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**The Forgotten Pioneers: The Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent (1962 - 1971)**

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My interest in the Victoria Theatre was sparked by my grandparents' memories of living round the corner from the theatre, and owning a shop opposite. I will always be grateful to them for sharing their views for an interview as part of the University of Sheffield's Theatre Archive project with the British Library in 2003. This interview resulted in the opportunity to spend a number of fascinating days in the Victoria Theatre collection, accompanied by Peter Cheeseman – a wonderful experience. I would also like to thank my parents and in-laws for their unfailing support over the years, and for always being there exactly when I needed them. A very special thank you to my husband who has managed to remain enthusiastic during our endless discussions about Cheeseman and the Vic company, and whose ongoing support has allowed me to realise an ambition. Finally, a thank you to my three wonderful boys - one who didn't even exist when the project began - who have always reminded me that there is life beyond the thesis!

## **Abstract**

The subject of this thesis is the history of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent under its director, Peter Cheeseman. Considering the scope of available resources in the Victoria Theatre Collection and the importance of the work taking place under Cheeseman's direction, the absence of the Victoria Theatre from British theatre history needs to be addressed. The thesis has three main aims to achieve. Primarily, it will offer a first exploration of the initial nine years of the theatre under Cheeseman, focusing on this period to ensure that the material is covered in sufficient depth. The analysis will draw on largely untouched archival resources and new interview material to provide a history of this ground-breaking theatre from its opening in 1962, up to its first verbatim documentary production in 1971. In this period, Cheeseman developed many of the artistic approaches that influenced him and the direction of the company for the rest of his long tenure. Secondly, I will draw on the archive to offer a close thematic examination of the company to provide an understanding of the range of work undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent, and thereby offering a corrective to the tendency for such history as there is on the Vic to focus on its contribution to the documentary form, however significant. As part of this examination, I will be adding to the range of primary resources available to future scholars, through a range of original interviews with key members of the company. The thesis will conclude by examining the documentary form, which has played a significant role in the theatre's history, and will offer a casebook study of the company's sixth documentary, *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971), of which there has been limited previous critical analysis. Lastly, the thesis will demonstrate the significance of the work that was taking place in theatres outside London during this period and will, therefore, contribute to the body of theatre historiography on regional theatres in the period.

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*All images reproduced with kind permission of the Victoria Theatre Collection,  
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## **Declaration**

*I, Rachel Claire Walker, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.*

*[A version of Chapter 1 has been published: Rachel Walker, “Gesticulating Peanuts”: an introduction of theatre-in-the-round to British theatre in the 1950s’, WRoCAH Student Journal, Issue 3, July 2017*

*A version of Chapter 3 has also been published: Rachel Walker, “One of the few theatres in England who really care about dramatists”: New Writing at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent in the 1960s’, *Theatre Notebook*, (Vol. 73, No.2, 2019), pp. 102-120]*

## **The Forgotten Pioneers: The Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent (1962 - 1971)**

### **Introduction**

This thesis aims to establish the Victoria Theatre's (the Vic's) reputation in Stoke-on-Trent as a centre for innovative theatre practice in the 1960s and 70s. Although there is relatively little written about it in histories of British theatre, the work being produced at the Victoria during the 1960s and 70s was viewed by contemporaries, including actors, writers, directors, critics and audiences, as ground-breaking. As the first theatre-in-the-round in Great Britain, it established a dedicated following both within the industry and with regional audiences, and steadily built up an impressive reputation.

The history of the Victoria Theatre begins in 1955 when Stephen Joseph established the Studio Theatre Company with a view to building a permanent theatre-in-the-round. The company did not establish their permanent home at the Victoria Theatre until 1962, and Joseph's dream of a purpose-built permanent theatre-in-the-round was not realised until 1986. Peter Cheeseman remained as Artistic Director of the theatre from its opening in 1962 through to his retirement in 1998, after which he was succeeded by Gwenda Hughes (1998 - 2007) and latterly, by Theresa Heskins (2007 - current). Although the theatre's history is extensive, and fairly well-documented in the Victoria Theatre archive, remarkably little has been published about its achievements.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the thesis is a history of the Vic, it has been necessary to make reference to Stephen Joseph and his philosophy, since the theatre was born out of his touring Studio Theatre Company. The thesis focuses on the first nine years of

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<sup>1</sup> The Victoria Theatre Collection, Special Collections, University of Staffordshire. The collection is currently being sorted and collated. Funding is being sought for cataloguing and digitisation. See 'Methodology' for an overview of archive holdings.

Cheeseman's tenure, since it was during this period that the company's principles were fully established, and these remained embedded throughout Cheeseman's time as Artistic Director. Covering the history thematically, rather than chronologically, therefore seemed an appropriate way of presenting a coherent view of Cheeseman and the company at Stoke. Inevitably, focusing on this period does not allow for a complete overview of Cheeseman's tenure and omits certain key developments, such as the construction of the New Victoria Theatre, Europe's first permanent theatre-in-the-round. However, to cover this thirty-six-year period would have been beyond the scope of a project such as this, particularly given the abundance of material available in the archive. The advantage of taking a narrower period is twofold. First, it allows for a detailed overview of the company's working practices, considering Cheeseman's policies on working with a permanent company or working with new writers, for example. This analysis draws on many documents in the archive that have not been studied previously. Second, I will argue, it was during this period that the company's unique identity was established, and practices were developed which would define Cheeseman's long tenure. An afterword in the conclusion will give a brief overview of the trajectory of the theatre's history after 1971.

## **Methodology**

The research for this study is drawn from three principal sources: the Victoria Theatre Collection at the University of Staffordshire, interviews with former members of the Victoria Theatre Company, and the small number of secondary sources which cover the Victoria Theatre's work in the period. The latter are considered in the Literature Review.



## Victoria Theatre Collection

The Victoria Theatre Collection is an extensive archive which documents the work carried out by Peter Cheeseman and the Victoria Theatre Company between 1962 and 1998. This work includes the company's theatre production, as well as their work within the community of Stoke-on-Trent, and their research for the annual documentary that was based on the local area. The archive contains a vast amount of material relating to the company's productions, including recordings of performances, prompt scripts and press cuttings, as well as an extensive collection of correspondence between theatre practitioners, audience members, local organisations and the Victoria Theatre. Further, there are a number of original scripts contained in the archive, and detailed correspondence between Peter Cheeseman and a variety of playwrights, many of whom began their career in Stoke-on-Trent. The archive is particularly unique since it contains all of the research undertaken by the company for the local documentaries, including the interview recordings and transcripts from a variety of Staffordshire workers, such as miners, steelworkers and prisoners of war. The collection also contains photographs and other records relating to the conversion of the old Victoria Theatre in Hartshill, and the building of the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme. There is also a large amount of information and correspondence based on Arts Council funding, as well as more general accounting and meeting minutes which document the daily operation of a regional repertory theatre.<sup>2</sup> I have drawn on a number of notes and writings made by Cheeseman and recorded in the archive on scripts, in jottings to the company and in production diaries. His thoughts have also been documented more comprehensively in

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<sup>2</sup> University of Staffordshire, Guide to Special Collections, University of Staffordshire, 2019 <[libguides.staffs.ac.uk/specialcollections/victheatre](http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/specialcollections/victheatre)> [Accessed 13 May 2019].

contemporary articles for theatre journals and television and radio interviews for the BBC. These too are included in the archive. The collection is currently being sorted and collated, and funding is being sought for cataloguing and digitisation. I have therefore referenced each item from the archive in as transparent a way as possible to ensure easy access for researchers in the future.

### Interviews

As part of the research for this study, I have interviewed a range of people associated with the Victoria Theatre Company during the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these individuals have not previously had the opportunity to discuss their involvement with the theatre and so this original source material forms an essential part of our understanding of the theatre's working life. I have endeavoured to speak with individuals with diverse experiences of the theatre, including playwrights, actors, volunteers, financial administrators and technical crew. I have also drawn on selective material from interviews collected by Paul Elsam for his research on *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur*.<sup>3</sup> Since there are very few studies of the theatre during this period, the principal source of evidence is the memory of live witnesses. Memory, despite its potential flaws, remains an invaluable source of evidence given the ephemeral nature of rehearsal work and theatre production. Certainly, without these accounts it would be impossible to evoke a sense of the company's ethos in the initial years. A reliance on oral history can become problematic, however, as Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson explain:

Even when the agents of the past are still available to bear live witness, such is the unreliability of memory and the instability of the mediating efficacy of interpersonal and intertextual exchange that the constructedness [sic] of the historian's representation remains obstinately incontrovertible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, 'Introduction', in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth* ed. by Claire Cochrane (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-29 (p. 2).

The historian must therefore bear in mind at all times the fallibility of memories, as well as their critical contribution to our understanding of the past. Given this, and in an effort to paint as reliable a picture as possible, I have interviewed members of the company who performed a range of different roles and were part of the company at different stages of the chosen period. Material on the company itself has also been supported with a range of sources including journal articles, reviews and contemporary press coverage. In an effort to convey the essence of the company's ethos and practices, I have included verbatim extracts of the interview transcripts, rather than attempt to paraphrase and accordingly risk affecting the sense of the words spoken. This determination to stay true to people's words is critical to the validity and value of the research narrative. By drawing on them, I have privileged the views and experiences of those who created the work, allowing them the space through quotation to define how they are represented in theatre history.

### Historiography

Thomas Postlewait's 1991 essay, 'Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes', published in *Theatre Journal*, raises a series of significant points to consider on approaching this study. The absence of the Vic from recent theatre histories may be explained by Postlewait's affirmation:

The chain of commentary is not so surprising, because historians read previous historians, and regularly write about the same events that their predecessors described and analyzed.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, British theatre history has been written as London theatre history, as if the significant performances, new wave playwrights and innovative directors were all centred in the capital with few major theatrical events occurring in the rest of the

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Postlewait, 'Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes', *Theatre Journal*, 43.2 (1991), pp. 157-178 (p. 172).

country, save for poor imitations of London's leading productions. This is an exaggeration, of course, and theatre historians do make reference to regional activities, but these references are largely nominal. As Dominic Shellard maintains in his preface to *Post-War British Theatre*:

On re-reading my manuscript, I was surprised at the extent to which London recurs throughout the narrative, but then London has been *the* site of theatrical activity throughout the period. A debate about the advisability of such centralization is long overdue.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably, it is the continuing dominance of London in theatre histories that perpetuates precisely this 'centralization'. Thus, regional theatre history takes a similar place to that of women's theatre history, according to Susan Bennett:

Women's work tends to be ghettoized in a single chapter devoted to this period-inscribed phenomenon of feminist theatre (predominantly 1970s and 1980s), something that seems to assure the continued absence of women elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The same could be said about regional theatre. In theatre histories, it too becomes 'ghettoized', dealt with in a dedicated chapter or section before continuing with the primary narrative of London theatre developments. Ros Merkin addresses these concerns in her essay 'Liverpool':

The local, never a very fashionable concept for mainstream historians, has become increasingly marginalised.<sup>8</sup>

This study aims to build on the pioneering work done by theatre historians such as Merkin, Claire Cochrane and Marvin Carlson, in bringing the unfashionable and 'marginalised' region of local theatre history into the mainstream. It is only by considering theatres such as the Victoria Theatre in Stoke, the Playhouse and

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<sup>6</sup> Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1999), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bennett, 'The Making of Theatre History', in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* ed. Charlotte M. Canning & Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), pp. 63-84 (p. 70).

<sup>8</sup> Ros Merkin, 'Liverpool', in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* ed. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 91-103 (p. 91).

Everyman in Liverpool or the Birmingham Rep that we are able to understand the full picture of theatrical work throughout the 1960s and 70s in Britain. Since these theatres were so fundamentally rooted in their respective regions, their histories are essentially those of their regions, a term which should not be read as in any way degrading or suggestive of the theatres' lack of importance. As Merkin comments:

If an inclusive history of world theatre is not to leave out Times Square or Bunraku, why exclude Liverpool? And if we do, what happens to our understanding of theatre history when we leave out that specific culture's history?<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, Stoke-on-Trent shares a similar place to Liverpool in the way it has been perceived culturally. Merkin states that Liverpool 'is probably the city with the worst reputation in the national consciousness' and arguably, Stoke-on-Trent would be a close contender.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the region's theatre becomes judged in a particular light and perhaps because of this, little is written about it. Merkin argues that the Liverpool Royal Court is 'unashamedly local in its storyline...and unashamedly local in its references...jokes rely on local knowledge'.<sup>11</sup> Again, this local emphasis is at the heart of Cheeseman's work at the Vic:

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<sup>9</sup> Merkin (2012), p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Merkin notes that Liverpool has been 'associated with riots, radical politics and economic meltdown, with gun crime, football violence and the kidnap and murder of two-year-old Jamie Bulger by two ten-year-olds in 1993. It stalked our television screens with images of inner-city Toxteth on fire during riots in 1981 and with Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock condemning the city council for the 'grotesque chaos' of a Labour council hiring taxis to hand out redundancy notices to its own workers in 1985. In the same year, pictures of rioting Liverpool football fans who caused a wall to collapse, killing thirty- nine Spanish supporters of Juventus at Heysel, were beamed into the nation's living rooms'. Merkin (2012), p. 96.

Similarly, Stoke-on-Trent has long had a reputation as an industrial no-man's land inhabited by violent football supporters, with the so-called 'Naughty Forty' ensuring that Stoke City fans were the most arrested of any club in the country in 2018-19 according to Home Office figures. It is often viewed as stranded between the North and South, and between its definitions as a sprawling city or a disjointed collection of Potteries' towns. Descriptions of the city from the 1960s and 70s refer to it as 'one of the ugliest cities in existence' (*Daily Mirror*, 1971) and more recently Stoke has become 'a symbol of left-behind Britain' in its alleged role as 'Brexit capital of Britain' (John Lichfield, 'Stoke, the city Britain forgot', <[www.unherd.com](http://www.unherd.com)> [accessed 23 January 2020]).

<sup>11</sup> Merkin (2012), p. 93.

The only human situations we can truly comprehend are the ones small enough for us to feel ourselves a significant or effective part. Otherwise our actual sense of existing at all is depressingly diminished.<sup>12</sup>

His argument that visitors to the theatre from outside the district must ‘expect to feel like a visitor’ further supports this.<sup>13</sup> This local outlook, however, should not imply that the theatre is not worthy of study. As Carlson agrees:

There is also a sense in which all theatre is local; but in an increasingly interconnected world, neither theatre nor politics can be viewed as only local without a serious distortion and misunderstanding of each.<sup>14</sup>

Carlson’s view is that the ‘interconnected’ nature of theatre leads much local theatre and politics to have wide-reaching consequences beyond the immediate community; this is undoubtedly true for Cheeseman’s work at the Victoria. Cheeseman’s preoccupation with the region of Stoke-on-Trent particularly ensured that the theatre’s work took on a new political significance in locating this region on the cultural map. Whilst the theatre’s pioneering community work did ensure that Stoke-on-Trent had a place on the theatrical map, it has also meant that its history has been reduced to a repeated soundbite that Stoke is the home of political documentary. Whilst this was a cornerstone of the theatre’s philosophy, the documentary was only one production approach in a varied repertory of plays all chosen with the region in mind. The theatre’s significance does not lie solely in its innovation of local documentary and to suggest this allows it to be ghettoized, along with other regional theatre soundbites (such as the creation of Theatre-in-Education at the Belgrade, or Olivier’s debut at the Birmingham Rep, for example).

To explore further the potential issues of writing a narrative history, I return to Postlewait’s essay:

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Cook, *Directors’ Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Cook (1974), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Marvin Carlson, ‘Become Less Provincial’, *Theatre Survey* 45.2 (November 2004), 177-180 (p. 180).

Historians usually tell some kind of story about human actions, decisions, conditions, and values. We organize historical events into a sequence or story line that posits contiguous and causal lines of development.<sup>15</sup>

In piecing together the often fragmented archival sources, it is easy to imagine that there was always one intended outcome and a set of plans in place to achieve it.

Especially in the study of the Victoria Theatre, a narrative that has been so infrequently recorded, there is a risk that anecdotes can become arranged in order, as

Postlewait outlines:

We tell a familiar story of innovation and revolution, thus recording yet one more time the triumphant battle of individual genius against traditions and conventions.<sup>16</sup>

It would be easy to cast Cheeseman in this role as the individual genius battling against convention, however, whilst the Victoria Theatre Company did undertake considerable innovation, Cheeseman was constantly aware of producing work that was relevant and accessible for the district. Thus, the company often worked with certain traditions and conventions, which will be explored further in Chapter Two. It has been essential therefore to ensure that the company's work has been viewed in the context of the Staffordshire district and not as an independent, unattached company pushing for radical change in Britain's theatre-going habits. In order to counter-balance a singular chronological narrative, I have selected a thematic approach to the material which has also allowed me to tease out the range of work being undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent during the period 1962-71.

It has been important to remember in researching particular productions, that one review does not constitute an entire audience's opinion on a production, just as one complaint in the correspondence folder does not imply that a production caused

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<sup>15</sup> Postlewait (1991), p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

widespread offence. Postlewait: ‘we should resist the idea that the audience or the community is a singular entity, a collective mind’.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the study of reviews, it is often difficult to ascertain how representative the critic’s views are and yet, since a review or set of reviews remain the only lasting record of a production, it becomes increasingly challenging to do anything but rely on their judgments as if, to quote Postlewait again, ‘they are the arbitrators’.<sup>18</sup> I have, wherever possible, attempted to use reviews within a wider framework of responses including audience correspondence, audience and actor interviews and prompt script notations. Whilst each of these sources remains fraught with partiality problems, I hope that by combining a selection of material from different informants I have been more able to access the reality of the production being described. In essence, as Barbara Hodgson argues skilfully: ‘theatre historians work within a realm of loss, attempting to remember who (and what) has disappeared’.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, every theatre historian is working in an impossible situation in attempting to define the truth of a particular performance from a variety of subjective sources. It remains for the theatre historian to study all of these sources with a constant awareness of their limitations, and to draw conclusions that are unavoidably countered with a disclaimer of the analysis being a combination of a number of subjective sources. It is with these same disclaimers that I have approached an archival study such as this. Ultimately, as extensive and varied as the Victoria Theatre archive is, it has been largely collected and preserved under the auspices of the theatre’s artistic director, Peter Cheeseman. As an English and History undergraduate, Cheeseman approached all of his work at

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> Postlewait (2009), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Hodgson, ‘The visual record: the case of *Hamlet*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* ed. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 246-266 (p. 246).



the theatre with conservation in mind, and retained a vast amount of material. Interviewing him in 1974, Judith Cook recalls ‘talking to him in his cluttered office’ and his reference to ‘that heap of papers on the floor represents the theatre’s archives’.<sup>20</sup> Whilst it may not always have been carefully catalogued, Cheeseman always maintained the importance of preservation, and the archives are a rare glimpse into the rich history of a local theatre from its inception with the Studio Theatre Company tours, through to its purpose-built home in Stoke-on-Trent and beyond. However, whilst there is no evidence to suggest the material has been consciously constructed, I have been constantly aware that the records have been retained by an individual with preservation and a potential public readership in mind. As Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait argue in their introductory essay to *Representing the Past*:

Our historical sources, such as written documents and records, are already mediated representations of the historical actions, events, and thoughts that we seek to recover. The “original” documents are not the events themselves; they are representations by the historical agents and eyewitnesses, who themselves must negotiate their own double binds within the codes of representation.<sup>21</sup>

In an archive such as this, not only should we consider the fact that these documents are merely mediated representations of the events, but also that the documents themselves may have been selected intentionally to preserve a specific set of values to which the company aimed to adhere. In an effort to counterbalance this inevitable bias, I have aimed to draw from published documents that were not included in the theatre’s archive, as well as other archival sources where possible (for example, the Ayckbourn Collection at the Borthwick Institute in York).<sup>22</sup> Further, I have undertaken a range of interviews from people who were members of the company in a

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Cook (1974), p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 14

<sup>22</sup> The Alan Ayckbourn Archive, Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York.

variety of capacities and members of the audience, as well as some local residents of the time who did not attend the theatre regularly, in an attempt to give an objective assessment of the theatre's work in Stoke-on-Trent.

