatrical activity should continue to exert an enduring hold on people's memories. The first section of this chapter will consider Laurence Olivier's association with the Old Vic between 1944 and 1948, in terms of the role it played in establishing both the reputation of the company and Olivier's post-war stage persona. The second part will explore the work of the pioneering Old Vic School between 1948 and 1952. The final section will address the reasons behind the demise of both the School, and the triumvirate of directors who ran the main company. Within this discussion I will consider the extent to which this period of history has been re-written in the light of later theatrical developments.

1. Performance Mythologies

1.1. Laurence Olivier

Michael Billington's 2007 history of post-war British theatre is the latest in a long line of theatre histories proclaiming the cultural importance of the Old Vic Theatre during the mid-1940s when the company was, for a brief period of four years, in the directorial hands of Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson and John Burrell: 'Those lucky enough to have seen the 1944-1946 seasons at the New always

speak of them as one of the high-water marks of modern British Theatre'.⁴⁶⁵ Interestingly, Billington's statement emphasises the extent to which the company's work in this period has been kept alive by oral history. This has been borne out by *TAP* interviews with older theatre-goers and practitioners, who often prioritise their memories of the Old Vic when being asked about their experiences of theatre-going between 1945 and 1968.⁴⁶⁶

Actress Eileen Page remembers her experiences of watching the Old Vic in the mid-1940s as one of the high points in her theatre-going experiences: 'I had the advantage of seeing and knowing and being part of an audience that was absolutely held in thrall with those performances [...] which I remember to this day, and we're talking like 60 years ago, and I can still remember the wonderful, wonderful feeling'.⁴⁶⁷ Page's memories of the Old Vic were embodied by the performances of one actor: 'for me personally the main one was Olivier who was thrilling and just [sic] so wonderful to see him perform live'.⁴⁶⁸ Laurence Olivier's domination of the British stage in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, in the different guises of actor, manager, director and theatre administrator, has helped to ensure that he remains imprinted on 21st century memories where many of his contemporaries have faded. Today, Olivier's performances are the stuff of mythical anecdote, and the man himself is often seen as embodying a golden age of performance. Olivier's enduring legacy provides an example of the way in which memories of an individual performer can, over time, become narrative vessels which hold a myriad of public and private histories.

When the triumvirate of directors joined the Old Vic in 1944, it had been six years since Olivier had appeared in a play on the London stage, and only one year less for Ralph Richardson.⁴⁶⁹ Both had established themselves as respected

⁴⁶⁵ Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 9.

⁴⁶⁶ Examples of *TAP* interviewees talking about the Old Vic can be found in interviews with Michael Allen, Ian Anderson, Geoff Ayres, David Ayliff, Alfred Burke, Lionel Burman, Jonathan Cecil, Richard Digby Day, Colin George, Ronald Gray, Edward Hardwicke, Neil Heayes, Neil Hornick, Neville Hunnings, Rosalind Knight, John Moffat, Helen Neale, Eileen Page, Maurice Stewart and Tudor Wilson, see <<http://www.bl.uk/theatrearchive>>

⁴⁶⁷ *TAP* interview with Eileen Page conducted by Chloe Ingram (no date recorded) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/pagee.html>> [accessed 5 February 2008]

⁴⁶⁸ *TAP* interview with Eileen Page

⁴⁶⁹ Olivier's last major London stage role had been as *Coriolanus* at the Old Vic in 1938, whilst Richardson's had been as Johnson in Priestley's *Johnson over Jordan* at the New in 1939

classical actors at the Old Vic in the 1930s, but in the intervening years they had become more widely known for their film work.⁴⁷⁰ The arrival of two starry directors transformed attitudes towards the Old Vic. In its home on the unfashionable South side of the river, the theatre company had been distanced from the West End in both its geography and its values. It had been a place where stage actors made their name as classical performers, rather than a company driven by star names. However, bomb damage to the Old Vic Theatre led the triumvirate to install the company in Donald Albery's New Theatre in the heart of the West End. The Old Vic was operating in the commercial theatre-world and, as Peter Roberts observes, 'audiences for a period did think more in terms of star actors giving star performances'.⁴⁷¹

The film-star glamour associated with Olivier and, to a lesser extent, Richardson created a sense of anticipation around the Old Vic seasons, injecting war weary London with a welcome frisson of excitement. Olivier's academy award-winning 1944 film of *Henry V*, which he acted in and directed, had made him a film star.⁴⁷² As Terry Coleman observes: '*Henry V* changed Olivier's stature [...] few had so successfully promoted themselves before, and so widely [...] For the first time, as a man of the cinema and of the theatre, he stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries'.⁴⁷³ Olivier's reputation inevitably preceded him, as Old Vic theatre-goer Ronald Gray remembers:

Everybody knew him, because he'd already made these two films. *Hamlet* and he made *Henry V* [...] they emphasised the patriotic element in that play: 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more'. You know, during the war [Laughs] it was absolutely right, and Laurence Olivier's voice reeling out from the screen. 'We will fight!' - echoing Churchill's 'we will fight them on the beaches'. So it had tremendous kudos for Olivier that film, and suddenly everybody knew around the world- Allied world anyway - about his prestige and talent.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁰ Between 1939 and 1945 seven films with Ralph Richardson were released; *Q-Planes*, *The Four Feathers*, *The Lion has Wings*, *On the Night of the Fire*, *The Day Will Dawn*, *The Silver Fleet*, and *The Volunteer*. In the same period Olivier had appeared in eight; *Q Planes*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Rebecca*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Lady Hamilton*, *49th Parallel*, *The Demi-Paradise*, and *Henry V*

⁴⁷¹ Roberts, *The Old Vic Story*, p. 142.