In Christopher B. Balme's essay on 'Playbills and the Theatrical Public Space', he suggests that 'any study of the theatregoing public needs to engage with the political and social sphere(s) in which it is situated'.<sup>23</sup> In my study, I have been acutely aware of the need to place it within the fluctuating political and social spheres of the 1960s and 70s, and to recognise that many of the choices made by Cheeseman were responding directly to new pieces of Arts Council legislation, for example.<sup>24</sup> This has been the difficulty and the joy of the project, making connections across a range of sources in order to arrive at a history that is as detailed and as balanced as possible. Overall, then, I have three principal aims to achieve. Firstly, this study will form the initial stages of an overdue exploration of the theatre. Considering the scope of available resources in the Victoria Theatre Collection and the importance of the work taking place under Cheeseman's direction, the absence of the Victoria Theatre from British Theatre history needs to be addressed. I will investigate largely untouched archival resources and new interview material to provide a history of this ground-breaking theatre from its opening in 1962 up to its first verbatim documentary production in 1971. Secondly, I will use this close thematic examination of the company to provide an understanding of the range of work undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent, and thereby offering a corrective to the tendency for such history as there is on the Vic to focus on documentary contribution, however significant. As part of this

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher B. Balme, 'Playbills and the Theatrical Public Space', in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* by Charlotte M. Canning & Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), pp. 37-63 (p. 41).

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter One for an exploration of the contemporary political situation and impact of governmental funding decisions.

examination, I will be adding to the range of primary resources available to future scholars, through the original interview material with those involved. The thesis will conclude by examining the documentary form, which has played a significant role in the theatre's history, and will offer a casebook study of the company's sixth documentary, *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971), of which there has been limited previous critical analysis. Lastly, the thesis will demonstrate the significance of the work that was taking place in theatres outside London during this period and will, therefore, contribute to the body of theatre historiography on regional theatres in the period.

### **Chapter Summary**

The first chapter opens with an outline of the state of theatre in post-war Britain with a particular focus on activity in the regions. It will examine Stephen Joseph's philosophy and explore his passion for theatre-in-the-round and his establishment of Studio Theatre. The chapter will then explore the company's location in Stoke-on-Trent and offer an account of Peter Cheeseman's recruitment. Cheeseman's position as theatre manager of the newly converted Victoria Theatre in Hartshill will then be explained. A version of this chapter has been published in the *White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH) Journal*.<sup>25</sup>

In Chapter Two, Cheeseman's company will be described in more depth. It will provide an analysis of Cheeseman's theatre philosophy and the company's commitment to involving the local community in their productions. It will address the company's atmosphere, drawing on oral testimony from actors, technicians and front-

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<sup>25</sup> Rachel Walker, "Gesticulating Peanuts": an introduction of theatre-in-the-round to British theatre in the 1950s', *White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH) Student Journal*, Issue 3, July 2017.

of-house members from the original staff body. It will then examine how the Stoke Victoria repertory system worked, and why Cheeseman made particular programming choices. This chapter will also cover the dispute between Cheeseman and Joseph that led to Cheeseman being sole Artistic Director of the company from 1967 onwards.

Chapter Three will explore a fundamental policy of the Victoria Theatre - its commitment to working with new writers. First, Joseph's philosophy on new writing within the Studio Theatre Company will be explained, as well as the influence this had on Cheeseman who adopted the same approach in the new theatre. The chapter will explore the methods Cheeseman used to recruit new writers and the process of actors working closely alongside a new writer as part of the company. It will examine three of the four new writers (the fourth being Brian Way who will be discussed further in Chapter Four), who were named as the company's writing team by Cheeseman in his review of the company's first three years: they were Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Plater and Peter Terson. Each had a very individual relationship with Cheeseman, which can be seen clearly in the detailed correspondence held in the archive. Drawing on a combination of these letters, plus press cuttings, reviews and audience feedback, the chapter will offer a comprehensive account of the role of the writer in the Victoria Theatre Company in the period. A version of this chapter has been published in *Theatre Notebook*.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst the Victoria Theatre is traditionally linked with the documentary style, a little-known strand of the company's work was their commitment to producing children's theatre to a high standard, and Cheeseman's plans to form a permanent children's theatre company. Cheeseman's approach to children's theatre is therefore significant

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Walker, "One of the few theatres in England who really care about dramatists": New Writing at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent in the 1960s', *Theatre Notebook*, 73.2 (2019), pp. 102-120.

in order to give a holistic view of the theatre's artistic policy; indeed, the fourth named member of the writing team in Cheeseman's policy statement of 1965 was Brian Way, founder of Theatre Centre – a pioneering children's theatre company. Chapter Four will therefore provide an overview of children's theatre in the 1960s and the early days of theatre-in-education. It will examine Way's development of Theatre Centre with Margaret Faulkes, and his important association with Cheeseman and Stoke-on-Trent throughout the 1960s and 70s. It will look particularly at Way's production of *Pinocchio*, which was revived three times at the Victoria Theatre, as an example of Way's theories of engagement and audience participation and explore how these were developed in collaboration with the company at Stoke. This section will draw heavily on archival material such as reviews and audience feedback, as well as correspondence between Cheeseman and Way. These letters chart the mutual support between the two practitioners as Theatre Centre developed their touring circuit in North Staffordshire, and the Victoria Theatre began to increase and develop their work for children's audiences.

Central to the theatre's history is its pioneering work in documentary theatre. Chapter Five will explore how Cheeseman developed this style of production with the company's first documentary, *The Jolly Potters* in 1964, in the absence of a resident writer. It will then chart the development of the company's theories through to the production of *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971), whilst making reference to significant documentary productions that came after this such as *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974). It will examine how Cheeseman's style combined influences from the work of the Living Newspapers of the 1930s, Theatre Workshop's *Oh What a Lovely War*, and Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads*, with the Victoria Theatre's company ethos to ensure its success within the community.

Chapter Six follows with a casebook on *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971), which will provide an in-depth analysis of the research process and production of the company's first verbatim production and the first cited example of verbatim theatre in the UK. This casebook draws largely on notes from a previously unpublished production journal held in the archive and is an opportunity to see Cheeseman's policies put into practice and, from reviews and audience correspondence, to understand the community's response to the piece. Drawing on interview material from actors, writers and technicians who were part of the research and production, as well as audience members' memories and archival material, this chapter will establish Cheeseman and the Victoria as a forerunner of the wave of verbatim theatre that was to follow in the subsequent decades.

The conclusion will sum up the significance of the Victoria Theatre and the progressive work that was taking place there. It will reiterate the importance of the company in its pioneering use of verbatim techniques in documentary theatre but will also emphasise the need to view this work more holistically in the context of the theatre's artistic policy. Further the chapter will contend that, as the first permanent theatre-in-the-round in Britain and given its role in the establishment of some major names in British theatre, there is a need to consider the significance of the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent alongside, for instance, the Royal Court or Theatre Workshop at Stratford East. The chapter will address the extent to which this rich theatre archive remains untouched and will suggest that further important research into the theatre's history still needs to be undertaken, noting that this material covers merely the first nine years of the theatre's history and does not address, for example, the establishment of the first purpose-built theatre-in-the-round in 1986.

## Literature Review

### **Stephen Joseph**

Any study of Peter Cheeseman's work at Stoke must be underpinned by a thorough explanation of Stephen Joseph's plans and ambitions, since ultimately the Victoria Theatre was the culmination of his theatre philosophy and his work with Studio Theatre Company since 1955. For this material, I am indebted to Paul Elsam's book, *Stephen Joseph: Pioneer and Provocateur*, which has been an invaluable resource in my understanding of Joseph as a 'manager, director and theatrical "missionary"'.<sup>27</sup> Rather than offering a simple biography, Elsam aims to address Joseph's forgotten legacy and explores this through a series of investigations into Joseph's life, for example: 'Joseph's Seven Routes to the Unknown' – an analysis of Joseph's influence on new writing for the theatre; or, 'Joseph and the Establishment' – an exploration of Joseph's often tempestuous relationship with the theatrical elite.<sup>28</sup> A key chapter for this study was 'Ayckbourn and Cheeseman – Twin Protégés', in which Elsam analyses the close involvement of these two theatre practitioners with Joseph as members of Studio Theatre Company and his lasting influence on them in their future work.<sup>29</sup> The chapter gives a discerning introduction to the working relationship that both practitioners had with Joseph and is further evidenced with Elsam's interviews and scrupulous attention to detail. For my thesis, this chapter provided a helpful starting point to begin exploring the complicated relationship between Cheeseman and Joseph in the advent of the Victoria Theatre's creation.

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<sup>27</sup> Elsam (2014), cover note.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63 and 123.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-63.

The book collates detailed analysis of archival material with interviews with theatre practitioners and has therefore been a useful methodological model, as well as a factual resource. The study is further aided by Elsam's investigatory approach, which leaves many questions asked but not all answered, for whilst the Stephen Joseph archive is extensive, it provides only a series of clues as to the inner workings of this complex individual. Although Elsam is not always able to provide the answers, the questions he poses are insightful and allow for a series of interpretations to be explored. He is careful not to be lured into a selective narrative of Joseph and aims to provide a tentative, yet coherent portrait of him. The study was particularly useful in providing information regarding Joseph's relationship with the Establishment and his visionary approach to theatre-making.<sup>30</sup>

The only other assessment of Joseph's life is Terry Lane's *The Full Round: The Several Lives and Theatrical Legacy of Stephen Joseph*.<sup>31</sup> Lane's is a more traditional biography, and covers Joseph's early years in detail which, while interesting, was less relevant for this study. Moreover, Lane's personal involvement in the dispute between Joseph and Cheeseman often colours his interpretation of events.<sup>32</sup> Lane was appointed as director of the Victoria Theatre in place of Cheeseman during 1967, and therefore was deeply affected by the events that took place towards the end of Joseph's life. Despite his attempt to maintain a third-person voice throughout the study, Lane's personal voice is undoubtedly evident. Therefore, I have drawn on this study selectively, aware that the representation of events may not be as impartial as a

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<sup>30</sup> Elsam argues that Joseph's absence from theatre history is largely due to some of the public and private disagreements he held with 'England's post-war cultural Establishment – a small, influential group located within English theatre, broadcasting, government and printed media'. (Elsam (2014), p. 124).

<sup>31</sup> Terry Lane, *The Full Round: The several lives and theatrical legacy of Stephen Joseph* (Italy: Duca della Corgna, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> In 1967, an ongoing dispute between Peter Cheeseman and his mentor, Stephen Joseph came to a dramatic conclusion with Joseph's dismissal of Cheeseman from the role of Artistic Director of the Victoria Theatre. The dispute is explored in more detail in Chapter Two.



study such as Elsam's, which has relied on a broad selection of available evidence and has no personal connection to the events discussed.

Both of these studies of Joseph's life enhance the understanding we can ascertain from Joseph's own writings. His studies range from the predominantly technical, such as *Adaptable Theatres*,<sup>33</sup> which provides a handbook for those considering adapting or creating a new studio theatre space, to the more philosophical, such as *New Theatre Forms*, published posthumously, which explores some of Joseph's issues with the state of post-war theatre in Britain.<sup>34</sup> Equally useful were Joseph and Tyrone Guthrie's publication *Actor and Architect*,<sup>35</sup> which provided a rich sense of fervent theatrical discussions that were taking place during the late 1960s regarding the place and shape of theatre in Britain and *The Story of the Playhouse in England*, a historical study of the changing architecture of British theatres.<sup>36</sup> All of these texts demonstrate Joseph's vast knowledge of theatre. Whether it be his understanding of its history or the technicalities of building and lighting a studio space, Joseph was evidently a fount of knowledge on British and international theatre. Taken together, these studies provide a valuable insight into Joseph's outlook and the motivation behind his passion for theatre-in-the-round. They also demonstrate why Cheeseman, Ayckbourn and others found him to be such an influential and inspiring figure in the post-war British theatre world.

## **Victoria Theatre History**

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<sup>33</sup> *Adaptable Theatres. Conference notes from the third biennial congress of the Association internationale de techniciens de theatre (AITT), 25-30 June 1961* ed. Stephen Joseph (London: Association of British Theatre Technicians, Feb 1962).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Joseph, *New Theatre Forms* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968).

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Joseph and Tyrone Guthrie, *Actor and Architect* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964). Internationally renowned British-born director, Tyrone Guthrie (1900-1971), launched the Stratford Festival of Canada in 1953 and founded the Guthrie Theater, a thrust space in Minneapolis in 1965. He was celebrated as an innovative director and knighted in 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Joseph, *The Story of the Playhouse in England* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1963).

The most comprehensive study of the Victoria Theatre in its first ten years remains George Rowell and Anthony Jackson's case study in *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain*.<sup>37</sup> The history comprises a study of six representative regional theatres: The Nottingham Playhouse; The Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow; The Salisbury Playhouse; The Victoria Theatre, Stoke; The Everyman, Liverpool; and the Royal Exchange, Manchester.

The Victoria Theatre's inclusion in such a study underlines its importance in the British theatre scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed Jackson asserts that 'Cheeseman's own venture at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, stands as the forerunner and one of the foremost of this new breed of reps'.<sup>38</sup> It was Cheeseman's ambition to retain a permanent company established in the community of Stoke that Jackson highlights as particularly remarkable. He comments on the 'continuity and consistency of policy' which had been maintained for over twenty years by 1984 and the 'international reputation' garnered by the theatre despite its lack of technical resources.<sup>39</sup>

The study includes a short description of the origins of theatre-in-the-round in Stoke, Stephen Joseph's pioneering work with the Studio Theatre Company and the 'distressing circumstances' in which Joseph and Cheeseman found themselves in 'yet another Board-versus-Director clash'.<sup>40</sup> In his analysis of the Stoke style, Jackson addresses Cheeseman's use of documentary, briefly covering the motivation behind the form, the method and the international interest it garnered. Similarly, he addresses the theatre's 'extra-mural' work in the mid-1970s under the government's Quality of

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<sup>37</sup> George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), cover detail.

<sup>38</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 151.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pp. 152-3.

Life scheme, in which the actors offered support to amateur theatre work as well as producing the touring Vic Road Shows, which visited community centres, residential homes, pubs and clubs.<sup>41</sup> Jackson concludes the study with a look to the future for the theatre and the proposed plans for the new purpose-built theatre-in-the-round, which opened in 1986. Since the most comprehensive material written about the company at the Vic remains a section of a chapter, a principal aim in this study is to amplify and extend Rowell and Jackson's work on the theatre.

A far more recent study is Leslie Powner's *The Origins of the Potteries' Victoria Theatre*, which details Joseph's original plans with Newcastle-under-Lyme Council to establish a permanent theatre-in-the-round in Staffordshire.<sup>42</sup> Whilst Powner's study of the correspondence is exhaustive, at times it can be difficult to follow a line of argument throughout the various and confused manoeuvrings between Joseph and Newcastle Council. Further, the study becomes focused on the details of the disagreement between Joseph and Cheeseman and, therefore, sheds little light on the day-to-day workings of the theatre company. Nevertheless, the study is useful in highlighting the breakdown of such a significant theatrical relationship, and has been a good reference point for exploring the complex journey of establishing a theatre in the region. The second half of the study concentrates on the working relationship between Cheeseman and Arnold Bennett's common-law wife, Dorothy Cheston Bennett. As Trustee of Bennett's estate, Cheston Bennett engaged in lengthy correspondence with Cheeseman regarding the company's many adaptations of

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<sup>41</sup> This government scheme ran from 1974 to 1976 and was sponsored by the Department of the Environment, Department of Education and Science, the Scottish Education Department, and the Welsh Office, in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain (including Welsh and Scottish Arts Councils) and the Sports Council. There were 4 areas chosen for leisure experiment - Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Dumbarton and part of Clwyd (Deeside). The purpose of the 'experiments' (as they were called) was to encourage community involvement in the regeneration of urban areas.

<sup>42</sup> Leslie Powner, *The Origins of the Potteries' Victoria Theatre* (The Arnold Bennett Society, 2017).

Bennett's work. Whilst this was of contextual interest it was not directly relevant for this study.

### **Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre**

Cheeseman's work at the Victoria Theatre is referenced in a number of British theatre history books but there remains to be published a comprehensive study of the company's practices, and his varied work undertaken at Stoke.<sup>43</sup> Largely, the theatre is noted for its innovative use of the documentary style and its dedication to one community. In some cases, such as Rowell and Jackson, there is recognition of the work undertaken at the Vic to foreground new writing and its influence on a range of theatre practitioners. However, in its position as a regional repertory theatre, the Vic often falls between identifiable groups. It is referenced in overviews of political theatre for its work within the community, and its development of the documentary style but, ultimately, it is not viewed as extreme or political enough to warrant extensive coverage.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the theatre's policy on new writing is rarely valued in the same way as the Royal Court's, despite its ground-breaking work with a number of important writers, and Cheeseman's development of the writer in residence position in conjunction with Arts Council funding. The most significant analysis of the theatre's practices focuses on the documentary style, even though documentaries accounted for just eleven original productions during Cheeseman's thirty-six-year tenure. Nevertheless, Derek Paget's work on verbatim and documentary theatre, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, affirms Cheeseman's

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<sup>43</sup> See Shellard (1999), Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2007) and Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> See Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1992), John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1<sup>st</sup> publ. 1981) and David Bradby and John McCormick's *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978)

position as the pioneer of the verbatim documentary.<sup>45</sup> His research is supported by Cheeseman's own description of the company processes in the forewords and notes sections of the two published Stoke documentaries: *The Knotty* and *Fight for Shelton Bar*.<sup>46</sup> These texts will be considered further in Chapters Five and Six. Cheeseman also published articles in a range of journals and newspapers, all of which have been extremely informative regarding his philosophies and practices. More specific references to the varied work taking place at the Vic can also be found in a number of actors' biographies and memoirs which note the particular influence the theatre had on their subsequent careers.<sup>47</sup> Many practitioners associated with the theatre in Stoke have commented on the significance of the period that I have explored. Some, for example, James Hayes' *Shouting in the Evenings*, provide in-depth description of their time in the Stoke company.<sup>48</sup> Others, such as Colin Chambers' biography of play-agent Margaret Ramsay, offer an interesting insight to the way in which the theatre was viewed by others in the industry.<sup>49</sup>

## **Regional Theatre History**

Dominic Sandbrook's lively and informative overviews of British history during this period, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* and *White Heat* have been very useful to give a sense of the political and cultural shifts

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<sup>45</sup> Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970) and *Fight for Shelton Bar* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977).

<sup>47</sup> See James Hayes, *Shouting in the Evenings* (Cornwall: Troubadour Publishing Ltd, 2016); Paul Allen, *Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2001); Michael Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh* (London, Harper Collins, 1997) and Michael Coveney, *Ken Campbell: The Great Caper* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Hayes (2016), pp. 115-156.

<sup>49</sup> Colin Chambers, *Peggy: The Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1997).

that were taking place during the theatre's initial years in Hartshill.<sup>50</sup> He makes the important point:

The theatre was still a minority interest, and only one in every two hundred people attended regularly. But, as the historian Alan Sinfield points out, the theatre in the late 1950s not only became the focus of great press attention, it also became the subject of passionate cultural and social commentary, so it therefore took on a historical importance beyond its immediate appeal to an audience. Since the theatre could no longer aspire to the massive popularity of the cinema, its audience was associated more than ever with intellectual eminence and respectable gentility.<sup>51</sup>

Sandbrook's evocation of the importance of theatre in the culture of 1950s and 1960s Britain emphasises its position as a middle-class pursuit, something which Joseph and Cheeseman often cited as a difficulty in their attempts at inclusivity in Stoke. More widely, Sandbrook gives a sense of the changing times in post-war Britain, both politically and socially, and the growing feeling that culture and the arts were important in every community and ought to be supported more widely.

This narrative of expansion is also explored in Claire Cochrane's study of regional theatre, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre, Industry, Art and Empire*, in which she states:

Indeed, irrespective of the changing political complexion of the government, social expenditure grew in real terms between 1960 and 1975 from just over 11 per cent to 19 per cent of the gross national product, representing an unprecedented shift in public resources.<sup>52</sup>

Cochrane's long-overdue study fills the gap of regional theatre history, which had previously only been addressed directly by Rowell and Jackson. Her work on the repertory system was particularly useful for this study as was her exploration of the

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<sup>50</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* (London, Little, Brown, 2005), and *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Sandbrook (2005), p.174.

<sup>52</sup> Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre, Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 184.

‘magic circles’ of actors who began to operate around this time.<sup>53</sup> Surprisingly, Cochrane makes no direct reference to Joseph and Studio Theatre Company or Cheeseman and his work at the Victoria despite her full and detailed overview of work that was taking place in the regions of England and further afield in Scotland, Wales and Ireland too. In a study as wide as this, however, it is perhaps anticipated that certain practitioners or buildings will be omitted in an effort to give a sense of all that was taking place across the United Kingdom. What is noticeable in Cochrane’s study is the scale and quality of work that was taking place outside of London and the relative dearth of information that surrounds it, compared with the celebrated narratives of buildings such as the National or the Royal Court. As a counter to these narratives, both Cochrane’s study of the Birmingham Rep and Merkin’s history of the Liverpool Playhouse, provided a clear sense of work that was taking place at other regional theatres.<sup>54</sup> Both texts combined detailed historical study with oral history accounts from members of the theatre’s staff and therefore became useful style models for this study.

Further information on English regional theatre was available in Ros Merkin and Kate Dorney’s *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009*.<sup>55</sup> Although the study focused on a more recent historical period, both the introduction by Merkin and Dorney and Anthony Jackson’s chapter, ‘From Rep to Regional’ proved useful in understanding the history of Arts Council funding in the regions. Similarly, Olivia Turnbull’s *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in*

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<sup>53</sup> In *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), Irving Wardle describes a series of ‘magic circles’ present in the Oxford University Drama Society which led to the formation of a new generation of actors, including John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft and George Devine, who would go onto become the ‘next theatre establishment’ (pp. 14-25), quoted in Cochrane (2011), p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> Claire Cochrane, *The Birmingham REP: A City's Theatre 1962-2002* (Birmingham: Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003), and Ros Merkin, *Liverpool Playhouse: A Theatre and its City* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin, *The Glory of The Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

*Britain's Regional Theatres* provided a valuable précis of the foundation of arts subsidy in the regions and for touring companies.<sup>56</sup> It is important to understand the development of the post-war theatre scene in the regions in order to appreciate Stephen Joseph's frustrations with the status quo, and to recognise how these frustrations led to his pre-occupation with theatre-in-the-round, and ultimately to his development of the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent.

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<sup>56</sup> Olivia Turnbull, *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008).



## **Chapter One – Studio Theatre Company finds a home**

A history of Peter Cheeseman's company at the Victoria Theatre must begin with Stephen Joseph, since it is impossible to ignore the supreme influence of Joseph, through both the practical aspect of the Vic company being formerly Joseph's Studio Theatre group, and the long-lasting impression that Joseph made on Cheeseman's theatre philosophy. In this chapter, I will outline the state of regional theatre in post-war Britain in order to contextualise Stephen Joseph's philosophy, and explain why he felt so passionately about theatre-in-the-round. The chapter will offer an overview of the motivation behind Joseph's establishment of Studio Theatre - in part in response to what he saw as the stagnation of the post-war British theatre scene - and his enthusiasm for touring outside of London to particular towns of the UK, many of which had been recorded as 'theatreless' by the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA).<sup>1</sup> It will examine why the company eventually took root in Stoke-on-Trent, despite the local council's initial hostility to Joseph's plans for a theatre-in-the-round. The chapter concludes with an account of the recruitment of Peter Cheeseman, and how he found himself in charge of the newly converted Victoria Theatre in Hartshill.

### **Post-war British Theatre Scene**

By the early 1950s, the British theatre world had withstood a considerable number of threats to its survival: two devastating world wars; the introduction of a wireless into

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<sup>1</sup> Although Stoke-on-Trent was recorded as theatreless because it had no professional theatrical space, *The Stage Year Book* (1952) recognised at least eight separate amateur groups operating in the region.

half of UK households; and the popular phenomenon of the “talkies”.<sup>2</sup> Theatre, however, remained remarkably strong. Peter Cotes, a progressive theatre-maker of the 1940s and 50s, notes in his analysis of the 1949 theatre scene: ‘Neither a cinema-minded press nor a devastating war can kill the theatre’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Dominic Shellard in *British Theatre Since the War*, notes:

London theatre had staged a remarkable recovery by 1945 ... for example, *Blithe Spirit* had achieved 1,716 consecutive performances, *Charley’s Aunt* 1,466 and *Arsenic and Old Lace* 1,057.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been written on the post-war London theatre scene.<sup>5</sup> The star turns of Olivier, Richardson et al and the dominance of impresarios such as Hugh ‘Binky’ Beaumont are well-understood. Until fairly recently with the publication of Claire Cochrane’s *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* and her work on the Birmingham Rep, and Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin’s collection of essays, *The Glory of the Garden* exploring regional theatre and the Arts Council, the majority of studies have focused on theatrical activities in the Capital.<sup>6</sup> This has made it difficult to assess what, if anything, was taking place post-war outside of London and its environs.

As Cochrane argues, ‘in general, regional or “provincial” theatre has been subordinate to the metropolitan grand narrative’ and yet, there can be no doubting the proliferation of theatre activity throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles in the

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Lambert, ‘Everyday Life in Britain the 1930s’, updated 2020 <<http://www.localhistories.org/1930slife.html>> [Accessed 18 October 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Peter Cotes, *No Star Nonsense* (London: Rockliff, 1949), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on post-war London theatre, see Peter Hall, *Peter Hall’s Diaries*, ed. John Goodwin (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage, 1944-1965* (London: Methuen, 1984), Shellard (1999) and Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre, Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin, *The Glory of The Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

twentieth-century.<sup>7</sup> The repertory theatre movement in Britain, led by Annie Horniman's work at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester in 1907, ensured that theatre-going remained a popular pursuit in the pre-war years. Many repertory theatres began to follow Manchester's lead with, for example, Liverpool Repertory Theatre (later to become the Playhouse) opening in 1911 and the Birmingham Repertory opening in 1913. In a brochure for the Liverpool Playhouse's preliminary season, the theatre's aims are clearly stated:

It is designed to make such a theatre a social event; to make it a part of the life of the citizens; a place where men and women of all classes and all shades of opinion may meet and witness the production of plays of the best dramatists, both past and present; a theatre in which they have a personal interest; in which their tastes and criticisms are honestly considered.<sup>8</sup>

In Ros Merkin's history of the theatre, she notes that the repertory movement aimed to 'provide a home for a dramatic revival which stood fiercely in opposition to the values of commercialism'.<sup>9</sup> Whilst the theatres were aiming to attract audiences from a range of backgrounds, they found themselves increasingly in competition with cinemas, and many repertory theatres encountered a struggle to survive as audiences were suddenly presented with a choice of entertainment. The introduction of the 'talkies' in the late 1920s appeared at first to be a difficult rival. George Rowell:

The cinema, scattering its images all over the country, internationally financed and so cut-priced, commanding lavish and spectacular means which not even the largest theatre, still less a modest "rep", could rival.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this competition, the repertory scene survived, arguably because the cinema gave the theatre 'a charm of its own...offering "something different" as well as

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<sup>7</sup> Cochrane (2011), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ros Merkin, *Liverpool Playhouse: A Theatre and its City* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Merkin (2011), pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 54.

“something local”, since it possessed the novelty of providing live entertainment.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, both Liverpool Playhouse and Birmingham Repertory enjoyed long histories in their respective cities, with the Playhouse operating from 1911-1999 (before joining with Liverpool’s Everyman), and the Rep continuing to provide entertainment for the city of Birmingham.<sup>12</sup>

Having withstood the competition of the ‘talkies’, the repertory movement was to face further difficulties with the onset of war in 1939. Perhaps surprisingly, however, it seems that the war had a largely progressive effect on the nation’s view of theatre in the regions. John Maynard Keynes, an expert economist with a keen interest in the arts, had become Chairman of CEMA in 1942. He recognised the potential benefit of the arts as a social service, and the importance of widening access to the arts, regardless of commercial interests. Further, he acknowledged the interest and enthusiasm with which the British public had responded to the entertainment provided by CEMA:

The demand has, in fact, presented a continual problem of supply and has dissipated scepticism about the public response to unaccustomed forms of beauty in sound and thought and design.<sup>13</sup>

Since the establishment of CEMA in 1940, audiences across the United Kingdom had been steadily increasing, as reported by Jack Lindsay in an independent wartime survey, *British Achievement in Art and Music*:

We have made an incalculable leap ahead, creating for the first-time in England since folk-days a genuine mass-audience for drama, song and music.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For histories of these theatres, see Merkin (2011) and Claire Cochrane, *The Birmingham REP: A City’s Theatre 1962-2002* (Birmingham: Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Eric W. White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain* (London: David-Poynter, 1975), p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> White (1975), p.37.

Keynes was keen to maintain these audiences, and in 1945 CEMA was formalised into the Arts Council with an admirable aim:

To encourage the best British national arts, everywhere, and to do it as far as possible by supporting others rather than by setting up state-run enterprises. “Co-operation with all, competition with none...the arts owe no vow of obedience”.<sup>15</sup>

Funding would be provided to allow freedom in the arts, to enable the artist to ‘walk where the breath of the spirit blows him’, and thereby to ‘lead the rest of us into fresh pastures’.<sup>16</sup> Under Keynes’ direction, the Arts Council ensured that the country’s ‘intellectual and cultural experiences’ were prioritised in post-war spending, encouraging a ‘communal, civilised life’.<sup>17</sup> Keynes may be drawing here on Clive Bell’s polemic, *Civilization*, in which Bell defines civilised societies as ones which ‘valued reason, tolerance, knowledge, and art, above wealth, power, and commerce’.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, the apparent freedom suggested in Keynes’ ambitions for the Arts Council became more limited, since he undoubtedly exerted a preference for, as he termed it, ‘serious’ entertainment:

The charter of the Arts Council gave as the purpose of its establishment “developing a greater knowledge, understanding and practice of the fine arts exclusively, and . . . to increase the accessibility of the fine arts to the public . . . [and] to improve the standard of execution of the fine arts” (Sinclair 1995, appendix A). This privileged knowledge and understanding over accessibility, although the latter came before improved standards. As well, within the council’s activities there was no place for literature or film. And among the fine arts, pride of budgetary place went to music (including the opera and ballet), with drama and art combined taking up half as much—a balance that shifted further once Covent Garden came into the picture.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lord Keynes, *Arts Council of Great Britain: 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report* (1945), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> D.E. Moggridge, ‘Keynes, the Arts and the State’, *History of Political Economy*, 37.3 (Fall 2005), pp. 535-555 (p. 552).

<sup>17</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*. Vol. XXVIII. ed. D. Moggridge (New York: Macmillan/Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 372.

<sup>18</sup> Clive Bell, *Civilization* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

The Arts Council's aims could be criticised for adhering too closely to Keynes' 'limited' idea of what constituted fine art.<sup>20</sup> His assumption that the system would be 'administered by people who shared his social background and ideas', logically led to funding preferences for art-forms associated with the 'established standards of high culture located in the metropolitan centre, London'.<sup>21</sup> Despite his apparent commitment to 'decentralize and disperse the dramatic and musical and artistic life of the country', he also prioritised the cultural rejuvenation of London to a 'great artistic metropolis'.<sup>22</sup> The fourteen regional offices of CEMA quickly became six regional offices of the Arts Council in 1951-2 and between 1952-56, all regional offices were closed.<sup>23</sup> Further, the Arts Council had abdicated some of its funding responsibilities to local Councils by 1948, in its Local Government Act, which permitted up to 6d in the pound from the rates levied by local authorities to be spent on the arts.

Importantly, however, as Cochrane affirms, the rate was not obligatory and

by 1950 comparatively few authorities had taken up the opportunity to assist theatres in their localities.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst Keynes' drive to take advantage of CEMA's gains resulted in a renewed focus on the arts in post-war Britain, then, the concentration on the metropolis continued to be an issue for regional theatre. Many outside of London were moved to create work that was more relevant to their own communities.

Amongst many theatre practitioners, there was a belief that the theatre scene needed to be revitalised if it was to survive. Whilst cities such as Liverpool or Birmingham were fortunate enough to have pioneering figures at the helm like Basil Dean or Barry

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<sup>20</sup> Moggridge (2005), p. 538.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Rosser Upchurch, 'Keynes's legacy: an intellectual's influence reflected in arts policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (Volume 17, Number 1, 2011) pp. 69-80 (p. 78).

<sup>22</sup> Keynes (1945), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Dorney and Merkin (2010), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Cochrane (2011), p. 151.

Jackson, many repertory theatres became filled with ‘twice-nightly repertory companies playing ‘popular’ programmes at ‘popular’ prices’.<sup>25</sup> Since these programmes were lacking in funding and local support, they became increasingly nonspecific and often had little particular relevance to the community for which they were catering. As David Bradby and John McCormick affirm in their history of

*People’s Theatre:*

Although these theatres were local, they catered essentially for the middle-class audience. Most had very little local flavour and tended to ape the London fashions, although the standards were often worse than those of the touring companies before them.<sup>26</sup>

In response to this, a number of groups formed with the principal intention to provide theatre for the working-class specifically. Unity Theatre, for example, originally based in London, hoped to grow their regional groups with an aim in 1945 ‘to establish 100 new branches’ and develop their touring work.<sup>27</sup> In 1946, the group toured a production of Clifford Odets’ *Golden Boy* to the mining communities of South Wales.<sup>28</sup> Colin Chambers records in his *Story of Unity Theatre:*

[Unity] saw its main function as being an expression of the working-class – a class that had been denied access not only to political power but to cultural production as well.<sup>29</sup>

With similar objectives, Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl had set up a permanent home in Manchester for Theatre of Action to develop their distinctive combination of

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<sup>25</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Bradby and McCormick (1978), p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that the repertory movement focus on locality was not new: in the 1930s attempts had been made to produce more political theatre for local communities. After the First World War, workers’ theatre groups had begun to form with the general strike of 1926 aiding the organisation of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, led in Britain by a stockbroker’s clerk H. B. (Tom) Thomas.<sup>27</sup> Its aim was ‘mass working-class propaganda and agitation through the particular method of dramatic representation’ and although the WTM ended in 1936, their work inspired a number of other companies such as Unity Theatre and Theatre of Action. (Bradby and McCormick (1978), p. 143).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Chambers (1989), p. 19.

theatre, song and mime.<sup>30</sup> This was later to develop into Theatre Union and after the war, the full-time company was formed and re-named Theatre Workshop.<sup>31</sup> Whilst the group's name changed, their aims remained consistent, as espoused in 1945 in an early Theatre Workshop leaflet:

If the theatre is to play an effective part in the life of the community it must face up to contemporary problems and at the same time revive all that is best in theatrical tradition. We believe Theatre Workshop is doing this.<sup>32</sup>

The group was evidently anxious to appeal to new audiences, a community which was feeling largely disconnected from the theatre world. MacColl and Littlewood were intent on shifting the focus of theatre from middle-class preoccupations to working-class realities:

The West End theatre, or the formal theatre of that time, was not concerned with the lives of ordinary folk, and it had become stultified as a result. It was the language of the cocktail bar rather than the workshop, and the settings of the plays reflected this, in the sense that you almost felt lost if there wasn't a French window or Tudor fireplace.<sup>33</sup>

Their work, often with a political focus, aimed to encourage a new audience into the theatre, although this proved to be more difficult than they had anticipated:

We believed the people were waiting with open arms to receive our sort of theatre. All we had to do was to book halls, put up posters and, provided we were good enough, the rest would take care of itself. We were to learn the hard way that the ingrained habit of not going to see plays wasn't going to be changed overnight, by us or by anyone else.<sup>34</sup>

This struggle for a genuine working-class audience was one that would surface repeatedly in the story of the Victoria Theatre, and will be explored further in the concluding chapter. Whilst much has been written on Theatre Workshop's influence in revolutionising theatre in the 1950s and 60s, as events proved, a lesser-known

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<sup>30</sup> Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Goorney (1981), p. 47.



figure was equally instrumental in pioneering change in the world of regional theatre.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Joseph, an unlikely champion of the accessibility of theatre, is in many ways the beginning of the Victoria Theatre's story.<sup>36</sup>

### **Stephen Joseph and 'Fish and Chip' theatre**

Born in 1921 to successful parents - London publisher, Michael Joseph and Hollywood star, Hermione Gingold - it may have been assumed that Stephen Joseph would enter immediately into the theatre Establishment.<sup>37</sup> His background was indeed privileged, with Joseph being educated at Clayesmore, an independent boarding school founded by George Devine's uncle, and going on to be Central School of Speech and Drama's youngest-ever recruit, aged sixteen. His interest in theatre continued at Jesus College, Cambridge where Joseph produced and directed two Footlights reviews, before working at a proscenium theatre in Lowestoft and returning to teach at Central School in 1949. Evidently though, Joseph was eager to follow his own path and always had a keen interest in experimenting with theatre forms early in his career. Elsam:

Staging 'weekly rep' at a proscenium theatre in Lowestoft, some 140 miles from central London, he directed his actors to turn their backs during a naturalistic production; such a break with British stage convention 'led to the biggest batch of letters in the history of the Lowestoft Theatre, all complaining'.<sup>38</sup>

Joseph was, like Littlewood and MacColl, anxious to inject change into the world of theatre. During his time at Cambridge, he had been particularly influenced by J. B.