⁴⁷² Olivier was also a producer on the film

⁴⁷³ Coleman, *Olivier*, p. 170.

⁴⁷⁴ TAP interview with Ronald Gray

The comparison that Gray makes between Henry V and Winston Churchill, associates Olivier's actor persona with a heroic quality. The harsh reality of two World Wars in close succession had severed the idealised link between war and glory. However, bravery, patriotism and strong leadership were values which had been actively promoted by government propaganda throughout the war. Henry V, like Churchill and the British people, had been fighting against the odds. The play's strong link to the socio-political context of the time meant that Olivier's persona in this role was impressed onto popular consciousness in a way that would have been impossible in peacetime. To suggest that Gray's memory of Olivier was typical of the Old Vic Theatre audience would be a generalisation. However, it would be likely that their recognition of him as a film actor would, at some level, inform the way in which they viewed his stage work. The association of Olivier and authoritative power was maintained throughout the 1944-6 seasons at the Old Vic by the fact that it was Olivier, and not Richardson who played the three King roles; Richard III, Oedipus, and King Lear.

Gray's remembrance of the patriotic fervour associated with Olivier after *Henry V* is also a reminder of the impact that the Second World War had on cultural and artistic perceptions in the mid-1940s. The fact that the triumvirate's first season was put together in the sixth and final year of the Second World War could only add to the national prestige associated with the company, as John Elsom observes: 'it was one of those British boasts that, despite the rigours of war, London could still provide the finest Shakespearian productions to be seen anywhere'.⁴⁷⁵ The war-time experience runs through Gray's recollections of the Old Vic. His memories of Olivier's plays and films provide him with a narrative framework through which he can convey the personal impact that the War had on him:

RG: Shakespeare wasn't 'somebody everybody just knew about', but somebody meaningful in my life. I was ready to see other Shakespeare plays.

⁴⁷⁵ John Elsom and Nicholas Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre* (London: Cape, 1978), p. 83.

PH: It was a deep matter for you? It was a deep matter for you rather than something shallow?

RG: Yes, yes, and I mean, *King Lear* in particular, I mean, I'm now his age, you know. And I know how [Laughs]...I've lived through...not Lear's experiences, but I've made it through a war and I know what happens. But I... during the war I saw one of the Nazi atrocities; I mean, I didn't see it actually happen but I saw the aftermath.⁴⁷⁶

Gray's recollections of the Old Vic and Olivier's performance of Lear are shaped not only by the war-time experiences he had before he took his seat in the theatre, but also by his retrospective identification with Lear as an old man looking back at his life. This recollection fits in with Paul Fussell's view of the way in which war-time memories are shaped:

The very enormity of the proceedings, their absurd remove from the usages of the modern world, will guarantee that a structure of irony sufficient for ready narrative recall will attach to them.⁴⁷⁷

Theatrical memories provide Gray with an imaginative space through which his traumatic personal experiences can be mediated or displaced. David Lodge argues that literature represents, 'in the guise of fiction the dense specificity of personal experience'.⁴⁷⁸ Gray's interview emphasises how our reaction to the 'dense specificity' of a play is focalised by the external narratives attached to both actor and theatre-goer. Both of these external narratives continue to develop beyond the brief life-time of an individual production. For example, Gray's recollection of Olivier's film star persona suggests the extent to which the memories surrounding Olivier's performances in the 1944-8 Old Vic seasons have been retrospectively bolstered by the more permanent celluloid imprint of his celebrated Shakespearean films. In the interview, he seems to be saying that Olivier had made *Henry V* and *Hamlet* prior to his post-war seasons at the Old Vic. However, in reality *Hamlet* wasn't released until May 1948, by which point Olivier

⁴⁷⁶ TAP interview with Ronald Gray

⁴⁷⁷ Paul Fussell, 'The Great War and Modern Memory' in *Memory: An Anthology*, ed. by Harriet Harvey Wood and A. S. Byatt, pp. 368-370 (p. 368).

⁴⁷⁸ Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel*, p. 10.

had been out of the country for two months on the Old Vic's seven month tour of Australia.

Olivier's later association with the National Theatre ensured that he remained an important theatrical figure until his death in 1989. His three films, *Henry V* (1943), *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1955), continued to be shown regularly on television throughout his life. The prevalence of the films continued to remind theatre-goers of Gray's generation of Olivier's classical performances on the stage and, in the case of *Richard III*, of a specific performance that Olivier had first created on the Old Vic stage in 1944. More significantly, the films immortalised an era of Olivier's career for a younger generation who were too young to remember either his stage or filmic triumphs the first time around: as John Elsom observes, 'thirty years later young actors were still mimicking Olivier's *Richard III*'.⁴⁷⁹

1.2. Audience memories: *Oedipus* and *The Critic*

The repertoire across the first two years under the triumvirate was a mix of classical drama and modern plays by well established playwrights: *Arms and the Man*, *Peer Gynt*, *Richard III*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Henry VI part I and II*, *Oedipus*, *The Critic*, *King Lear*, *An Inspector Calls*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The company played in repertory and sold fifty percent of the season's tickets at below average West End prices. This was in keeping with the Old Vic's pre-war commitment to introducing ordinary people to the classics at affordable prices.⁴⁸⁰ Over sixty years later, the cheap tickets were still a talking point, as theatre-goer Eileen Page comments: 'to see Olivier's first night of *Richard III*, I queued up outside [...] for the gallery, which is all I could afford, which was one and six, which to today's prices is seven and a half p'.⁴⁸¹ Or, as Ian Anderson, another regular gallery-goer puts it: 'for about three or four Mars bars you could go to a London theatre'.⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁹ Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, p. 8.