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<sup>35</sup> See Robert Leach (2006), Howard Goorney (1981), Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), Joan Littlewood, *Joan's Book: The Autobiography of Joan Littlewood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> A version of this chapter has been published: Rachel Walker, "'Gesticulating Peanuts": an introduction of theatre-in-the-round to British theatre in the 1950s', WRoCAH Student Journal, Issue 3, July 2017.

<sup>37</sup> For the following biographical details, I am indebted to Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Elsam (2014), p.124.

Priestley's 1947 study, *Theatre Outlook* which explored the state of British theatre and identified what Priestley termed a moment of 'Now or Never for the English Theatre'.<sup>39</sup> Priestley argued that theatre should 'not be something existing precariously on the edge of the community' and ought to be

a place where serious professional men and women, properly trained and equipped, go to work, as surgeons and physicians go to work in a hospital.<sup>40</sup>

This concept of actors as useful workers in a community is something that remained influential throughout Joseph's career and a notion to which we will return in the history of the Victoria Theatre more generally.

During a trip to the United States of America in 1951-2, Joseph visited a number of varied spaces available to theatre companies and concluded that 'the central stage is both simplest and probably the most common primitive form of theatre'.<sup>41</sup> He became convinced that the only way of reviving the jaded theatrical tradition in England was to introduce a new form altogether. In his 1964 text, *Actor and Architect*, Joseph championed his long-held view:

It is my belief that the single most serious ailment of the live theatre, in our country, is the fact that unless you can pay very heavily for the best seats, you just don't see enough of the actors...we just don't want any longer to look at miniscule peanuts gesticulating in a big theatre. We want to get close and see what is going on.<sup>42</sup>

He believed passionately that in order to have any chance of re-establishing its position, particularly in the wake of television, theatre had to appeal more directly to a wider cross-section of society and highlight its advantages of live action by allowing every audience member the chance to be fully immersed in it. Here, Joseph's ideals came to the fore. He was unwavering in his belief that theatre-in-the-round was the

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<sup>39</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Theatre Outlook* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Joseph, *New Theatre Forms* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Joseph and Tyrone Guthrie, *Actor and Architect* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 47.

best way of engaging a cross-section of people in the action and, therefore, engaging them in theatre per se:

If we can sort out the tangle of words and ideas, we may find through our new buildings a way of establishing the live theatre, with its ever new dramatists, as a valid activity in our own society; if not, it seems likely that the drama with new waves of writers or without, will do no better than remain a cliquish activity for relatively few people.<sup>43</sup>

He was anxious to affirm the excitement of live theatre, a pass-time that should not be reserved for an educated few but a pursuit that would engage and entertain everyone, particularly because of one's proximity to the action. In a 1959 article for *Theatre World*, Joseph emoted:

So to hell with the scenery that the films can do so much better! To hell with the frame that protects the cathode ray tube! Let's have the actors in the same room as the audience, let's have four front rows, let's get really excited about this acting business!<sup>44</sup>

Further developing Priestley's ideas, Joseph was keen that the company's base became central to the community in which it was situated. Ultimately, theatre was for all. Joseph stated his philosophy in an early edition of *Plays and Players*:

As soon as we have premises of our own, the company hopes to encourage other social activities in the theatre, including dances and discussions, as well as meetings of outside groups...and practical courses related to the theatre itself for adults and for school children. ... The theatre belongs to everyone – and one looks forward to the time when everyone realises it and enjoys it.<sup>45</sup>

This view of theatre as a community hub was an idea that permeated many theatrical groups of the same period. Arnold Wesker, for example, in 1960 was fundraising for a permanent home at the Roundhouse for his Centre 42, where 'the original intention was to create a 'gymnasium of the arts'.<sup>46</sup> It was to be based in a converted theatre

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>44</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Joseph, 'Stephen Joseph writes on his Theatre in the Round at Newcastle-under-Lyme', *Plays and Players* (Mar 1962), pp. 26 and 38.

<sup>46</sup> Steve Nicholson, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1960s* (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 32.

and offer activities such as a youth club, jazz groups, exhibitions, concerts, films, plays, revues and lunchtime concerts.<sup>47</sup> Littlewood too, having moved South with Theatre Workshop, was gradually progressing in a similar direction with her plans for a Fun Palace which were published in *The Drama Review* in an article with architect Cedric Price in 1968.<sup>48</sup> Her aim was to create a ‘university of the streets’ in which people were encouraged to partake in a wide range of leisure activities and the ‘essence of the place will be informality – nothing obligatory – anything goes’.<sup>49</sup> Reacting to these democratic movements, the relatively new Labour government presented a policy for the arts in 1965, which emphasised their importance:

In any civilised community the arts and associated amenities, serious or comic, light or demanding, must occupy a central place. Their enjoyment should not be regarded as something remote from everyday life.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of a theatre being a centre for a wide range of arts and activities was something that Joseph continued to develop until his premature death from cancer in 1967, when he had begun plans for a radical new form of ‘fish and chip’ theatre in which the audience was encouraged to eat their food whilst watching the play.

Campton recounts the origin of Joseph’s plans:

The germ of this idea began to incubate in the first years of the Scarborough company, when plays were taken for matinees to a local holiday camp. The audience was almost totally unused to the conventions of theatre, so an in-the-round production did not worry them at all (they had been expecting performing seals anyway). They talked in low tones to start with, but growing louder until the actors were straining to be heard above the noise - until a really interesting scene was reached, when silence fell: not a murmur was heard until the play began to lose its grip again, when the conversation level rose once more. It was a useful experience for a beginning playwright: decibels alone demonstrated where rewriting was called for.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, ‘The Fun Palace’, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 12.3 (1968), pp. 127-134 (p. 130).

<sup>49</sup> Joan Littlewood, *Joan’s Book* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 704.

<sup>50</sup> Jennie Lee, *A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps*, Cmnd 2601 (London: HMSO, 1965).

<sup>51</sup> David Campton, ‘Stephen Joseph...And After’

<<http://www.stephen-joseph.org.uk/styled/styled-72/styled-75/index.html>> [accessed 4 March, 2017].

Whilst a ‘fish and chip theatre’ might at first glance be discounted as an outlandish scheme, Campton’s experience of performing at a local holiday camp demonstrates that, in fact, the concept was rooted in good sense and upheld a coherent set of values that Joseph maintained throughout his career - to engage a broad cross-section of society in a stimulating theatrical experience. He noted in *Actor and Architect*:

It is not a matter of ‘educating’ people so that they can join the privileged ranks of, for instance, theatre-goers. The theatre can speak, if we allow it, to all people; we have only to take it out of its fetters.<sup>52</sup>

It was this vision of theatre that made theatre-in-the-round so appealing to Joseph. He commented in an early interview that:

Drama is a ritual demonstration of man’s ability to take deliberate action in the face of almighty obstacles. There can be no better background to such an activity than other human beings.<sup>53</sup>

For Joseph, there was no better way of ‘taking it out of its fetters’ than placing theatre back amongst the people in a primal and basic form.<sup>54</sup> Alan Plater, later a writer at the Victoria Theatre, recalled Joseph’s analogy in a recent interview:

Stephen said - that, - I can’t remember whether this was his illustration or mine - if, you know, if you have a football match, you don’t say, ‘Play football at the end of the room, and we’ll all sit in rows and watch it.’ Or if two guys started a fight, or if a fight breaks out in a playground, you don’t say, ‘Go and fight over there. We’ll watch you in a neat row.’ You gather around in a circle. There’s something very basic and primitive about it, and I think theatre is a basic, primitive activity in lots of ways.<sup>55</sup>

It was to this end that Joseph formed the experimental Studio Theatre company in 1955, to impart his enthusiasm for theatre-in-the-round to a previously deprived public. Having run a Sunday evening theatre club at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall in London, as well as touring the company around the UK, it is interesting that Joseph found the regions to be far more receptive to his company’s work than audiences in

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph and Guthrie (1964), pp. 28-9.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph (Mar 1962), p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph and Guthrie (1964), p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Alan Plater, *Interview with Alan Plater* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 8 Sep 2008), Elsam archive.

the Capital. Campton recalls Joseph's frustration after a succession of poorly attended London productions in-the-round:

The Mahatma Gandhi productions ended because we used to run the Scarborough season at a slight profit, about one hundred pounds on the summer season, and each Sunday Club show would lose a little, about ten pounds, which isn't much to lose for one stage show. At the end of the year we had lost exactly what we had made in Scarborough, and Stephen said, 'I do not understand why the provinces should subsidize London', and he stopped doing the Mahatma Gandhi Club productions.<sup>56</sup>

Joseph was not alone in recognising the open-mindedness of regional audiences. Peter Cotes, who had had a profound influence on Joseph through the publication of his 'fiery tome',<sup>57</sup> *No Star Nonsense*, believed that 'the West End is not the entire country and cultural vitality must not be confined to one city'.<sup>58</sup> In his earlier tours of Britain, Cotes too had found that audiences outside of London were often more accepting of new playwrights. He made this argument after a tour to Wales in 1947:

My tour of the coalfields in the autumn of 1947, when I took a company of players, sponsored by the Arts Council and the Miners' Welfare Commission, to the South Wales mining valleys, proved a revelation... There was no blind hero-worship and stupid fan hysteria as far as the cast was concerned. People came to see 'the drama' as they called it.<sup>59</sup>

Joseph, then, encouraged by Cotes' findings and by the reception of his own work in the regions, found a number of spaces around the country that were well-disposed to an in-the-round conversion: a large room above the library in Scarborough and the Municipal Hall in Newcastle-under-Lyme, for example. For five years, Studio Theatre toured the regions, carrying everything including the theatre itself – raked rostra providing in-the-round seating for up to 250.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gillette Elvgren, 'The Evolution of a Theatrical Style: A Study of the Interrelationship of select regional playwrights, the director, the community and the round stage at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1972), p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> Adam Benedict, 'Peter Cotes: Obituary' (*The Independent*, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1998) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-peter-cotes-1184306.html>> [accessed 8 March, 2019].

<sup>58</sup> Cotes (1949), p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Council of Repertory Theatres* publication (1971), p. 29, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Joseph was able to garner modest support from Arts Council Great Britain which references the company's progress each year in its Annual Report, with a particular focus always on the fact that the company was 'still unable to find a permanent base'.<sup>61</sup> This was a nod, perhaps, to the Council beginning to shift from CEMA's strategies, focusing on 'maintaining established value systems and conventional notions of artistic practice'.<sup>62</sup> Joseph did not fit neatly into the 'conventional notions' of the Council members, which may explain why the company's grant remained so small (£250 in 1956/7, compared with £7,000 to the English Stage Company and £12,000 to the Old Vic).<sup>63</sup> Indeed, by 1959, Joseph was forced to make a personal payment of £776 to keep the company solvent; this, coupled with support from donors from local authorities in a number of regions, as well as Independent Television and the Pilgrim Trust, enabled the company to continue despite the lack of Arts Council support.<sup>64</sup>

### **Settling in Staffordshire**

Throughout this period, the company was in search of the best locality to set up a permanent in-the-round base, and Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire was high on the list of potential locations. As the worldwide centre for pottery production in the 1950s and 60s, the region of North Staffordshire may not have seemed the most likely choice for Joseph's venture.<sup>65</sup> Peggy Burns, in her book, *Memories of Stoke-on-Trent*, remembers how

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<sup>61</sup> Arts Council of Great Britain, *Arts Council of Great Britain: Twelfth Annual Report (1956-57)*, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Nadine Holdsworth, 'They'd Have Pissed on My Grave': the Arts Council and Theatre Workshop', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 15.1 (1999), pp. 3-16 (p. 4).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> 94% of pottery workers in the country in 1958 were based in North Staffordshire and 70,184 people in the region were employed in the pottery industry. Steve Birks, <[www.thepotteries.org](http://www.thepotteries.org)> n.d., [accessed 26 February 2017].

the fields around Etruria were the playground of many local children, and playing with the biscuit ware dumped on the Horse Fields was one of their favourite pastimes.<sup>66</sup>

The air was heavy with smoke from the bottle ovens and the skyline was dominated by chimneys from the local iron and steel works, Shelton Bar. By 1962, the prefabs built during the 1920s and 30s as a rapid solution to the housing crises, still dominated the crowded housing estates of Cobridge and Trent Vale where between forty and fifty homes could be found per acre.<sup>67</sup> This heavily industrialised area was (and still is) fiercely proud of its label as ‘the Potteries’ despite the increasing redundancies that were taking place as many of the larger companies underwent a process of rationalisation. Newcastle is the neighbouring town to Stoke-on-Trent - a city made up of a federation of six towns: Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke-on-Trent and Tunstall. Despite attempts to incorporate the town into the federation, the borough of Newcastle had always remained determinedly separate from its neighbour and the Councils were often at odds with one another.<sup>68</sup> Presumably, Joseph was attracted to Newcastle because it fitted neatly into his notion of a community in need of a theatre. For such a large region, there remained no professional theatre:

Just over ten years ago Mecca took over the Theatre Royal in Hanley, an excellently-equipped theatre of the variety hall type. A series of unimpressive variety shows failed to draw audiences, perhaps predictably, and the conclusion was reached that it was ‘obvious that there was no economic demand for live theatre’. The Theatre Royal became a bingo hall.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Peggy Burns, *Memories of Stoke-on-Trent* (Halifax: True North Books, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> In 1930 the continuance of the borough as a separate entity was endangered by the promotion of the Stoke-on-Trent Extension Bill, which sought to incorporate Newcastle within the limits of that city. Despite strong local opposition—a postcard poll of the local government electors showed a majority of 97.84 per cent against the Bill—the measure was passed by the House of Commons, only to be rejected by the House of Lords. J. G. Jenkins, ed., ‘Newcastle-under-Lyme: Introduction’, in *A History of the County of Stafford: Volume 8* (London, 1963), pp. 1-8. *British History Online* <[www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/staffs/vol8/pp1-8](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/staffs/vol8/pp1-8)> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>69</sup> Jim Lagden, ‘Professionals, Amateurs and Students’, *Theatre Quarterly* 1.1 (1971), p. 69, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



The loss of the Theatre Royal was noted in the local press which seemed particularly frustrated with the ‘cultural decline’, worrying that

it has passed virtually unnoticed. It is almost incredible that an area with a population exceeding 300,000 allowed this to happen with little more than a few growls of protest.<sup>70</sup>

Joseph and his company were not deterred by this apparent indifference, however, and Joseph was quick to recognise that Newcastle had a receptive Council. Indeed, Newcastle had first mooted plans for a new civic theatre back in 1943 and whilst it had never transpired, Charles Lister, the Treasurer, remained particularly keen to see a civic theatre established.<sup>71</sup> He backed Joseph’s plans from the outset and watched the Studio Theatre Company’s progress with interest.<sup>72</sup> From 1955, the group fixed the location as a regular stop on their circuit of the UK and slowly built a reputation for themselves there:

Because of the discontinuity of their residence (in the town’s draughty and uninviting Municipal Hall) they have to start more or less from cold each year, audiences have continued to increase, with – which is unusual for a provincial theatre company – a high proportion of young people.<sup>73</sup>

Many welcomed the visits of Studio Theatre and the local press acknowledged that Joseph had garnered ‘a coterie of faithful supporters for their productions’.<sup>74</sup> By their third season of plays at the Municipal Hall, Joseph had seemingly proved that there was in fact an audience in this ‘cultural desert’;<sup>75</sup> and, in 1961, Newcastle Council

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<sup>70</sup> ‘The fight for “live” drama’, *Evening Sentinel*, 22 August 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Leslie Powner, *The Origins of the Potteries’ Victoria Theatre* (The Arnold Bennett Society, 2017) p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Lane (2006), pp. 162-163.

<sup>73</sup> From our Special Correspondent, ‘Enterprise at Newcastle-under-Lyme’, *The Times*, 6 February, 1961, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>74</sup> ‘For and against ‘round’ drama’, *Evening Sentinel*, 9 July 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>75</sup> J.S.A, ‘Vic on crest of success: capacity audiences prove it,’ 26 November 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

voted in favour of constructing a new, purpose-built theatre-in-the-round which could be erected at a tenth of the cost of a conventional building.<sup>76</sup>

Newcastle Council's support for a new theatre came amidst a wave of theatres springing up across the regions, starting with Coventry's Belgrade in 1958. Rowell and Jackson:

Until 1958 no new purpose-built repertory theatre had been opened in the country since before the War. By 1970, however, twenty new theatres had been constructed, fifteen of which were designed specifically for repertory...The expansion was, too, even more a regional than a London phenomenon...That Coventry rather than London should have been the pace-setter was itself of considerable significance.<sup>77</sup>

Joseph, however, was not a supporter of the Belgrade. He criticised the design, describing the stage arrangements as rather old-fashioned.<sup>78</sup> Six years later, Frederick Bentham also commented on the poor provision backstage, in his 1970 round-up of new theatres:

It is strange now to look back to 1958 and the Coventry Belgrade. This represented a more spacious approach to the front of house with a restaurant and all the rest which was unusual for a theatre here, but at the same time horrified theatre people with its cramped facilities backstage – the money having run out. It looked as if audiences were going to be cosseted while actors and technicians had to make do. After all the public had many other things to do and had to be lured in, whereas the stage struck could consider themselves lucky to find a job at all.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst Joseph was clearly in favour of encouraging new theatres to be built in the regions, he remained frustrated with the determinedly traditional views of those designing the buildings:

The confusion arises out of ignorance. It is common in this country to assume that any big space with a large number of seats is a proper theatre, provided they all face a hole in the wall got up to look like a proscenium arch. Sight-lines matter little, backstage equipment and working space even less.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> 'Studio Theatre at Newcastle', *Financial Times*, 2 October 1961, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>77</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 89.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph and Guthrie (1964), pp. 1-29.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick Bentham, *New Theatres in Britain* (London: Whitefriars Press Ltd, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 129.