⁴⁸⁰ The discounted tickets were sold at prices between 1/6d. to 4/6d

⁴⁸¹ TAP interview with Eileen Page

⁴⁸² TAP interview with Ian Anderson conducted by Jennifer Ball (December 2006)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/anderson.html>> [accessed 1 August 2008]

Prior to the production of *King Lear* in September 1946, Richardson and Olivier alternated all the main parts between them, appearing in smaller supporting roles in the majority of the productions where the other had taken the main role.⁴⁸³ In his autobiography, Olivier describes the 1945-6 season as 'the one that made our names, and the one to which, years later, people still referred'.⁴⁸⁴ The 1945 double-bill of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Sheridan's *The Critic* has been retrospectively described by theatre historians as one of the triumphs of this season: 'the extraordinary double-bill'⁴⁸⁵; 'the most striking'⁴⁸⁶, 'the most sensational success of the Olivier-Richardson years.'⁴⁸⁷; 'his remarkable double performance'⁴⁸⁸. The popular success of this production is an established fact and I do not want to dispute this. Instead I want to use the proliferation of contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of the double-bill as a reference point from which to consider Olivier's acting methods, and the role which popular memory has played in refreshing memories of his performances.

Sophocles' tragic tale of patricide, incest and suicide in ancient Greece was not an obvious partner for Sheridan's meta-theatrical satire about late 18th century society. Sheridan's play had first opened on a double-bill with *Hamlet* in 1779: however, in 1945, critics found the conflation of tragedy and comedy problematic. James Agate was vehement in his criticism: 'these grotesqueries of juxtaposition are not to be tolerated [...] the Sheridan romp successfully dowsed whatever light I had seen the tragedy in'.⁴⁸⁹ Beverley Baxter offered a rather more patronising dig at Olivier himself, by declaring his double performance to be 'in the true Vincent Crummles tradition'.⁴⁹⁰ However, the disjunction between the two plays was

⁴⁸³ The brief New York tour of *Uncle Vanya* and *Oedipus* and *The Critic* in 1946 was the last time Richardson and Olivier appeared on stage together at the Old Vic. Subsequently Olivier played the title role in *King Lear* between September 1946 and January 1947 whilst Richardson appeared as Inspector Goole in *An Inspector Calls* and the title role in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Olivier made his film of *Hamlet* in 1947 whilst Richardson stayed at the Vic to play Face in *The Alchemist* and Gaunt in *Richard II*. In 1948 Olivier went on the Old Vic tour of Australia and New Zealand

⁴⁸⁴ Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor*, p. 157.

⁴⁸⁵ Coleman, *Olivier*, p. 182.

⁴⁸⁶ Roberts, *The Old Vic Story*, p. 136.

⁴⁸⁷ Rowell, *The Old Vic Theatre*, p. 138.

⁴⁸⁸ Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, p. 8.

⁴⁸⁹ James Agate, *Sunday Times*, 21 October 1945, in John Elsom, *Post-War Theatre Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 20.

⁴⁹⁰ Beverley Baxter, *Evening Standard*, 20 October 1945, in Elsom, *Post-War Theatre Criticism*, p. 19.

Olivier's main reason for choosing them: 'I was filled with gloom at the prospect of confining myself to quite such a deadly solemn evening. The fear of frustration made me remember the delight I took in reading Sheridan's *The Critic*'.⁴⁹¹ The double-bill also gave Olivier an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his virtuosity as a stage actor, beginning the night as the tragic Oedipus and ending it as the comic Mr Puff, a self proclaimed 'Professor of the art of Puffing'.⁴⁹²

Jane Baldwin makes the point that the success of *Oedipus* was not solely down to Olivier: '[his] performance was a tour de force, but it was part of a production architected by Saint-Denis'.⁴⁹³ The same could also be said of *The Critic*, which was directed by Miles Malleon and described by theatre historian Audrey Williamson as being, 'in its own class as brilliant as that of Saint-Denis'.⁴⁹⁴ However, the extreme contrast between the two plays inevitably made Olivier's performance the focus of the evening; something which was duly reflected in the amount of space devoted to it in newspaper reviews. The strong impression that Olivier made on the audience is suggested by the vivid quality of theatre-goer Ian Anderson's memory, over sixty years later:

...it opened with Sheridan's *The Critic* [sic] which was a short one act, eighteenth century farce, a skit on playwrights [...] and Olivier is a wonderful...he loved false noses – a lovely false nose, powdered up, white powdered wig - periwigs, doing his camp best.⁴⁹⁵ He thoroughly enjoyed the part. You could see him really revelling in it. And a wonderful denouement after these various gags and so on (there was a play going on, and the critic was criticising it) and they're changing some scenery on stage, and Mr. Puff, who is Olivier, is stepping across a piece of scenery which goes up with him on it. He is raised aloft, stuck on this thing, a wonderful piece of comic farce scene. And that closed the first part of the show. The second part of the show is *Oedipus Rex*, Greek tragic drama, woe, everything is dark and dismal, grey drapes, blue-grey drapes, costume drapes [...] And there's a magnificent scene in that, where Oedipus, who has discovered he's married his mother by mistake, tears out his eyes, happily, off stage, but [he] comes on immediately afterwards, with red eye-sockets, being led on by two young boys, saying, 'Woe, woe' in the best Olivier fashion. And this in contrast to Mr. Puff going up on the scenery, an hour before-hand, is

⁴⁹¹ Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor*, pp. 152-153.

⁴⁹² Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic* (London: A & C Black, 1989), Act I, scene II, p. 31.

⁴⁹³ Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*, p. 199.

⁴⁹⁴ Audrey Williamson, *Old Vic Drama* (London: Rockliff, 1948), p. 191.