Joseph's clear irritation with the status quo is in evidence here: his unyielding belief that in-the-round was able to offer opportunities over and above that of the proscenium arch; his preoccupations with 'sightlines' in order that every audience member had an immersive experience, rather than only those who had paid for premium seats; and his determination that the technicians' needs in his theatre would be ranked alongside those of his actors and his audience. Whilst he agreed with the emerging sense that theatre needed to be comfortable for audiences and be the centre of a community, Joseph was also keen to ensure that new theatres were able to cater adequately for everyone who worked there as well as the paying public.

By 1961, however, the details of the theatre in Newcastle were still to be decided. Joseph's campaigning in Staffordshire was not over, despite the Council's apparent backing. Evidently, many in the area remained sceptical of Joseph's plans. The letter pages of the local paper, the *Evening Sentinel*, were filled nightly with hotly contested arguments over the idea of theatre-in-the-round being established in Staffordshire and, indeed, whether taxpayers' money ought to be spent on theatre at all:

Mr. Stephen Joseph lives in a cultural world. No doubt the majority of the people he meets at Newcastle have had the educational and social opportunities of appreciating the interesting and stimulating brand of culture theatre in the round offers... To the ratepayers of these areas, which house the bulk of Newcastle's population, it seems that there are more urgent channels for money than to provide cultural entertainment for ex-grammar school pupils and their affluent parents... The fact is that if this scheme goes through before more basic assets are in evidence a residue of bitter censure will be left from one end of the borough to the other.<sup>81</sup>

There was clearly a disconnect between the people who were welcoming 'culture' to the area and those who felt the project would only serve to benefit an elite section of the population. There was a fear that the project was bound to be unsuccessful since

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<sup>81</sup> F.D. Wright, Letter to *Evening Sentinel*, 11 July 1961, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

both the Grand and the Theatre Royal had been forced to close due to lack of patronage and ultimately, that

Mr. Joseph and his company would not suffer in the event of the failure of the project but, once again, the milking cows (ratepayers) would have to foot the bill.<sup>82</sup>

Amidst the furore, Joseph could not help but add to the hysteria, writing to *The Stage* under his well-used pseudonym, R. Heath Block:

Remember that it is his [Joseph's] company that recently shocked the Midlands by playing no National Anthem in the theatre, and by presenting disgusting plays by John Osborne and Strindberg. The theatre must resist these communistic moves.<sup>83</sup>

Despite Joseph's exaggerated acerbity, many of the letters to the press do evidence a real resistance over this form of theatre, a sense that this was something radical, experimental and elitist that was not welcome in a working-class community. The arguments were summarised by the *Evening Sentinel*:

The principal objections are that there is not sufficient public demand for a civic theatre (or any kind of theatre) that would justify a large amount of public money being spent on it or lent for the purpose; that, even if a case for theatre had been established on the ground that it would be a valuable amenity, though only patronised by a minority, a theatre in the round is not the type of theatre that is wanted because it would restrict the performance of drama to subjects suitable for presentation in that form; and that Newcastle is not the place to try out an experiment of the kind that is envisaged.<sup>84</sup>

From the Studio Theatre's tours, however, the group was confident that there was an audience for their work, albeit perhaps, a different audience to those that may have patronised the Grand or Theatre Royal previously. Joseph recognised that theatre-in-the-round 'tends to alienate many people who have had a long experience of the

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<sup>82</sup> H. G. Rowley, 'And more letters about theatre in the round', *Evening Sentinel*, July 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>83</sup> R. Heath Block, 'To the Editor...of The Stage', *The Stage*, 1 February 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection. Joseph regularly wrote to the national press under the pseudonym of R. Heath Block with the aim of airing the most extreme views opposing theatre-in-the-round and presumably, to provoke a more measured counter-argument in the readership.

<sup>84</sup> 'For and against 'round' drama', *Evening Sentinel*, 9 July 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

theatre' but for him and Studio Theatre, this was, in many ways, a positive attribute.<sup>85</sup> Their theatre welcomed new and, significantly, young audiences to their productions and it was this enthusiastic and dynamic following that helped to pioneer theatre-in-the-round in the area. For Joseph, the encouragement of young people into the theatre was a crucial element of his philosophy:

If we delay, I believe that we shall lose a great part of this potential audience – a whole generation, I suspect, who have been given a sample of theatre and now want the proper thing, or they will seek their entertainment in other forms altogether.<sup>86</sup>

Theatre-in-the-round was a way of revitalising theatre per se and for him, it was essential that the young felt included in the movement. Joseph believed that if the temporary work of Studio Theatre was not continued in Stoke-on-Trent in the form of a permanent space, there was a danger that this new audience would disappear.

Unfortunately, the local Council was not made up of many young people. Although the building of a new theatre had appeared certain, indeed it was reported in *The Times* that plans had been drawn up, the money was available, and now all that was needed was planning permission, in fact, the venture was far from agreed.<sup>87</sup> In a memo of 1962, Arts Council Drama Director N. V Lintlaker

informed the Secretary General that the Town Clerk was stating that his council had never made an offer of £99,000, even though the sum had been made public and never denied.<sup>88</sup>

Money, however, was not the only limiting factor. After months of planning and discussions, Joseph continued to struggle with the restrictions placed upon his designs

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph (Mar 1962), p. 26.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *The Times*, 6 February 1961, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>88</sup> Lane (2006), p. 169.

by Newcastle Borough Council, who were proposing a proscenium arch theatre to be built alongside a studio space.<sup>89</sup>

Without the combined backing of Newcastle Borough Council and the Arts Council, the new theatre was no longer a feasible venture. Since local public reaction was so mixed, Joseph felt the need to prove that theatre-in-the-round had a chance of success in Staffordshire on a more permanent basis than the Studio Theatre tour. He felt that the Council, ‘will only back a winner which has actually won the race’.<sup>90</sup> In order to ensure that Studio Theatre created a ‘winner’, Joseph needed to recruit more help to further the cause.

### **Cheeseman is recruited**

Peter Cheeseman was born in Portsmouth in 1932 but, due to his father’s frequent postings as a Radio Officer in the Merchant Service and later a Civil Servant in the Air Ministry, Cheeseman spent most of his childhood in the North East, attending five different primary schools. He then moved on to four other secondary schools – Manchester, Southport, Wallasey Grammar and finally Quarry Bank High School in Liverpool, spending his teenage years on Merseyside. Unlike Joseph, he was not born into a world of theatre and the arts but was encouraged by his mother to attend drama evening classes as an alternative to life on the streets of a large Liverpool housing estate. Cheeseman claims that he agreed, ‘having decided it was the only way to meet Jean Simmons’.<sup>91</sup> He continued this interest in drama whilst ‘scraping through’ his degree at the University of Sheffield and directing a number of productions, as well as working alongside William Empson to direct the Royal Masque when the Queen

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<sup>89</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 129.

<sup>90</sup> Lane (2006), p. 170.

<sup>91</sup> For this and the following biographical details, see Peter Cheeseman, 1988 Curriculum Vitae, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

inaugurated Sheffield's Jubilee year in 1954. Cheeseman completed teacher training at Sheffield before embarking on his National Service in the Education Branch of a Fighter Command Base, where he

converted the dilapidated old Airmen's Dance Hall into a theatre and directed several productions for the all-ranks (and rather undisciplined) Station Drama Group.<sup>92</sup>

It was during this period that Cheeseman had the opportunity to attend professional productions in London and Paris, and began to feel frustrated with the current British theatre scene:

The audiences were composed of strangers. There was no contact between us, and no contact therefore possible with the actors. For me, the experience was ultimately meaningless as a result. It was as lifeless as a trip to the Louvre.<sup>93</sup>

In 1959, Cheeseman began his first professional post as Assistant Director at Derby Playhouse, but his frustration continued. He described the productions as 'Cake-mix theatre ... powdered scripts from London, add water',<sup>94</sup> and resigned from the post in 1961, when the 'delightfully nice but misguided Board ... put a ban on rehearsals in the afternoon'.<sup>95</sup>

A chance encounter between Cheeseman and Joseph at a London conference for the Council of Repertory Theatres (CORT) was to initiate one of the most significant theatrical relationships in post-war British theatre. Cheeseman claimed that meeting Joseph was 'like a shot in the arm',<sup>96</sup> and despite their different backgrounds, Cheeseman recognised in Joseph, his own mother's 'trade union-born passions for Education and the Arts'.<sup>97</sup> Subsequently, Cheeseman contacted Joseph in search of a post with the Studio Theatre Company. In response, Joseph offered him a role with

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'The Director in Rep – No. 6: Cheeseman', *Plays and Players* (May 1968), p. 64.

<sup>94</sup> Cheeseman (May 1968), p.64.

<sup>95</sup> Cheeseman (1988).

<sup>96</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 47.

<sup>97</sup> Cheeseman (1988).

‘the real scope for someone who wants a considerable degree of freedom and plenty of responsibility’ but on a relatively low salary of just ten pounds a week.<sup>98</sup>

Undeterred, Cheeseman seized the opportunity and was engaged as the new manager of the Studio Theatre Company in September 1961, touring with the company and continuing work on the ground in Staffordshire towards the new venture.

However, Cheeseman’s recruitment did not save the Newcastle theatre project. By 1961, a split was emerging between Joseph’s plans for the theatre and the Council’s aims. As Powner details in his study, *The Origins of the Potteries’ Victoria Theatre*, Joseph’s frustration was growing as he believed that

‘The Council wants to have a full and vigorous say in every step that is taken, and does not trust the Studio Theatre Limited to take action in a field where every Councillor knows best’. Joseph’s comment was a further indication of the gulf emerging between an established theatre company seeking local authority support and a local council wishing to create its own civic theatre in partnership with a theatrical company.<sup>99</sup>

As initial plans for the newly-built home began to fall through early in 1961, Cheeseman pushed on to locate a base for the company in Stoke-on-Trent in a converted building. He maintained that this was now necessary in whatever capacity that may be:

The company’s work, I believed, could only now effectively develop and mature in a permanent context: the days of touring and self-discovery must be left behind.<sup>100</sup>

Whilst Joseph had always had an ambition to find a home for Studio Theatre, he lacked enthusiasm for the conversion of an existing building into a theatre-in-the-round, particularly after the failure of his permanent theatre plans. Joseph had been touring the country since 1955 with the company’s portable rostra and surviving in a

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<sup>98</sup> Lane (2006), p. 168.

<sup>99</sup> Powner (2017), pp. 89-90. See pp. 1-99 for a detailed account of correspondence between Joseph, Cheeseman, the local Council and the Arts Council during this period.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Cheeseman, ‘A Community Theatre-in-the-Round’, *National Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (1971), p. 72.



temporary context. Having been so close to achieving his dream of a purpose-built theatre in Newcastle, it is perhaps understandable that Joseph felt somewhat disillusioned by Cheeseman's suggestion of a conversion. In a recent interview, Cheeseman recalled that Joseph 'first said "no" – but eventually I got him to allow me to go and look at possible buildings'.<sup>101</sup> Despite his determination, Cheeseman describes the search as rather disheartening:

We visited a number of depressing old chapels, cinema and even a crisp factory. Finally we settled on a suburban cinema turned into a variety club and empty after a police raid had discovered several hundred people merrily boozing long past the permitted hour – the old Victoria Cinema in Hartshill.<sup>102</sup>

Whilst a conversion did not satisfy his yearnings for a purpose-built in-the-round theatre, Joseph was still keen to see the success of the venture since it was as close as he had come to achieving his long-held ambitions. He set about work with local architect, Peter Fisher, to design a space that would fill the void in the Potteries' theatrical landscape. Funding for the venture, however, had now all but disappeared. Through his frustration, Joseph had alienated a large section of the council and key figures of the Establishment had him labelled as difficult. Elsam:

To W.A. Darlington he was also 'a headache'; to Kenneth Tynan he was 'a threat' and (perhaps, because of this alienation), Joseph struggled to mobilise funding for the Vic conversion.<sup>103</sup>

Almost unbelievably, the whole conversion was completed in eight weeks for less than £5000, with no state funding whatsoever. Cheeseman recalled:

We were given seats by Granada Television out of abandoned cinemas, and we fitted in 347... with the company finally sorting out the first load of second-hand cinema seats into three piles – the unacceptable (apparently vomited on), the dubious (possibly pissed on) and the acceptable (only stuck with chewing gum).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Interview with Peter Cheeseman* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 2008), Elsam archive.

<sup>102</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 72.

<sup>103</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 156.

<sup>104</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 73.

The space, arguably, was already defining the company that would work in it: not anti-establishment but working in some way outside and facing a large degree of hostility from both the local and national arenas, the company of the Victoria Theatre was inevitably drawn closer together during the theatre's opening. Indeed, as Cheeseman remarked later:

The theatre was opened without a single remark in the national and professional press... we let off two rockets from the roof but they flew nearly horizontally and landed in the middle of Hartshill Road.<sup>105</sup>

In a letter exchange between Joseph and Cheeseman in 1962, the pair is incredulous as to the lack of interest in their venture. Joseph writes:

Please tell me, did we invite the National Press to the first night? I would not have thought it possible that a new theatre could open without a single comment in any National (other than the *Northern Daily Mail*). I think we have achieved a record and it is not without significance!<sup>106</sup>

To which Cheeseman replies:

Yes, we did invite the National Press, *The Times*, *Observer*, *Telegraph*, *Express*, *Herald* and several others. Their indifference is distressing. If we were opening a theatre in 2001 and Dame Sybil Thorndike was going to speak a Prologue we might get headlines, otherwise ....<sup>107</sup>

Cheeseman's response to this indifference was to explore every possible avenue to drum up support for the new venture and to embed the Victoria Theatre firmly in the district of Stoke-on-Trent. His methods of doing so are explored in Chapter Two.

Joseph, in contrast, distanced himself from the company, taking up the role of Fellow of Drama at the University of Manchester since, according to Cheeseman, 'he couldn't face more work in a converted situation for the moment'.<sup>108</sup> Whilst

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<sup>105</sup> Peter Cheeseman and Jim Lagden, 'The District and its People', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (1971), p. 29

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 17 October 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 19 October 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 72.

Cheeseman seemed happy to accept the challenge of running the theatre, the complexities of the management structure made day-to-day organisation difficult.

Alan Ayckbourn, a writer, actor and director with Studio Theatre Ltd, highlights the confusion and overlap of the roles at Stoke:

Stephen was notionally the Artistic Director of the Company – Peter was the General Manager who did direct a bit and I did most of the directing – so when we arrived there Peter was the Manager, and I was both leading actor and director.<sup>109</sup>

Yet, in the first programme for the Victoria Theatre, written by Joseph, he lists himself as ‘Managing Director, Studio Theatre Ltd’ and Cheeseman as ‘Director, Victoria Theatre’.<sup>110</sup> Some confusion clearly arises over the terms used to describe roles within the theatre company, and lines become increasingly blurred when we see the range of roles that each member of Studio Theatre had been expected to perform, particularly whilst on tour. Ayckbourn, for example, was employed in 1957 as Acting Stage Manager but soon became a leading actor with the company, before also experimenting with writing and directing. Cheeseman’s role as Manager was to be primarily concerned with building up audiences and assisting with the location of a permanent home for the company but clearly had a creative element too, as Cheeseman directed a touring production of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in his first season with the company.<sup>111</sup> The relationship between Ayckbourn and Cheeseman remained challenging in the early years at Stoke-on-Trent, particularly because of their widely different views on directing. This will be explored further in Chapter Three. An added complication of the theatre company’s structure was the existence and ultimate

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>110</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *First Season Programme 1962-3* (1962), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>111</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 47.

control of the Studio Theatre Board, whose members had all been handpicked by Joseph.<sup>112</sup>

No matter how much responsibility Cheeseman appeared to have as Manager of the Vic, particularly with Joseph's decision to re-locate to Manchester, Joseph, as Managing Director of Studio Theatre and his Board of directors remained firmly in charge, albeit from behind the scenes. This was to prove problematic in the years ahead and will be explored further in the following chapter.

### **Cheeseman at the Vic**

It was in this challenging situation that Cheeseman had his first taste of running a theatre: in a working-class locality with seemingly little interest in theatre generally; in a theatre-in-the-round towards which many had voiced hostility; in the absence of his pioneering mentor, and with a grant of just £490 from the Arts Council to cover both the company's dealings in Scarborough and in Stoke-on-Trent. Nevertheless, Cheeseman seemed particularly drawn to the Staffordshire region:

The district is quite coherent, separate, distinct...it is the character of the people of North Staffordshire that really makes our situation an enviable one. It is wrong to generalize about what is only the sum of so many particulars, but I can only describe how I feel about the community that has become my home. The people of North Staffordshire are exceptionally friendly, naturally sanguine, and more absent of concern for social distinction than any community in the United Kingdom.<sup>113</sup>

Whether Cheeseman saw the area as a challenge or whether he simply felt that audiences would be less self-conscious in their theatre choices is not clear; perhaps it was a combination. Nevertheless, Cheeseman's attraction to the 'naturally sanguine'

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 47.

population of Stoke-on-Trent was unquestionable. In the company's first announcement, Cheeseman states:

We believe that this theatre will enrich the life and vitality of the Potteries, that it will provide good entertainment and stimulating ideas, and that it will fill a long felt demand, in an area where there is so much good amateur drama, for a permanent professional company with high standards.<sup>114</sup>

It is interesting to note how careful Cheeseman is to cite the 'high standards' of amateur drama in the area. This was an important and shrewd strategy from the theatre's opening and one that followed Joseph's touring traditions. Joseph had a strong belief in the partnership of amateur and professional theatre. On his arrival in Scarborough in the mid-1950s, he had formed an essential partnership with Ken and Margaret Boden, founding members of the Scarborough Theatre Guild, which began as an amateur dramatic society but later became intrinsically linked with Studio Theatre in Scarborough. The Guild had a central role in securing funding, props and staging for Joseph's company and keeping the Library Theatre viable out of season.<sup>115</sup> In order to embed themselves in the Stoke community, it seems that Joseph was encouraging Cheeseman to adopt similar tactics:

We are pursuing our audience with breathless vigour and arranging quite a number of talks over the next few weeks. We shall certainly follow up your idea of visiting amateur productions, however much suffering it costs us.<sup>116</sup>

Whilst it may not have been Cheeseman's first choice, he records a visit to a college production of James Saunders' one-act play, *Barnstaple* (1961), as 'depressing' and 'atrocious', he did adopt Joseph's strategy, presumably understanding the mutual

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<sup>114</sup> Cheeseman, *Victoria Theatre Appeal First Announcement* (August 1962), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>115</sup> Simon Murgatroyd, 'Alan Ayckbourn: Careers and Timeline' <<http://theatre-in-the-round.co.uk/page7/styled-66/styled-108/index.html>>, [accessed 19 February 2017].