⁴⁹⁵ Anderson confuses the order of the productions in this recollection

amazing, [a] quite startling contrast. To even have thought of doing those two together is quite shattering, but to perform them both is amazing!⁴⁹⁶

Although Anderson misremembers the running order of the plays, his recollection offers a seemingly vivid recollection of the theatrical spectacle itself. Often when people talk and write about productions, their account is bolstered by their knowledge of surrounding criticism, or the written play text itself; something which remains largely unchanged despite the vagaries of different productions over time. This is especially the case in academic writing where productions are usually described by people who were not present when they took place. Yet in Anderson's account the plot details are revealed through his memory of particular visual moments in a specific production. The physical details compare accurately with the production photos and the accounts given by contemporary reviewers and historians. The description is notable for its focus on Olivier's movement and appearance; it is a description of a performance rather than a play.

Anderson's description of Olivier's powdered false nose gives his account a feeling of verisimilitude. However, prior to describing the performance of 'Oedipuff', he mentions that he bought cheap tickets for the gallery. This is the highest point in the almost 900 seat auditorium at the New Theatre, and, as Anderson himself observes, 'you're a long way up in the gallery'. It is unlikely that from his seat in the theatre he would have been able to see the actors' faces and movements in the detail which he describes. It is arguable that this memory remains so strong because it draws on two of the most renowned, and oft remarked on, traits of Olivier's acting style - his penchant for disguise and his physical dare devilry. Anderson's statement that Olivier 'loved false noses' brings attention to the frequency with which the actor changed his on-stage appearance.

Olivier's belief in the transformative power of disguise was later commented on by the American director Elia Kazan: 'Some great actors imitate the outside and "work in" from there. Larry needs to know first of all how the person he's to play walks, stands, sits, dresses...concentrating on what might seem to us insignificant

⁴⁹⁶ TAP interview with Ian Anderson

aspects of his characterisation'.⁴⁹⁷ Olivier's ever changing physical appearance in films and theatre productions often lingered beyond the life-time of a run or release, as a result of widely disseminated stage and film photographs in books, magazines and newspapers. The false noses may have been a relatively small aspect of Olivier's performance style but the fact that he used them repeatedly meant that they caught the public imagination. This is reflected in Neil Heayes recollections of the Old Vic's *Richard III*, in which Olivier's physical appearance is once again central to the vivid quality of the memory: 'He had a hunchback and a very long nose that he put on- he always had a nose for every part. He always put a different nose on. I don't think he ever used his own!'.⁴⁹⁸

Gray's, Heayes' and Anderson's memories of Olivier's roles at the Old Vic are shaped by their knowledge of his performances in different roles. Heayes, like Gray, cross-references theatre and film performances: 'I never thought his film *Richard* was as good as his stage *Richard*'.⁴⁹⁹ It is also important to consider that interviewees will sometimes have refreshed their memories of theatre-going by reading a historian's account of the period. Olivier is one of the most written about figures in post-war theatre history. Whilst it would be inaccurate to suggest that every TAP interviewee who mentions Olivier has read his biographies, the testimonies of interviewees like Ronald Gray do reflect the potential impact that written history can have on the way a theatre-goer recalls a production: 'I can't reel them all off, but I've got a book there about all the productions, in 1947, 48. And I must have seen at least half of those'.⁵⁰⁰

Our sense of the past is necessarily shaped by our vantage point in the present, as A. S. Byatt comments: 'to remember is to have two selves, one in the memory, one thinking about the memory, but the two are not precisely distinct, and separating them can be dizzying'.⁵⁰¹ In their interviews, Anderson, Heayes and Gray give theatrical details which tap into both the memory of the performance and

⁴⁹⁷ Coleman, *Olivier*, p. 236.

⁴⁹⁸ TAP interview with Neil Heayes conducted by Natalie Dunton (16 January 2008) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/heayes.html>> [accessed 5 September 2008]

⁴⁹⁹ TAP interview with Neil Heayes

⁵⁰⁰ TAP interview with Ronald Gray

⁵⁰¹ A. S. Byatt, *Memory: An Anthology*, p. xii.

the performance mythology that has grown up around Olivier. The interviewees are unconsciously blurring different memorial narratives that have been collected over a lifetime of theatre going. The wealth of knowledge contained within the recollections creates a powerful, albeit erroneous, sense of verisimilitude, which has helped to ensure that memories of the Old Vic Company's early post-war productions endure over sixty years after the original performances.

2. An educational legacy? The Old Vic School

Alongside its starry seasons, the Old Vic in this period is also celebrated for its educational and experimental theatre schemes, which ran under the banner of the 'Old Vic Centre'. The Centre aimed to provide a training school for actors and technical students (both production and design), a children's theatre company, and an experimental theatre company. Michael Billington has lauded the principles and ambition behind the Centre as the theatrical equivalent of 'the Atlee government's plans for a cradle to the grave welfare state', whilst Jane Baldwin argues that, 'the Old Vic School became the foremost theatre school in the Western World'.⁵⁰² The founding director of the Centre, Michel Saint-Denis, and his associate directors, George Devine and Glen Byam Shaw, envisaged that the Centre would develop to the extent that it 'would supply the parent stage with a regular flow of talent'.⁵⁰³ However, the experimental theatre was never realised and the Centre was wound up in 1952 amidst funding problems and allegations of internal feuding. This case study will consider the importance of the Old Vic Centre in post-war theatre by focusing on the work of the Old Vic School and, in particular, the influence of Michel Saint-Denis. It will explore some of the School's central aims and consider the status of its legacy.

2.1. The Old Vic School: Training outside tradition

In the pre-war years, drama schools were largely filled by students from well-off middle-class backgrounds who could afford to pay the fees. Post-war, a new

⁵⁰² Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*, p. 127.