<sup>116</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, undated November 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

benefits that it offered.<sup>117</sup> Having seen a production of *The Pleasure of His Company* (1958) early in 1963 performed by a local amateur dramatics group, Cheeseman seemed genuinely impressed by the company's work and was keen to congratulate them, claiming that

your players coped with these problems with a degree of accomplishment which a lot of professional companies would envy.<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, by November of the same year, Cheeseman had arranged for the group to present their production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) in-the-round at Stoke:

They are very excited about it and it has the advantage of bringing to the theatre their enormous audience, the bulk of whom I don't think have been here before.<sup>119</sup>

This relationship with amateur groups blossomed and Cheeseman regularly extended invitations to local groups to attend performances at the Vic, whilst also spending many evenings watching performances of amateur productions. He became heavily involved with the North Staffordshire Drama Association (NSDA), frequently opening the local amateur drama festival and attempting (albeit unsuccessfully) to arrange a Festival in-the-round at the theatre in collaboration with the NSDA Committee. Strong relations with amateur groups were encouraged for the lifetime of Cheeseman's tenure at the Vic, with various companies performing at the Victoria Theatre in Hartshill and subsequently in the Stephen Joseph Room, the New Vic's studio space.

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<sup>117</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, undated November 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Verdun Graham, New Era Players, 18 January 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 25 November 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

From the outset, therefore, Cheeseman was intent on building a local audience. He would go anywhere and talk to anyone if he thought there was the smallest potential of increasing ticket sales. Whilst Joseph remained firmly in charge from a financial perspective, Cheeseman undoubtedly became the face of the theatre and as Powner notes, Joseph had ‘given Cheeseman delegated powers to deal with the project’ as the ‘Company’s man on the spot’.<sup>120</sup> This division of power worked well initially but increasingly the shared responsibility between Joseph and Cheeseman was to put a strain on their relationship. Cheeseman was so fervent in his belief in Joseph’s philosophy, and so determined to make a success of the theatre that ironically Joseph began to have suspicions around Cheeseman’s intentions, fearing that he had plans to take over the running of the theatre entirely (See Chapter Two). Whilst Joseph had been putting his theories into practice for a touring company, Cheeseman needed to develop the concepts for an in-the-round space on a permanent basis. He needed to determine how to encourage an audience to firstly visit the theatre, and how to win their support on a regular basis throughout the year. For Cheeseman, his underlying belief was that

it is more necessary nowadays for the artist to make personal contact with his audience; for the audience to meet the artist as a person doing a real and useful job of work.<sup>121</sup>

This not only relied on local residents recognising actors as workers in their industrial community, it also presented Cheeseman with the difficult task of assembling a permanent company of actors, writers and technicians who would be willing to relocate to North Staffordshire. Joseph and Cheeseman had won the initial battle of locating a home for Studio Theatre in North Staffordshire, albeit not the purpose-built

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<sup>120</sup> Powner (2017), p.122.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Victoria Theatre: Ancillary Activities: October 1962 – July 1964* (1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

space that had been anticipated; their next challenge was to prove the critics wrong, and make the Victoria Theatre a viable concern in the ‘cultural desert’ of Stoke-on-Trent.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> J.S.A (1965).



## **Chapter Two - The ethos and practices of the Victoria Theatre Company**

In this chapter, I will examine the motivation behind Peter Cheeseman's decision to maintain a permanent company in Stoke-on-Trent, and consider what it meant to be a member of it. I will explore Cheeseman's working practices and how he began to develop a company of actors who were specialists at working in-the-round. It is worth noting that whilst it is now commonplace for actors to work in a variety of different spaces, in the early 1960s the majority of actors had been trained to perform on a proscenium stage. The particular skills needed at the Vic were often very different to those necessary in a traditional theatre, and Cheeseman was eager to attract actors who were willing to forget much of their training, and re-learn how to engage an audience in the Vic's intimate setting. Once these skills were acquired, Cheeseman was keen to maintain his company, and therefore a permanent company seemed an obvious choice. This decision though was not so unusual, as George Rowell and Anthony Jackson explore in their history of repertory theatre:

In the 1960s ... as the repertory movement revived and expanded, the permanent company was given a new *raison d'être* and a fresh impetus.<sup>1</sup>

This revival was due in no small part to the changes made by the new Labour government in 1964, specifically the policies of Jennie Lee, Britain's first Minister for the Arts.<sup>2</sup> As Michelene Wandor notes:

Lee's insistence on the importance of public funding for the arts and to encourage young practitioners, led in the mid-1960s to the building or converting of over 100 theatre venues all over the country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter One for further information on the effect of the political situation on the Arts during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> Michelene Wandor, *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 2.

Not only did this funding enable many new theatre venues, Lee was also keen to encourage theatre-going in existing venues across the country. Her insistence on supporting regional theatre was of particular benefit to the Vic, as an article in *The Guardian* in 1965 recorded:

Miss Lee attacked the pamphlet *Public Patronage of the Arts*, recently published by Political and Economic Planning, for suggesting that only London and a few big centres in the provinces should receive Government subsidies for the arts. “We are,” she declared, “most anxious to encourage grass roots participation in the arts, wherever they are”.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, in 1967, the Council’s Royal Charter declared its two main objects as being ‘to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts’, and ‘to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain’.<sup>5</sup> Jackson:

It was ... in fulfilment of the second object that the Council encouraged ticket prices generally to be kept to a minimum and gave particular support to theatre serving areas of the country where theatres were thin on the ground, and the habit of theatregoing had been all but lost.<sup>6</sup>

The Arts Council grant for the Victoria Theatre Company increased to £7,500 a year subsidy plus up to £400 for the assistance of parties travelling from a distance and £651 special grants for new plays.<sup>7</sup> Whilst the increased funding was beneficial, and venues were beginning to appear across the regions, not all used the permanent company model. Cheeseman felt that he was ‘swimming against the current’<sup>8</sup> compared with ‘most of the reps around London’ who cast each play from the ‘pool of actors’ nearby.<sup>9</sup> Despite the potential difficulties associated with a permanent

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Nightingale, ‘Steps towards North Staffordshire arts group’, *The Guardian*, 8 November 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *First Three Rounds, A report from the Victoria Theatre, S-O-T at the beginning of the fourth season* (August 1965), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Cheeseman, ‘Participation’, *Cue* (Greenwich Theatre Magazine), October 1972, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>9</sup> John Elsom, *Theatre Outside London* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 50.

company performing in repertoire, Cheeseman remained devoted to this system for the entirety of his career. Indeed, Rowell and Jackson note that ‘Stoke was one of the leading exceptions’ in its strict adherence to the permanent company ideal.<sup>10</sup> Life as a company member at the Vic was unique in many ways; actors and technicians were employed on a six-month agreement, which could be extended indefinitely, and were expected to relocate to Stoke-on-Trent. Many of the actors’ contracts were extended, particularly as there was the added incentive of an additional £1 a week for every six months the actor remained with the company.<sup>11</sup> For Cheeseman, it was essential that ‘all the people concerned with the creation of the plays live in the community to which the theatre belongs’.<sup>12</sup> The evidence suggests that this prospect attracted a certain type of individual, often one without family ties and at the beginning of their career. The company during these years, therefore, was for many akin to a university experience, and fellow company members became a close support network for one another. To examine this more closely, I will draw on testimonies from actors, technicians and voluntary staff who were members of the theatre company during the period 1962-1978. As noted in the Methodology, I will be relying largely on the testimonies of company members, as their memories provide a rich resource in conjunction with the archival material. This chapter will also explore the increasing tension arising between Joseph and Cheeseman, and the dispute that occurred between them shortly before Joseph’s death in 1967.

### **Acceptance within the Community**

In an article on the region of Stoke-on-Trent in 1971, Jim Lagden noted:

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<sup>10</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 25 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Cheeseman (August 1965), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Stoke, as may be increasingly obvious, has the largest proportion of genuine working-class to middle-class in England. And the majority of middle-class artistic activities are irrelevant and unknown to them.<sup>13</sup>

And Cheeseman agreed:

The precariousness of the industry in past times has kept the community busy and poor, and has also successfully prevented it from being culturally or socially tyrannized by a strong and coherent middle-class section in the community.<sup>14</sup>

The community of Hartshill was indeed busy, with a high street packed full of convenience stores ranging from cobblers to newsagents, from grocers to cafes. The theatre itself was positioned in the very centre of this thriving community, on the junction of Hartshill and Victoria Roads. Caroline Jay, who joined the company in 1978, describes the unusual situation of the theatre as, ‘just so bizarre, it was like instead of being the corner shop it was the corner theatre’.<sup>15</sup> With this industrious backdrop, Cheeseman shared Joseph’s belief that the theatre should be beneficial to the community. He believed strongly that the Vic needed to be regarded as, ‘as useful in this community as the milkman, or the miner, or the grocer’.<sup>16</sup> To this end, he recruited a company of actors who would live and work in the community of Hartshill in the hope that they would come to be accepted by the locals and, as Cheeseman explains in his introduction to *The Knotty*, would ensure that the people of North Staffordshire ‘realised we were serious about our attachment to the district’.<sup>17</sup> This attachment was necessary in the world of regional repertory theatre as an article in *The Times* in 1964 makes clear:

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<sup>13</sup> Jim Lagden, ‘Professionals, Amateurs and Students’, *Theatre Quarterly* 1.1 (1971), p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Jay, *Interview with Caroline Jay* (interviewed by the author, 27 November 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Pamela Harrison, ‘Theatre in the Round (interview)’, *Leicester Student University Newspaper*, May 12, 1966, p. 5, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. xix.

Normally an out-of-town repertory company is staffed by an ever-changing pool of London-orientated actors who see the provincial theatre as a springboard to better paid work in the capital.<sup>18</sup>

For Cheeseman, this notion was the absolute antithesis of his aims at the Vic. He was keen for actors to work in Stoke as an ambition in itself, and increasingly, Cheeseman hoped that actors would be viewed as ‘insiders ... fellow workers embedded within the local community’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the company of actors regularly engaged in a series of activities outside the theatre; they became researchers, presenters, childcare assistants and educationalists. Cheeseman maintained that this work was of joint benefit, to allow the community to recognise the commitment of the company but also to provide the ‘contact with the world outside ... that is necessary unless the artist is to become a mere creature of the theatre, with no relationship with the outside world’.<sup>20</sup>

Primarily, then, the permanent company was Cheeseman’s method of ensuring community acceptance of the theatre and of the actors’ commitment to the region they were serving. This *modus operandi* also chimed with Cheeseman’s wider philosophy, as he believed it was an effective way of addressing the issues of competition within the industry:

I suppose one of my basic pre-occupations is that I’m not interested in The Top let alone vindicating the kind of destructive systems that depend in the end on the very notion of a Top in order to create the seething pyramid of struggling souls who constitute the way up.<sup>21</sup>

Cheeseman was adhering to the company ideals of Harold Clurman, founder of the Group Theatre in 1931 and Peter Cotes, a pioneering theatre practitioner who had

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Making a go of the Potteries’ theatre’, *The Times*, 16 November 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Cheeseman (October 1972).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

been inspirational to Joseph.<sup>22</sup> Clurman, in his personal account of founding the Group Theatre, *The Fervent Years*, made a similar claim:

The individual actor would be strengthened so that he might better serve the uses of the play in which our common belief was to be expressed. There were to be no stars in our theatre, not for the negative purpose of avoiding distinction, but because all distinction – and we would strive to attain the highest – was to be embodied in the production as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

This investment in the collective was echoed in Cheeseman's company. Chris Martin, a longstanding actor, writer and director at the Vic from 1965 until Cheeseman's retirement in 1998, remembers that there were no 'prima donnas' in the company and if there were, 'they didn't seem to last long, they seemed to disappear quite quickly'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Ron Daniels, an actor with the company from 1965-70, recalls 'there wasn't any bullshit, nobody was better than anybody else, there was no hierarchy. It was very egalitarian'.<sup>25</sup> Whilst this lack of hierarchy appeared to exist amongst the company, there was no questioning Cheeseman's ultimate authority as director, as I will discuss later in the chapter. Nevertheless, there remained a notable lack of affected pretention at the Vic. Steven Granville who acted in the company from 1974-1993, adds 'there were no luvvies or darlings, if you'd have come out with that you'd have been straight out the door, I think'.<sup>26</sup> The company was encouraged to focus on the successful production of the play rather than their own starring role within it, and certainly any suggestion that actors were using their time at the Vic as a way to 'the Top' was frowned upon. In his memoir, *Shouting in the Evenings*, James Hayes, company member from 1966-1968, recalls meeting Cheeseman to inform him of his

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<sup>22</sup> For more on these practitioners, see Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: the Group Theatre and the 30s* (New York: Da Capo Press Ltd, 1945) and Cotes (1949).

<sup>23</sup> Clurman (1945), p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Chris Martin, *Interview with Chris Martin* (interviewed by the author, 10 April 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Ron Daniels, *Interview with Ron Daniels* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Steven Granville, *Interview with Steven Granville* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

move to the National Theatre at the Old Vic, after more than two years with the Stoke company:

We chatted for a while and then I told him I felt it was time for me to move on. In my innocence I at least expected a gracious acceptance of my decision, perhaps an appreciation of my work with the company and a sincere thank you for my support in helping him regain his position. Instead, as my news sank in, he took a pause, leant back in his chair, and looked somewhat coldly at me. 'Yes,' he said, 'I always thought you had your eye on the West End.' I was shocked and saddened.<sup>27</sup>

Cheeseman seemed to view any pursuit of London work as the root of the industry's problems, particularly as he believed that 'London is the focus of this greedy maelstrom'.<sup>28</sup> Any actor that left the permanent company upset the delicate balance of personalities and further embedded the sense that the Vic could be viewed merely as a facilitator on an actor's route to national prominence. As Cheeseman complained in a letter to Oxford professor, John Wain:

We can spend months and years penny pinching and working here to keep a company together only to see them lured away by a London manager with a fat cheque book.<sup>29</sup>

To this end it seems, Cheeseman chose his actors not only on talent but also, as Martin describes, he 'wanted to know has this person got heart and have they got a brain'.<sup>30</sup>

### **'All Muddled Up Together': being a member of the Vic company**

More widely, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the country was beginning to feel the effects of the 1944 Education Reform Act as explained by Sue Dunderdale, a practitioner with touring theatre company Pentabus from 1974-76:

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<sup>27</sup> James Hayes, *Shouting in the Evenings* (Cornwall: Troubadour Publishing Ltd, 2016), p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Cheeseman (1972).

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to John Wain, 28 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Martin (2017).

It was a fantastic period. And also I come from a very poor working-class background. In the 60s, when I went to university in '66, of the percentage of people who went to university there were a lot of us comparatively from the working class.<sup>31</sup>

There was suddenly a group of young people who felt entitled to a type of culture that was more relevant to them. Irving Wardle describes these practitioners as a 'post-war tribe of over-educated yet still under-privileged malcontents' and to some extent, this description was apt for the company at the Vic, and many sections of the audience who ventured down the road from neighbouring Keele University.<sup>32</sup> The similarities between the company members, and the shared inexperience of many seemed to foster familial attachments between the 'tightly-knit' company, a group of people described by Alan Plater as 'almost huddling together for warmth and survival'.<sup>33</sup> Many of the company members interviewed describe the closeness of the company. Gillian Brown, for example, actor with the company from 1966-1971, remembers that 'I was very young, ... but it was like coming home'.<sup>34</sup> Barbara Day, née Gartside, production secretary in 1968, describes how she found a place to live in Hartshill:

We had a whole house that had been passed on to us by some actors who had left, and they passed it onto us, so we kept it in the family.<sup>35</sup>

The notion of the company as a 'family' was returned to repeatedly during interviews and was also a theme observed in a 2015 sociological study on the theatre company in the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> The study noted that:

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<sup>31</sup> Sue Dunderdale, *Interview with Sue Dunderdale* (interviewed by Stephen Abbott for *Unfinished Histories*, January 2015) <[www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/pentabus/sue-dunderdale-interview](http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/pentabus/sue-dunderdale-interview)> [accessed 18 November 2017].

<sup>32</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Thieves and Parasites: On Forty Years of Theatre Reviewing in England', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13 (1997), pp. 119-132 (p. 125).

<sup>33</sup> Alan Plater interview, *Interview with Alan Plater* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 8 September 2008), Elsam archive.

<sup>34</sup> Gillian Brown, *Interview with Gillian Brown* (interviewed by the author, 12 April 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Day (née Gartside), *Interview with Barbara Day (née Gartside)* (interviewed by the author, 13 November 2017).

<sup>36</sup> *Ages and Stages* is a collaborative research project between the New Vic's Education team and Keele University. It encourages adults of all ages to enjoy drama and creative work, and has been exploring



Linked to this sense of belonging were commonly used metaphors of the theatre as ‘home’ or ‘family’. Interviewees from all four sub-groups described both the old and new theatre as ‘homely’, ‘like a home from home’, ‘like going home’ and ‘feeling like home’. The metaphor of ‘family’ was used particularly by former employees, many of whom had moved to the Potteries from other areas as young people and very much relied on the theatre for social and moral support.<sup>37</sup>

Comparing the company to a family may not always be wholeheartedly positive.

Granville commented that ‘in families there are ups and downs, there’s in-fighting and bits of backchat’ but ‘basically it’s solid’; nevertheless, the permanence of the company and a sense of common purpose seem to have enabled a ‘solid’ base to grow at Stoke.<sup>38</sup> Hillary Griffiths, née Weaver, wardrobe mistress from 1978-82, remembers:

This theatre has all been about, completely about teamwork...it was certainly the happiest time of my life working there for 4 years. I look back on it and think I knew where I was, I knew who I was, I knew who my mates were, I knew what we were supposed to be doing, we were all doing, we were all working towards something and that was great.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, company members felt a bond to each other because, as Granville explains, ‘you were all Vic-ites’.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, this sense was not exclusive amongst the actors; technical and managerial staff felt equally integrated. Day recalls that ‘there wasn’t the same division between stage management and actors that I’d come across in other places’.<sup>41</sup> Keith Plant, a volunteer at the theatre remembers:

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the impact of theatre on the experience of ageing. As part of the project, which launched in 2009, a theatre company was created, made up of participants of all ages. The research findings, though useful to this project, were largely focused on the impact of the Vic and New Vic on older people both through the effect of the documentaries and through the community work of the theatre. (See New Vic website for more information <<http://www.newvictheatre.org.uk/education-and-community/education/for-adults/>> [accessed 24 October, 2018].