⁵⁰³ Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, p. 108.

system of educational scholarships enabled schools and universities to take students on the basis of their ability, regardless of their financial situation. For the Centre director, Michel Saint-Denis, this was a 'very important factor in the evolution of the theatre in the post-war years, one which gave it fresh strength and colour'.⁵⁰⁴ Two-thirds of the students at the Old Vic School were on scholarships.⁵⁰⁵ The extent to which the School's progressive attitude marked a radical departure from the prevalent attitudes within established drama schools is reflected in Sheila Hancock's memories of RADA in 1949: 'it was a finishing school for the rich [...] In my time the Academy moulded its students into the elegant actors required for the theatre and films of the period'.⁵⁰⁶ In contrast, the Old Vic School training set out to introduce students to a diverse range of techniques and styles. Michel Saint-Denis described the aim of the acting course as twofold:

1. To bring reality to the interpretation of all theatrical styles, particularly the classical, and to achieve the greatest possible freedom in their practice
2. To enlarge the actor's field of expression and to equip him in such a way that he could mime, sing, dance, perform acrobatic tricks.⁵⁰⁷

Although the Old Vic School's training placed an emphasis on the classical, Saint-Denis states that the 'aim [...] was always to enrich the modern theatre'.⁵⁰⁸ Like Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, Saint-Denis believed that a greater understanding of past theatrical traditions and techniques would inform, and thereby improve the contemporary theatre:

There are not two worlds; there is not a world of the modern and a world of the classic theatre. There is only one theatre as there is only one world. But there is a continuity which slowly changes and develops from ancient to modern style. The deeper modern realism becomes in its expression as well as in its subject matter, the more it is possible to say that a modern

⁵⁰⁴ Michel Saint-Denis, *Training for the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 52.

⁵⁰⁵ Michel Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style* (London: Heinemann, 1960) p. 96.

⁵⁰⁶ Hancock, *The Two of Us*, p. 59.

⁵⁰⁷ Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style*, p. 97.

⁵⁰⁸ Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Re-discovery of Style*, p. 91.

actor, if he is brought up in a classical tradition which he has properly understood, will be better equipped to bite on modern forms of theatre.⁵⁰⁹

The breadth of the acting course was impressive, with students receiving classes on the Commedia dell'Arte, acrobatics, mask work and music hall comedians.⁵¹⁰ The Old Vic Centre and its training courses were driven by the idea of experimentation. Improvisation classes were an integral part of the syllabus. First year students found that dramatic texts were initially put to one side: 'They did plenty of acting but it was of the improvised kind. The purpose of this was to give them an opportunity to discover for themselves, within themselves, what acting consists of'.⁵¹¹ Former student Joan Plowright remembers one of the improvisational exercises in vivid detail in her memoirs:

We had to choose an animal, go to the zoo and study it, and then work to perfect the physical characteristics of that animal; slinking around on all fours as a tiger, slithering about the floor as a snake, or hopping around as a chicken. After about four weeks we had to perform it on stage for the staff and other students. If we were successful, they would be able to identify the animal by its eating habits, the way it moved, whether it was timid and frightened or a hunting animal. All that is not as silly as it may sound, for an actor needs to apply the same intense study of movements, habits and peculiarities to the creation of a human character.⁵¹²

Such exercises were not approved of by the Old Vic's administrator, Llewellyn Rees, who added to internal fears that the School's methods were unorthodox, by reportedly informing the governors that 'Students in the improvisation class did nothing but spend the morning on the floor pretending to be animals'.⁵¹³ Whilst Plowright's comments suggest that the training methods were often successful in terms of performance technique, fellow pupil Rosalind Knight was less convinced about the teaching style:

We had criticisms a lot, you know every month or...with all the directors. And you were criticised mercilessly. And you had to sit there and take it. And you were so self conscious that somebody else had to take down your

⁵⁰⁹ Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Re-discovery of Style*, p. 51.

⁵¹⁰ See Plowright, *And That's Not All*, p. 21. See also Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Re-discovery of Style*, p. 105.

⁵¹¹ Saint-Denis, *Theatre the Re-discovery of Style*, p. 101.

⁵¹² Plowright, *And That's Not All*, p. 21.

⁵¹³ Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*, p. 136.

notes for you, you see, because you couldn't hear them because you were so embarrassed by yourself [...] Michel Saint-Denis - the humourless French man. He scared us all to death [...] Because he was so damn destructive you know. I'm sure he didn't like the English really. And he thought we were so inhibited and restricted. And he was always trying to open the girls up, in every sense [Laughs].⁵¹⁴

There is no written evidence (in the public domain, at least) to suggest that Saint-Denis conducted inappropriate relationships with students. Jane Baldwin somewhat obliquely records that staff assumed a 'therapeutic' role, and would 'intervene in student's personal lives if it meant improving their work', but she gives no sense that Saint-Denis overstepped the mark in this. However, the harsh critical approach that Knight remembers was central to Saint-Denis' working methods. Laurence Olivier's description of being directed by him suggests that he applied the same controlling pressure to students and professionals alike:

You either believed in the man or you didn't, but something told you instinctively that you had better do so if you were to get any good out of him. This resulted in a kind of enslavement which, though not at all disagreeable, was apt to make you feel like a donkey enticed by a different carrot at every milepost along a road that kept re-appearing ahead of you just when you thought you had come to the end. There seemed to be no limit to the amount of demands which he made upon his actors.⁵¹⁵

Knight's and Olivier's recollections are important as they offer a view of Saint-Denis which fills in some of the gaps left by Baldwin's sympathetic representation of Saint-Denis as a theatrical revolutionary who engendered dislike as a result of ignorance and xenophobia.⁵¹⁶ Their historical importance lies not in their ability to provide a conclusive truth, but rather in the way in which they open up historical interpretations of past events and people. Criticisms of Saint-Denis' methods notwithstanding, when students began to graduate and enter the profession, other theatre practitioners were impressed by their innovative performance style. Edward Hardwicke exemplifies this in his recollections of his first acting job with the Old Vic Company:

⁵¹⁴ TAP interview with Rosalind Knight (6 November 2007)

<<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/knight.html>> [accessed 5 September 2008]

⁵¹⁵ Laurence Olivier, 'Introduction' in Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Re-discovery of Style*, p. 10.

⁵¹⁶ Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*, p. 138-139.

What I do remember clearly was working with actors who had been to the Old Vic School, [they] had a very definite and distinctive way of working, which they'd been taught, which I envied hugely [...] they had a way of working on a text, or reading a text and deciding how you would...and picking little bits and then...rather like one of those pictures with dots, you fill in a couple of dots and then gradually...and I can remember thinking gosh, I was never taught to work like that, and how good that was.⁵¹⁷

Hardwicke's description supports Saint-Denis' argument that, 'We do not practice improvisation for its own sake; it is not there to corrupt the text but to invent a way to 'uncork' it'.⁵¹⁸ To the end of his life, Saint-Denis believed that student work could play a central part in theatrical change:

Working in experimental plays, or shows specially written for students would allow them to contribute to the evolution of new theatrical forms; the experimental stage would be a place where such experiments could take place without having to succeed. The right to fail, after all, is a basic element of that climate in which freedom for experimentation can grow.⁵¹⁹

By the late 1980s, when Saint-Denis wrote this, subsidised theatre was widespread and 'the right to fail' was an understood, if not always agreed upon, argument within British culture. This was in no small part due to the work of George Devine and the ESC in the late 1950s and 60s. However, in 1947 Saint-Denis wrote a promotional article about the Old Vic Centre which suggests that he was driven by the 'right to fail' principle well before it became fashionable:

We all know that experiments in the theatre are viewed with mistrust because they are not paying propositions. And yet can an art be really living if it does not renew itself? And can it renew itself without experimenting?⁵²⁰

The experimental nature of the School was central to the ethos of the Centre. In 1946, the Experimental Theatre was described in one of Saint-Denis' memoranda as 'the key-stone of the structure of this whole plan'. The launch of the School and

⁵¹⁷ TAP interview with Edward Hardwicke conducted by Kate Harris (6 November 2007) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/hardwicke.html>> [accessed 29 August 2008]

⁵¹⁸ Saint-Denis, *Training for the Theatre*, p. 147.

⁵¹⁹ Saint-Denis, *Training for the Theatre*, p. 53.

⁵²⁰ Michel Saint-Denis, 'The Old Vic Centre', *Theatre Arts*, August 1947 (Copy of article held within Michel Saint-Denis archive at the British Library ADD 81176).

the Young Vic were, for the three directors, Saint-Denis, Devine and Byam Shaw, only the initial stages in a much bigger organisational plan. The same memorandum gives a sense of both the development timescale and the extent to which the three Centre directors had envisaged their own career progression within it. According to this document, September 1948 was the 'Earliest possible date for the opening of the Experimental Theatre', by which point Glen Byam Shaw and George Devine 'should be the directors of the theatre [...] with Saint Denis remaining at the head of the Centre as a whole'.⁵²¹

3. The end of an era

However, by the late 1940s both the triumvirate and the Centre were facing problems. In 1948 the governors informed Olivier, Richardson and Burrell that they would not be renewing their contracts. When the news broke, Olivier was on tour with the Old Vic in Australia whilst Richardson was in Hollywood for a film commitment. In their absence the main season had been left to Burrell and, without its star performers, the Old Vic ran up a loss of £26,000.⁵²² The debt provided a tangible reason for dismissal, but the suggestion that Olivier and Richardson had never been fully committed to the theatre as a result of their star status and film commitments was implicit in a private and confidential memorandum from the Joint Council of the National Theatre and the Old Vic governors:

An institution such as the Old Vic is about to become, based on the National Theatre [...] must have a permanent staff, and cannot be administered by men, however able, who have other calls upon their time and talent.⁵²³

⁵²¹ 'The Old Vic Centre. Memorandum Number 1. 18th July, 1948.', Michel Saint-Denis Archive BL ADD 81173

⁵²² Elsom and Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre*, p. 98.

⁵²³ 'National Theatre and Old Vic: Future Administration'. The document is undated but a later document in the same file states that the original memorandum was circulated in July 1948. See Michel Saint-Denis Archive BL ADD 81173

This memorandum suggests that the Old Vic 'saw itself and was seen as a National Theatre in the making'.⁵²⁴ Following the triumvirate's departure in 1949, the management of the Theatre was streamlined. Hugh Hunt was appointed as artistic director of the main company and Llewelyn Rees, the former drama director of the Arts Council, was appointed to the new position of theatre administrator. The three Centre directors remained, but the departure of the triumvirate meant that they had lost three prominent supporters. It was decided that the company and the Centre should amalgamate under a joint directorate and share the premises on Waterloo Road. A reduction in Arts Council funding, and an ongoing power struggle between the Centre Directors and Rees and Hunt, resulted in management and policy disagreements which could not be resolved. Saint-Denis, Devine and Byam Shaw submitted their resignations and the governors accepted.