<sup>37</sup> Miriam Bernard et al., ‘Ages and Stages: the place of theatre in the lives of older people’, *Ageing & Society*, 35.6 (2015), pp. 1119-1145 (p. 1134).

<sup>38</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Hillary Griffiths (née Weaver), *Interview with Hillary Griffiths (Weaver)* (interviewed by the author, 16 October, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Day (2017).

The cast used to come out and have a pint and whatever after the show ... there was a genuine mingling between the company and the backstage people and the audience.<sup>42</sup>

There was a sense that everyone was, as Jasmine Warwick, secretary to Peter Cheeseman in 1972 describes, ‘all muddled up together’ with the ultimate aim of producing a successful show.<sup>43</sup> Granville:

If you needed an extra bod on stage, the ASM would be down somewhere. ‘Stick a costume on and stand there. You’re not doing anything just standing there. You’re a pirate’ ... but that was all the fun of it and that kind of bred that family feel that everybody was doing something. It was always that play at the end, that was the main thing.<sup>44</sup>

This inclusive atmosphere extended out further too, to the maintenance staff of the building. Many company members recalled Cath, the Head Cleaner who according to Carolyn Nixon, née Black, production secretary in 1966, was ‘in charge really, we weren’t’.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Black recalls ‘Betty in the box’<sup>46</sup> who was the box office assistant and Michael Turner, a volunteer at the theatre, was one of a number of interviewees who recalled Nelly Griffin, ‘who would be in during the day, baking cakes ... and making sandwiches’.<sup>47</sup> A local interest story in the *Evening Sentinel* in 1971 further endorses the sense of camaraderie that existed amongst the staff:

Mrs. Jeanette Hemmings – who works at the theatre as a cleaner – and her family faced a pretty grim time when fire destroyed part of their Newcastle home. But the company moved in, paid for a day out at Dudley Zoo for Mrs. Hemmings and the two children, cleaned up the mess, helped out with clothing and blankets, and insisted on returning to redecorate the whole house.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Keith Plant, *Interview with Keith Plant* (interviewed by the author, 16 October, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Jasmine Warwick, *Interview with Jasmine Warwick* (interviewed by the author, 9 October 2017)

<sup>44</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>45</sup> Carolyn Nixon (née Black), *Interview with Carolyn Nixon (née Black)* (interviewed by the author, 5 January 2018).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Michael Turner, *Interview with Michael Turner* (interviewed by the author, 13 September 2017).

<sup>48</sup> ‘Samaritans were from Vic Theatre’, *Evening Sentinel*, 5 June 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

There seemed to be a genuine recognition amongst everyone in the company that each person's role was valuable and contributed to the end result of the play's production.

Indeed, Granville recalls Cheeseman asking the cleaners' opinions:

It used to be wonderful when you were rehearsing in the theatre and they'd be cleaning in the auditorium and he'd say 'What do you think?' so there'd be 3 or 4 ladies round cleaning and they'd say 'Ooo, I don't like your character'.<sup>49</sup>

Cheeseman's approach to salaries was similarly egalitarian. A letter from Cheeseman to Joseph regarding company wages on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1966, details the basic wage that each company member received according to age, and the extra one pound a week company members would receive for every six months that they remained at the Vic. Further, he comments that:

The present system does seem to work very well, and means that everyone knows what everyone else is getting, and feels that it is an honest and straightforward system.<sup>50</sup>

This transparency added to the company's sense of a common goal and the shared belief that each person's contribution was equally valuable. The longer an actor remained part of the company, the more valuable he or she became.

The existence of the strong camaraderie described by company members might be further explained by an examination of their working lives and commitments. Heather Stoney, a member of the original company in 1962, recalls how intense the work at Stoke could be:

It may be because in Stoke, was a tiny company, and you really couldn't get out of it. I mean you couldn't get out of town. Because the work, you were working all the time. You didn't really get much more than a Sunday off. So it was very, very concentrated.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 25 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>51</sup> Heather Stoney, *Interview with Heather Stoney* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 26 July 2007).

Similarly, Alison Chitty, designer at the Vic from 1970-1978, recalls that it was ‘phenomenally hard work’ and that ‘my first night of paid work I did an all-nighter and there were no Equity agreements then’.<sup>52</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that company members became so close, given that they spent fifty weeks of the year together in intensive working conditions. Martin explains:

It’s twelve hour days starting at ten and get out of the pub at about eleven ...there was hardly any holidays except these two weeks which I used to spend waiting to get back again.<sup>53</sup>

Granville concurs, claiming that ‘it was the production, the play, that’s what you lived for and you were totally dedicated to it. There was no half measures really. It took over your life’.<sup>54</sup> Alan David, company member from 1969-1972, recalls that ‘we seemed to work so hard and that’s what I loved about it’.<sup>55</sup> Whilst there was a clear sense of purpose and belonging that seemed to encourage company members to devote hours to the theatre, they also remember their years in the company as being ‘terrific fun’<sup>56</sup> and many suggest it was ‘my university’.<sup>57</sup>

Actors were not only required to perform in the repertoire, there was also an expectation that they would be involved in community outreach activities too. A significant part of their role involved talks, demonstrations and drama sessions outside of the theatre itself. Cheeseman explained:

There is no question about it; without a permanent company of men and women who are in effect members of the theatre staff and not hired hands whose only loyalty is to play in one show and then go off and pursue their own private career interests, this work would not be possible at all.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Alison Chitty, *Interview with Alison Chitty* (Interviewed by Elizabeth Wright, 16 July 2007 and 10 October 2007), held at British Library, Sound and Moving Image Collection, C1173/19 and C1173/19A.

<sup>53</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>54</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>55</sup> Alan David, *Interview with Alan David* (interviewed by the author, 16 April 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>57</sup> Daniels (2017) and Martin (2017).

<sup>58</sup> Cheeseman (1972).

Very quickly then, company members began to gain a sense of the community in which they were living and working and as discussed earlier, Cheeseman hoped they would be further anchored to the theatre and its environs, explaining that ‘How can an actor do justice to a world he never comes into contact with?’<sup>59</sup>

An article in the local newspaper the *Evening Sentinel*, makes clear Cheeseman’s particular aims for their work in Stoke-on-Trent:

Mr. Cheeseman believes that it is imperative to develop an affinity between actors and audience but he is violently opposed to the coffee parties after the show and the “peep behind the scene” type of communication. He believes that this only serves to widen the gap, rather than bridge it.<sup>60</sup>

As may be expected, Cheeseman was uninterested in any communication that would emphasise the mysterious glamour of theatrical work. Whilst the work was clearly an attempt to build audiences, it was ultimately undertaken because ‘we want to run a theatre which is of maximum value to the community’.<sup>61</sup> This aim extended beyond the actors to everyone involved in making and programming work at the Vic. For Cheeseman all of the work produced at the Vic, whether new plays or productions of the classics, needed to fundamentally resonate with the community of Stoke-on-Trent.

In an interview in 1964, he explained this:

The artists of the theatre used to believe that the secret of their art lay in their remoteness...distance, remoteness, was a part of the magic of the theatre...nowadays artists have found themselves much more in need of contacting their public as people... The most important thing you do in your theatre is the plays that are written for your own time, but when you do a classic like “Hamlet” or “Electra”, your most successful interpretation is the one which re-interprets it in the terms of your own time.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cheeseman (1972).

<sup>60</sup> R.S. ‘Amateur and professional groups co-operate in N. Staffs drama’, *Evening Sentinel*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1964.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Cheeseman, ‘Victoria Theatre: Ancillary Activities – October 1962 – July 1964’ (1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Interview with Peter Cheeseman* (interviewed by Webb and Franklin, Winter 1964) held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Matthew Coady, in his introduction to the Council of Repertory Theatres' conference in 1971 agreed, claiming that

what is being forged here is a whole new relationship between the playhouse and the people it seeks to serve. It is a relationship inspired by the view that in an increasingly standardized world...the theatre offers a means whereby a community can renew its sense of self-awareness and develop a local pride.<sup>63</sup>

The Vic was therefore one of a number of regional theatres that was redefining the quality and purpose of repertory. Jackson argues that what characterises the period 1958-83 in regional theatre was 'an enormous and often exciting variety of work and a plurality of approach'.<sup>64</sup> Martin affirms that 'we were sort of linked up in a way. It was a kind of invisible link to up in Liverpool, Liverpool Everyman Theatre, marvellous stuff Alan Dossier was doing up there through the 60s, terrific plays and lots going on in Manchester'.<sup>65</sup> As Jackson states, many of the regional repertory theatres were beginning to 'challenge the conventional notions of what theatre was supposed to be. The local theatre might after all have a much needed and obviously *useful* part to play in the community'.<sup>66</sup> Theatre-in-Education (T-I-E), which will be discussed further in Chapter Four, was one such provision; pioneered at the Belgrade in Coventry in 1965 and swiftly followed with T-I-E teams at Bolton Octagon (1967), Leeds Playhouse (1969) and across the country at a number of regional reps over the subsequent years.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the Ken Campbell Roadshow, which had its origins at the Vic, toured the working-men's clubs of Bolton to 'spread the good word of the Bolton Octagon'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew Coady, 'Introduction: Everybody's Theatre', *Council of Repertory Theatres* publication (1971).

<sup>64</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 95.

<sup>65</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>66</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 95.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>68</sup> Ken Campbell interviewed by Dominic Cavendish  
<<http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/ken-campbell/>> [accessed 13 December 2018].

## **‘A Suburb of Hell’: Living in Stoke-on-Trent**

Cheeseman was keen for the company to share his enthusiasm for the district of Stoke-on-Trent, which he lauded for its unpretentious nature. An article in *The Times* in 1964 explains Cheeseman’s feelings about the theatre’s location with some apparent puzzlement:

He does not pretend it is beautiful. Pointing to the grey pyramids of slag, the belching factory chimneys and the sooty little streets, he remarks: “You can’t run away from all this. You have got to live in it, understand it and make it mean something”.<sup>69</sup>

However, first impressions of the area for others were not so sanguine. One reviewer visiting the theatre described Stoke-on-Trent as a ‘suburb of Hell’,<sup>70</sup> another claimed that ‘the only place he could imagine bleaker than Elsinore was the outside of the Vic on a wet night’.<sup>71</sup> Many employees arriving in the area had similar impressions.

Daniels, for example, arriving from Brazil remembers:

Stoke for me was a very difficult place to start off, because it’s so dark and when I first arrived there you couldn’t even buy garlic in the shops.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, Jay recalls that she found Stoke ‘very grey, quite bleak, very industrial’<sup>73</sup>

and Hayes remembers from his first bus ride into the city that

Stoke-on-Trent was not an attractive place in the mid 1960s... the city was studded with the distinctive tall brick bottle kilns of the potteries of Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, Spode, Minton and many smaller companies.<sup>74</sup>

To some extent, the artistic reputation of Stoke-on-Trent was slowly being modified, however, as Cheeseman and his company garnered more support and interest from London critics. Actor Jane Wood comments that

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Making a go’, *The Times* (1964).

<sup>70</sup> Matthew Coady, ‘A Suburb of Hell’, *Daily Mirror*, 3 May 1971, p. 5, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Cook, *Directors’ Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 30.

<sup>72</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>73</sup> Jay (2017).

<sup>74</sup> Hayes (2016), p. 115.

the difference then was that everyone came up from London to see our work. Irving Wardle of *The Times* was always there. Bill Gaskill and Lindsay Anderson of the Royal Court would often come and see what was going on.<sup>75</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman was keen to promote a strong sense of place amongst his acting company, he also wanted to publicise the high standard of work that was taking place at the Vic. He therefore worked tirelessly, giving interviews in the national papers, welcoming London critics and building strong links with television producers, to ensure that the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent gained an impressive national reputation. A letter from Margaret Ramsay in 1964 suggests that Cheeseman was successful in his aim, when she asserted that ‘you are getting Stoke a name in London’.<sup>76</sup> Many employees agreed. Hayes, for example, described the ‘prestigious Victoria Theatre’ that had ‘an extremely good reputation, was getting a lot of attention in the London press, and many actors were very keen to work there’<sup>77</sup> and Romy Cheeseman (née Saunders), a member of the company from 1972 and later Cheeseman’s wife, recalls the growing interest surrounding the Vic whilst still at drama school:

I’d heard other students talking about it in the year above me ... I seem to remember overhearing this excited conversation... “I’ve got an audition for Stoke!”<sup>78</sup>

By the early 1970s, the theatre’s national reputation was established. Bob Eaton, who joined as an administrative assistant in 1971 but soon graduated to Assistant Director, remembers seeing the job advertisement for Cheeseman’s personal assistant, knowing that

the Vic was the theatre I most wanted to work at in the whole world. Glamorous it was not. Metropolitan it was not. ... But it was the one theatre I

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<sup>75</sup> Coveney (2011), p. 35.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 24 June 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>77</sup> Hayes (2016), p. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Romy Cheeseman (née Saunders), *Interview with Romy Cheeseman (née Saunders)* (interviewed by the author, 2018).



knew that was working to cut through the barriers between theatre and ordinary people.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, Jasmine Warwick, an administrative assistant at the National Theatre, wrote to Cheeseman in application for her secretarial post in Stoke:

I am primarily interested in administration and feel that your theatre at Stoke is one of the few repertory companies doing a worthwhile job in providing ‘alive’ theatre that is of relevance to the community, and one in which I would really love to be involved.<sup>80</sup>

Cheeseman’s response to this application is particularly interesting:

May I just ask you straightaway however, whether in view of the fact that you already do have straight secretarial experience at a rather good theatre, you can face doing a job at another theatre which however good and northern it may be, is still basically a secretarial job...It has also come to our notice over the last few years, that people really have the most romantic ideas about what we actually do here, depending on their dreams!<sup>81</sup>

Warwick did secure the position, (not least, she felt because Cheeseman ‘quite wanted the “I’ve nicked someone from the National” kind of feeling’) but the exchange exemplifies both the reputation that the theatre had begun to acquire in its first ten years and Cheeseman’s typically direct manner, keen to play down the romanticism of their ‘northern’ theatre.

Many members of the company recognise that the Vic developed a culture described by Weaver as ‘make-do-and-mend’, which perhaps added to its reputation.<sup>82</sup> The theatre itself, described by Eaton as ‘a scruffy little theatre-in-the-round’, was initially a converted cinema and nightclub and was therefore in need of refurbishment.<sup>83</sup> There was very little money to spare, and hence renovations were infrequent and thrifty.

Michael Turner explains his voluntary involvement during sixth form:

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<sup>79</sup> Bob Eaton, *Fish and Chips and Rock and Roll: A Life in Popular Theatre* (unpub. ms., 2017), p. 14.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Jasmine Warwick to Peter Cheeseman, 27 January 1972, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Jasmine Warwick, 1 February 1972, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>82</sup> Weaver (2017).

<sup>83</sup> Eaton (2017), p. 14

One day, I would have been in the Lower Sixth, one of the Upper Sixth guys came into our class and said there's a local theatre here called the Victoria Theatre and they're redecorating the inside and they need some help with this, would any of you be up for it? ... The original theatre had this awful flock wallpaper, I can't even remember the colour sort of a dingy brown ... So they gave us this – these huge tins of a dark green which was called Montana Green but it was quite an awful colour ... the stage manager then called it 'shit green' I'm afraid! So we just had to wallop this on, you know, like two coats and went back for certainly one weekend, maybe another as well.<sup>84</sup>

The 'Vic vols', as they came to be known, not only helped to refurbish the theatre, but also played a central role in its daily working life. Often sixth form or university students, the volunteers not only helped to maintain the theatre but often ran the front-of-house each evening. Weaver claimed that employing voluntary helpers from the community ensured that there was always 'a really good atmosphere ... you always felt that you were welcome'<sup>85</sup> and the volunteers themselves remember that 'people stayed on for years', and that 'we really felt part of it all'.<sup>86</sup> Brown concurs claiming that 'the reason there were so many Vic volunteers, I think, was that people felt enriched just by doing whatever they were doing: they were part of the whole momentum and the whole life of the Vic'.<sup>87</sup>

Whilst the voluntary help was in accordance with the familial culture at the Vic, it was also financially necessary, since budgets remained tight, and the space continued to pose difficulties for both the creative and technical staff. Carrie Black, for example, remembers the lighting box soundproofed entirely with eggboxes;<sup>88</sup> Vivian Nixson, Business Manager, recalls access to the offices during a production was via a steel ladder in a 'little room where the boiler and the meters were'<sup>89</sup> and Day remembers the unusual access to the production office whereby 'the only way to get to it [was] to

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<sup>84</sup> Turner (2017).

<sup>85</sup> Weaver (2017).

<sup>86</sup> Turner (2017).

<sup>87</sup> Brown (2018).

<sup>88</sup> Nixson (née Black) (2018).

<sup>89</sup> Vivian Nixson, *Interview with Vivian Nixson* (interviewed by the author, 5 January 2018).

get across the roof which, if it was raining was a bit messy'.<sup>90</sup> Actors too experienced the peculiarities of the building since they were forced to 'race round through the kitchen to ... enter from a different entrance into the acting space'.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, due to lack of space, the costume department was housed in a separate building and Weaver recalls her regular trips up and down Hartshill Road laden with costumes and material from the design room (an ex-laundrette), past the metal scrapyards and into the theatre. It seems, however, that rather than these limitations hindering company members, they served to enhance the bond between them. The ramshackle nature of the building added, perhaps, to Cheeseman's desire that the community felt comfortable in the space and that no-one was made to feel inferior. Weaver recalls this particularly in relation to the design of the floor-cloth:

You can walk on this stage, this is there to be walked on, don't worry about treading on the cloth on the floor you know that's the whole point of it, you're sitting round this stage but it's not precious ... get down off your seat and come across and have a good look at the floor cloth, have a look at the set. It's not 'up there' ... it's not a sort of magic at a distance, it's magic you're a part of.<sup>92</sup>

As Jay affirms: 'the building itself, its quirks and limitations ... actually that probably formed part of the ethos of what Peter was trying to do'.<sup>93</sup>

### **Acting in repertoire**

This make-do and mend culture also allowed the company certain freedoms, particularly in its approach to the repertoire system. Since there was very little set required for each production, it was much easier to operate three or more productions

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<sup>90</sup> Day (2017).