4. The retrospective narrative of loss

With the departure of the triumvirate in 1949, and the decision to close the Centre in 1952, the optimism that had been associated with the early post-war years began to fade, as Elsom and Tomlin remark: 'The Old Vic Company, the basis of the new National, was now just one of several rather second-rate and transitory teams competing for attention'.⁵²⁵ This comment reflects a sense of wasted promise which is repeatedly picked up on in accounts of the Old Vic in this period. Retrospectively, the story of the demise of the triumvirate and the School has arguably become as important to the over-arching historiographical narrative of post-war British Theatre, as the story of its earlier successes. In an essay which explores Saint-Denis' working relationship with the director George Devine, Ewan Jeffery argues that 'the seminal moment in twentieth century British Theatre was not when the lights came up on Jimmy Porter's bed-sit, but when Saint-Denis got on the plane to France'.⁵²⁶ The Old Vic's work in the 1940s has been memorialised

⁵²⁴ Coleman, *Olivier*, p. 170.

⁵²⁵ Elsom and Tomlin, *The History of the National Theatre*, p. 102.

⁵²⁶ Ewan Jeffrey, 'Theatres of Resistance: Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine', in *The Golden Generation: New Light on Post-war Theatre*, pp 93-115 (p. 109).

by theatre historians in much the same way that the works of promising authors who die young become celebrated after their death. Jane Baldwin's observations about the Centre are a case in point:

There is no question that with the closure of the school, British Theatre incurred a blow. Although the School's influence continues to this day, how might the theatre have been transformed if the Centre had been allowed to flourish?⁵²⁷

Modern history thrives on the idea of revisionism, and the sense that there is an unfinished element to this story has inevitably encouraged theatre historians to ponder the unanswerable 'What if?'. Irving Wardle provides an extreme example of this tendency in his biography of George Devine:

What would have happened if EXP had been built; if Saint Denis had gained control of the National Theatre; if there had been money to build it in 1955 and if the Queen had not laid the foundation stone in the wrong place? [...] What direction would George Devine have taken if he had been in the position to spend his remaining years with the old team?⁵²⁸

It is unlikely that anyone considered Wardle's 'what ifs' in 1952. However, the benefit of hindsight allows their suggestions to be credited with at least a semblance of possibility in the mind of the reader. By 1978, when Wardle's book was published, British theatre had moved on. The practitioners who were associated with the Old Vic in the early post-war years had established impressive theatrical reputations; Laurence Olivier had become the director of the National Theatre; George Devine had founded the ESC; and Michel Saint-Denis had established theatrical training programmes in France, Canada and America. The value of the Old Vic Centre had been proven by the calibre of the students that the School turned out. A select list of the School's alumni includes: Joan Plowright, Rosalind Knight, Prunella Scales, Sheila Ballantine, Alan Dobie, Denis Quilley,

⁵²⁷ Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*, p. 138.

⁵²⁸ Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, p. 141. See also Elsom and Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre*, p. 101.

Alan Tagg, Richard Negri, Peter Zadek, Frank Dunlop, Val May and Caspar Wrede.⁵²⁹

Hindsight inevitably shapes the way in which history is written. Indeed Michel Saint-Denis' views on theatrical interpretation can just as easily be applied to its history: 'Each period has its own style [...] It has an influence on life and it is with that unconscious feeling of the style of our own times, in our own country, that we turn towards the interpretation of the styles of different periods in different countries'.⁵³⁰ Figures like Olivier continued to receive a high level of public interest in the late 20th century and this encourages theatre goers and practitioners to re-tell and, in the process, revise earlier anecdotes that concerned him. The recollections of Neil Hornick, an avid theatre-goer, provide an example of the often ambiguous relationship between historical knowledge and memories of actual experiences:

I still feel I would like to talk a bit more about what it was like in the forties and fifties to go to the theatre. It is well documented that the leading actors of the day were the famous knights, Laurence Olivier, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Ralph Richardson, and Sir John Gielgud, and they still – or at least Ralph Richardson in those days – still held sway at the Old Vic, the prestigious Shakespeare Venue [...] I saw my first real Shakespeare productions there and it was really very exciting and especially as there were young actors in the cast whom I had not heard of at the time but who went onto greater things later in life. One of the enjoyable things to do is to look at these old theatre programmes that I still have from the early fifties [...] I have here before me the yellow covered programmes from the first productions I ever saw at the Old Vic, that is the 1954-1955 season [...] If you look down the cast list in secondary roles you find people like Eric Porter, Robert Hardy, Charles Gray, John Wood [...] Michael Bates, Virginia McKenna [...] Ronald Fraser, Alan Dobie, John Woodvine [...] Anyway these people did go on to forge reputations later in life.⁵³¹

Hornick's recollections are a mesh of memorial and historical narratives. He begins his story by saying that he wants to talk about the theatre of the 1940s and 50s and the narrative that he begins to tell is ostensibly about the Old Vic.

⁵²⁹ See Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, p.113.

⁵³⁰ Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Re-discovery of Style*, pp. 49-49.

⁵³¹ TAP interview with Neil Hornick conducted by Katherine Lofthouse (24 January 2008) <<http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrchive/hornick.html>> [accessed 2 September 2008]

However, it later transpires that he did not start going to the theatre until 1954, meaning that he never actually saw either Richardson or Olivier performing with the company. This suggests that the earlier section of the story is entirely based on information he had either read or been told about. With regard to the performances that he did see, he seems to remember them on the basis of the later careers that the young members of the cast went on to have. The memories are tied to his theatre programmes, which are the only archival documents that remain from his trips to the theatre. Hornick's account indicates how a critical mass of interest can create its own momentum. The individual memory is connected to a well established, public narrative, in order to emphasise the relevance, or even the importance of the personal experience. It is then revised to encompass memories that are linked to later periods outside the time-frame under discussion. The influence of the present on the history of the past is, to a certain extent, inevitable. However, the historiographical narratives surrounding the Old Vic in the 1940s and early 50s provide an example of how memories can be inadvertently re-shaped to the extent that their historical value becomes contingent on their relationship to subsequent events, rather than their relationship to the surrounding context.

Afterword

The entire web of influences, contexts, conditions, causalities (and their respective, reciprocal hierarchies), woven by the historian [...] holds the past in suspension. It itself exists only in expectation of its complements, supplements, corrections, additions, contributions. "The dice" will never be cast.

Jean-Francois Lyotard⁵³²

This thesis has sought to explore the diversity of British theatre between 1944 and 1956 by looking at the period from 5 distinct angles. I have argued that the production of overly definitive interpretations of early post-war culture has closed down the possibility of new interpretations. Working with the *TAP* interviews has impressed upon me that history is a fluid concept, as Alon Confino comments: 'Memory work reconfigures the nation into a set of past traditions, which themselves are contested by social groups, marginalised people, exiles and strangers, who tell quite different stories about the nation'.⁵³³ I have made a point of drawing attention to the historical contradictions that I have encountered because this research has been predicated on the idea that we can only begin to understand the past by acknowledging and exploring the historical differences that often surround its narratives.

Re-claiming individual perspectives on the theatre of this period has been central to this thesis. Maurice Halbwachs observes that the history of individual lives disappears: 'not because the material measure of time that separates them from us lengthens', but rather, 'because nothing remains of the group in which they passed their lives, and which needed to name them'.⁵³⁴ In some cases the testimonies within the *TAP* interviews are the only public record of particular practitioners, productions, companies, and significantly, points of view, thus illustrating the potential impact that this kind of research can have on the way we write and read theatre history.

⁵³² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger And "The Jews"*, translated by Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, c1990), p. 10.

⁵³³ Alon Confino, 'Noises of the Past' in *The Work of Memory*, pp. 1-21 (p.12).

⁵³⁴ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 73.

The retrospective nature of the interviews has allowed me to analyse some of the ways in which the historiography of early post-war British theatre has evolved over time. Gaynor Kavanagh argues that in conducting an interview, 'the oral historian is attempting to arrest and formalise something that which otherwise has fluidity and the capacity to change'.⁵³⁵ In this respect, the *TAP* interviews can be seen as a series of snapshots of historical perspectives at the beginning of the 21st century. However, the context in which the interviews are situated is changing all the time, not least because the *TAP* is a 'living archive' to which new testimonies continue to be added. As with all historical documents, the apparent fixity of the testimonies themselves is challenged by the fact that the passing of time is likely to lead to their form and content being interpreted in new ways.

Collectively the testimonies give an expansive sense of history. The diversity of both the form and content of memory is encapsulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

There is no book like the memory, none with such a good index, and that of every kind, alphabetic, systematic, arranged by names of persons, by colors [sic], tastes, smells, shapes, likeness, unlikeness, by all sorts of mysterious hooks and eyes to catch and hold, and contrivances for giving a hint.⁵³⁶

The individuality of our memorial records often means that researchers are caught and held by different elements of the narrator's story. The *TAP* has collected the memories of over 200 individuals, and within them there are references to many relatively unknown and under-researched elements of the post-war period. In my work I have explored some of these areas, in particular in my consideration of the relationship between theatre and television. I have examined the connections between different practitioners, genres and media throughout this thesis. If I were to take this research further, I believe that investigation into interviewee references to music hall routines, variety shows, cinema and radio drama, would reveal that

⁵³⁵ Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 86.

⁵³⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Natural History of the Intellect and Other Papers' in *Memory: An Anthology*, pp.172-175 (p. 173).

other dramatic forms also had an important influence on the evolution of British theatre in the 1940s and 50s.

However, my thesis is only one interpretation of the wealth of material contained within the *TAP* collection. The archive continues to grow, and the worldwide accessibility of the transcripts will make it possible for other researchers to trace different historical narratives in the years to come, exemplifying Raphael Samuel's point that history is 'a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands'.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁷ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 8.

Appendix A

Oral history testimonies have been cited in written form throughout this thesis. However, as Stephen Owen observes: 'As we read the writings of memory, it is easy to forget that we do not read memory itself but its transformation through writing'.⁵³⁸ In a transcript it is almost impossible to convey the tone in which a memory was originally delivered. Our personality and emotions are often conveyed through our voices and, as a result, the memories that I have extracted in the preceding chapters, have lost much of the meanings that are contained within the recordings. In an attempt to address this loss, I am including a C.D. of sound extracts from some of the interviews which I have discussed.

C.D. Track List

1. Peter Bartlett talking about J.B. Priestley
2. Mavis Whyte talking about the Entertainment National Service Association
3. Renee Goddard talking about meeting Bertolt Brecht
4. Pamela Howard talking about working as a designer at Birmingham Rep
5. Jean Newlove talking about working as a choreographer for Theatre Workshop
6. Harry Greene talking about designing sets for Theatre Workshop
7. Ronald Gray talking about going to watch the Old Vic Theatre Company

⁵³⁸ Stephen Owen, cited by Peter Burke in 'History as Social Memory', in *Memory*, ed. by Thomas Butler, pp. 97-113 (p. 101).

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- Reader's Report by H.C. Game on *Party Manners*, 15 August 1949, License number 665

Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive, Ruskin College, Oxford

- Ewan MacColl, *Landscape with Chimneys*, unpublished manuscript
- Ewan MacColl, *Operation Olive Branch*, unpublished manuscript
- Ewan MacColl, *The Travellers*, unpublished manuscript
- Ewan MacColl, *Rogues Gallery*, unpublished manuscript
- Ewan MacColl, *The Flying Doctor*, unpublished manuscript
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