<sup>91</sup> Jay (2017).

<sup>92</sup> Weaver (2017).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

at one time, breaking up the run of each production over a two-month period.

Cheeseman explained his reasons behind operating this system:

What it does provide is the best basis for the working life of a production. It considerably improves the whole of the actor's relationship with each part. In anticipation, he sees it as something which will be with him over a long period. In rehearsal, he sees it in the context of not one (temporary) role, but of at least two or three with which he is involved over a similarly long period.<sup>94</sup>

That is not to say that working in repertoire did not have its own challenges, particularly since actors could have three or four plays in their head at once, performing a play in the evening and rehearsing a different one in a 'bring back' rehearsal, designed to refresh the cast on a play they had first performed as long as six weeks previously.<sup>95</sup> Martin affirms that 'I don't know how we did it really now when I look back. You needed nerves of steel'.<sup>96</sup> Despite the number of plays running concurrently, actors enjoyed the relatively lengthy rehearsal time compared to their previous experiences. Hayes for example, compared his work at Barrow-in-Furness (where a weekly repertoire was in operation), to his arrival at the Vic:

There was the opportunity to work on a more adventurous repertoire. Each production rehearsed for four weeks. This made a huge difference to the quality of the work a company could create.<sup>97</sup>

Three or four weeks rehearsal for an actor in rep was clearly seen as something of a luxury, not least because the longer a group worked collectively, the easier it became to develop a production ready for performance. Actors came to understand each other, anticipating intuitively the movements of other company members. Granville explained this understanding:

Mark Dornford-May who came, as a director, he would say - first rehearsal - 'Right OK, let's just run through the scene.' So we'd got our scripts, on we

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<sup>94</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 78

<sup>95</sup> Jay (2017).

<sup>96</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>97</sup> Hayes (2016), p. 118.

went, we played the scene and he just said ‘Mmm, you've just blocked it’. Because we knew where to go, we just knew.<sup>98</sup>

Undoubtedly, this intuition was due in part to the same casts working together for months at a time, but in part also it could be attributed to the same cast working in-the-round together. Because of the shape of the stage and the proximity of the audience, the company developed particular strategies in rehearsal to ensure the success of productions.

The unusual space of the Victoria Theatre naturally attracted a particular type of actor, as already discussed. Joseph had already found in his work with Studio Theatre Company that it was generally the young and inexperienced for whom it appealed. He explained in an article for *Plays and Players* in 1962:

There is nothing special about the requirements for acting in the round, except, possibly, that actors who had many, many years of working in one form of theatre only may find it difficult to adapt themselves to some of the superficial differences of another form. But this is no particular problem as it is likely to be young actors who will work in a company of this sort anyhow.<sup>99</sup>

The benefit of a young company working in this formation encouraged a break from tradition, for example, in the company’s rejection of the National Anthem before a performance. It also further embedded a sense of equality amongst the actors. Just as the repertoire system allowed Cheeseman to fairly distribute roles amongst the actors during each season, so the formation of the stage enabled all actors to be seen at all times during the performance. Ben Kingsley, an actor with the company in 1965, recalled:

There was no hiding place, and there were no tricks. There were no ghastly tricks like trying to upstage your fellow actor, or fiddling around with a prop to get the audience’s attention, - I discovered all this appalling behaviour in the proscenium arch days.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Granville (2018). Mark Dornford-May was invited to be an Assistant Director in 1982 and directed his first production of *Aesop’s Fables* in May 1983.

<sup>99</sup> Joseph (1962), p. 38

<sup>100</sup> Ben Kingsley, *Interview with Ben Kingsley* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, July 2008), Elsam archive.

The equality of working in-the-round therefore fitted neatly with Cheeseman's belief in leveling the company and ensuring that there was 'no star nonsense'.<sup>101</sup> Daniels agreed, in a 1972 interview:

The concept of the arena stage affects Cheeseman's work and the actor's work. In effect, it modifies what they do. The narrative, three-dimensional quality of the stage encourages a no-nonsense, uncamp and unstagy [sic] reality which affects everybody who has worked at Stoke.<sup>102</sup>

Daniels believed that in-the-round staging was building a particular type of reality acting with a narrative quality. Other members of the company also recall this, with Brown remembering the space as 'a sort of magic room, you know, a living, breathing space, waiting for stories to be told in it'<sup>103</sup> and Martin recalls their work as 'pure storytelling'.<sup>104</sup> This was largely borne out of the proximity of the audience and the simplicity of the form. Granville recalls:

The great thing was because you could see all the audience, not just the front people, all of them and what you did was you brought them onto the stage. You hooked them in and then you'd say 'Come down and join me'...they were simply, very simply put on, story told, the main person on the stage all the time was the actor, so you didn't have big lavish sets and pyrotechnics and all this going on, no, no, it was just the actor, you and the audience.<sup>105</sup>

For many actors, the difficulty arose in communicating these stories effectively. Cheeseman's particular bugbear was lack of clarity in delivery and actors recall him prowling the perimeter of the auditorium to ensure that every line could be heard, regardless of the direction of the actor's face. This therefore required work on particular acting techniques, as Kingsley described:

You must have the energy in your body language and your vocal range to include the people sitting behind you. And how you do that is that you bounce the energy off your fellow actor, who, he or she will then project your energy to the people sitting behind you.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Cotes (1949).

<sup>102</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 246.

<sup>103</sup> Brown (2018).

<sup>104</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>105</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>106</sup> Kingsley (2008).

In this way, actors in-the-round relied heavily on each other, since much of the success of an actor's performance was reliant on a fellow actor's reaction, further contributing to the collaborative nature of the company. The shape of the auditorium also made projection of lines particularly difficult, and for Cheeseman the projection of lines was one of the most important techniques for an actor to master. Granville recalls his unusual way of checking the effectiveness of an actor's delivery:

He [Cheeseman] had this very weird thing, you would rehearse the scene and then he would say 'right, run the scene' so we would run it and he'd have his head down and we'd think 'he isn't watching this, he's not...' and at the end he'd go 'ok' and what he was doing was listening.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst he was concerned that an actor's portrayal should be convincing, it was of no value if the lines could not be understood by every audience member. Martin recalls mumbling the lines of a 'yobbo...who hardly said anything' in an effort to effectively characterise the role, only to be chided by Cheeseman: 'Chris can you speak up I can't hear a word you're saying'.<sup>108</sup>

Under Cheeseman's close guidance, actors learnt both new ways of delivering lines to an audience in-the-round and particular ways of moving around the square stage with little or no scenery with which to interact. Actors came to understand positions on the stage that were, as Martin describes, 'hotspots...for example, in a perfect square right in the middle is the most vulnerable and at the same time is the strongest point'.<sup>109</sup>

Again, the regularity of the permanent company enabled the actors to understand intuitively how to move around the space and each other, and to gradually build up particular skills for projection and line delivery. Whilst Cheeseman never adhered to a precise methodology in rehearsal, he constantly reminded actors of the need to be

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<sup>107</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>108</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

‘honest and straightforward’.<sup>110</sup> Every rehearsal began with a physical warm-up in the foyer. Martin:

We had singing classes every week, we all warmed up and we were doing exercises every single day. We were physically fantastically fit.<sup>111</sup>

Since sets were minimal, rehearsals could usually take place in the auditorium itself or if the space was unavailable, the company would move across the road to their rented rehearsal room opposite the theatre, situated above the local convenience store. With such regular rehearsals, actors from the Vic company were familiar to the locals, even if some of their practices remained unusual. Mona Mason, a shopkeeper opposite the theatre, remembers

they’d stand in a circle and they’d be sort of dancing and jumping about and doing all sorts of things ... and I’d stand there in, by my shop window ... looking across and thinking “what are they doing? ... I wonder what they’re doing that for?”<sup>112</sup>

The regular warm-ups were essential to ensure actors were in tune with one another and focused on the day ahead. Rehearsals followed a strict routine beginning at ten o’clock, with rigorous timekeeping always employed. Granville recalls the tradition for latecomers:

If you were late... you would come in and you would join the circle. At the end of that time you would have to... walk to the centre of that circle and apologise to everybody why you were late...it was just – you’ve let us down.<sup>113</sup>

Cheeseman’s ethos permeated the company: that each member was as important as the next, and that an individual’s lack of commitment would be detrimental to the entire theatre’s success.

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<sup>110</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>111</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>112</sup> Mona Mason, *Interview with George and Mona Mason* (interviewed by the author 26 September 2003)

[www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk) [accessed 12 March 2018]

<sup>113</sup> Granville (2018).



## Working with Peter Cheeseman

Cheeseman himself was a formidable character, described by Daniels as ‘mildly pugnacious’ and by Stoney as ‘rather intense’.<sup>114</sup> Judith Cook in her 1974 edition of *Directors’ Theatre* includes a telling description of her interview with him:

Talking to him in his cluttered office (‘that heap of papers on the floor represents the theatre’s archives’), is something akin to being confined with a Force 9 gale in a matchbox, and he talks about theatre with a fervour and enthusiasm a Fundamentalist minister might use to bring you to God.<sup>115</sup>

Certainly, Cheeseman appears to have adopted Joseph’s mission as something of a personal crusade. Warwick describes Cheeseman as a ‘man with a mission’<sup>116</sup> and Albert Cooper, who had a close attachment to the theatre after his participation in *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1973), recalls:

He must have been working fourteen hours a day when he was directing. He’d just come back and do his paperwork, he never stopped.<sup>117</sup>

Arguably, this intensive work schedule was down to Cheeseman’s desire to be involved at every level. Keith Plant:

He wanted to know what was in the scones...he wanted to know everything that was going on about the theatre so in an odd sense he ran it as a sort of dictator...he could be a bit paranoid.<sup>118</sup>

For all that the company was egalitarian, then, there was no question that Cheeseman was in control. Alan David, for example, comments playfully that ‘this is Peter Cheeseman – there was nothing democratic about it. You were told what to do!’<sup>119</sup> and Terson affirms that Cheeseman was ‘the power man’.<sup>120</sup> Cheeseman presented his position slightly differently in an interview for a press article in 1964:

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<sup>114</sup> Daniels (2017) and Stoney (2007).

<sup>115</sup> Cook (1974), p. 29.

<sup>116</sup> Warwick (2017).

<sup>117</sup> Albert Cooper, *Interview with Albert Cooper* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Plant (2017).

<sup>119</sup> David (2018).

<sup>120</sup> Peter Terson, *Interview with Peter Terson* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2018).

With us, the actor-director relationship is completely changed', says Cheeseman, 'The actor has creative freedom, and the producer no longer has to be a kind of strategist, organising an exit three pages before it actually comes! What we have here is a group with its leader, rather than a dictator with its subject people.'<sup>121</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman may not have seen his actors as subjects, there remains a sense that as director, his emphasis was on leading the group to a successful production. He may have allowed a certain degree of creative freedom, but actors recall that ultimately 'he was the director, he was in charge, that was it'.<sup>122</sup> Jay too remembers that:

He was a force to be reckoned with as a director he wasn't someone who just let their actors work out characters by themselves and left them completely...no, he had too much of a vision, too much of a drive and too much of a passion about the finished product to do that.<sup>123</sup>

Arguably, the success of the theatre relied on this individual drive. Without Cheeseman's tenacity and forthright manner, the theatre would have been unlikely to have achieved the high quality of productions and, perhaps even more importantly, the level of publicity that it did. Ronald Hill, in an article on 'Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent', describes his enthusiasm:

Peter Cheeseman is the ideal administrator. One of the theatre's new crop of crusaders, he has the knack of rousing intense interest where it has never existed before. He makes his theatre sound so immensely desirable and so essential to the community, that there are few who can resist his eloquent, imaginative persuasiveness. He is tireless in his assaults on the doubters. He is forever addressing schools, clubs, institutes and factories, and fascinated hearers are drawn to the Victoria Theatre, only to find themselves facing an even more irresistible seduction.<sup>124</sup>

Indeed, Cheeseman's unfailing energy was a quality recalled by all who knew him.

Nixson: 'though he may be talking to you quite sanely you kind of thought he was thinking of two other things as well',<sup>125</sup> and Jay recalls his 'boundless energy and

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<sup>121</sup> Ronald Hill, 'Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent', *Theatre in the Provinces*, 26 (1964), p. 17, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>122</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>123</sup> Jay (2017).

<sup>124</sup> Hill (1964), p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> Nixson (2018).

enthusiasm for whatever he was doing'.<sup>126</sup> Stoney adds that 'he had the most extraordinary drive and energy, and care'.<sup>127</sup> Whilst Cheeseman could undoubtedly be forthright and abrupt, his level of care is a quality mentioned by many individuals who joined the company at a young age. David, for example, recalls that 'he was the most wonderful man...he gave me a lot of confidence'<sup>128</sup> and Warwick remembers that he 'was really good to me because I was actually very insecure and not very sure of myself at all and he just made me feel better about myself'.<sup>129</sup> Brown too recognises the reciprocal nature of Cheeseman's attitude:

He was an enabler, a magician. He wanted people to fulfil their potential and if he could help with that, then that would be great – great for him, great for them.<sup>130</sup>

One such example was recalled by Caroline Smith, who joined the company in 1963 but was unhappy in her acting role, and was keen to broaden her experience as a director. Smith was one of a handful of female directors in the early 1960s, but Cheeseman was keen to encourage and support her, particularly if Smith was to remain part of the company:

I did a deal with him whereby he wanted me to stay on ... and I said, "If you give me some productions, I'll stay on". So he did.<sup>131</sup>

Other company members had the chance to direct too; for example, Arnold Beck, Bernard Gallagher, Heather Stoney and Danny Schiller were all company members who tried their hand at directing in the early seasons, and later, Ron Daniels, Gillian Brown, Christopher Martin and Ken Campbell were given similar opportunities. Alan David remembers

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<sup>126</sup> Jay (2017).

<sup>127</sup> Stoney (2007).

<sup>128</sup> David (2018).

<sup>129</sup> Warwick (2017).

<sup>130</sup> Brown (2018).

<sup>131</sup> Caroline Smith, *Interview with Caroline Smith* (interviewed by Nirjay Mahindru, 18 May 2020), < <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1086089/3738806> > [accessed 14 July 2021]

That was what I admired about him most and that was the thing that I'll remember him for really. He gave me a lot of confidence and it was wonderful that he asked me to become the Assistant Director you know and I'd had no experience of directing and I just appreciated it but in the end I wasn't very good so I went to him and said 'Peter, this must end'.<sup>132</sup>

Those who were selected by Cheeseman and were happy to become supporters of his mission experienced a degree of loyalty that was unusual in the theatrical world at the time. Another such example was Granville. He had written to Cheeseman regularly after leaving school and eventually secured a position in the company, having followed Cheeseman's advice to train at drama school and gain some repertory experience. He explains:

Peter was wonderful because when I went I only had one good ear, the other one didn't work. Anyway I kept having problems with it, in the end I had an operation on it and I went to Peter and said 'Look I need an operation on there, it could get me my hearing back, but I will be deaf for a while' So he said 'fine' and he took me off acting and made me an Acting DSM put me on stage management, and he said to me, he said 'if I put you on stage management and you get your hearing back, you promise me you won't leave' ...I was 11 weeks in hospital or something with all this stuff going on – it was a long time but then eventually I went back and he put me on as a DSM – I was the only one in the country apparently, an Acting DSM! – and I worked the lights, I did the sound, oh I did lots of things, it was wonderful and then the little parts I did get, he rigged up, rigged up the headphones all over the theatre so that I could come on for my cue.<sup>133</sup>

This level of care for his actors is a clear indication of Cheeseman's determination to maintain a permanent company. Once he had discovered individuals who shared his outlook and passion for providing quality theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, he seemed loathe to lose them and would go to any lengths to retain them. In the case of Granville his loyalty paid off, as he remained with the company for over twenty years.

In attracting a young company, Cheeseman inevitably faced the resultant insecurities and anxieties of a group of young adults who were living in an alien environment and

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<sup>132</sup> David (2018).

<sup>133</sup> Granville (2018).

were at the early stages of their career. As in the case of Granville, though, it was worth investing time in these young people with a view to not only encouraging them to fulfil their potential as actors or technicians, but ensuring that the company felt bonded to one another on a number of levels. Saunders recalls:

We were like a seminar group...we were being bolstered and educated and nurtured for our own enrichment but presumably...for the purpose of enriching our performance.<sup>134</sup>

Because of this commitment, Cheeseman was careful in his recruitment, aiming always to build a company who had the potential to settle in Stoke-on-Trent for years at a time. Day, for example, felt she was ‘second choice’ when she was employed by Cheeseman as Assistant Stage Manager but remembers the moment he seemed to accept her:

There was one night when the designer – her name was Anna – decided that for her next show she wanted to paint the ... risers ... which was obviously going to take most of the night even for a team of us and I thought the only way to get through this is to enjoy it, so I was being quite upbeat and then I noticed ... it was late, and Peter must have been coming out of the office and he’d stopped on the stairs and was watching us ... he must have been standing there for a bit and it was after that that I felt his attitude to me changed because he saw that I was one of the team and I wasn’t just somebody that he’d had to get in at the last minute.<sup>135</sup>

There is a suggestion here that Cheeseman could be cautious before he was convinced of a new recruit’s commitment to the cause. Chitty too claimed that ‘I had to earn my stripes’,<sup>136</sup> and Eaton, who later adopted the role of assistant director, remembers:

When he offered me the job, he made it very clear that there was to be no possibility of it involving any directing on my part. I was too young and inexperienced, and he already had an Assistant Director in Alan David. I was to give him administrative support ... most importantly I was to learn about The Vic and its history, its methods of working and its ethos.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cheeseman (née Saunders) (2018).

<sup>135</sup> Day (2017).

<sup>136</sup> Chitty (2007).

<sup>137</sup> Eaton (2017), p. 15.

Whilst Cheeseman's direct approach was not to everyone's taste, there seem to be few accounts from those who did not flourish under Cheeseman's leadership. Potentially, these stories may not have survived in the archive, and those who disagreed with his methods would be less inclined to share their memories. When questioned on disagreements within the company, few are remembered. Granville explains, 'you either got on with Peter or you didn't' and those who did not, had a short history with the company.<sup>138</sup> Terson affirms that 'I never remember any downright arguments' because Cheeseman was such a forceful character, claiming that 'I don't recall anybody strong enough to attack him'.<sup>139</sup> In Daniels' opinion, Cheeseman's personality was another reason why he surrounded himself with young, willing students:

Peter worked very well with young actors, you know actors who he could teach, and he could, I guess, show the way and he never really enjoyed working with older, more experienced actors.<sup>140</sup>

A young company of eager students suited Cheeseman's pedagogical directing style. Brown notes, for example, that 'I learnt at his feet – I trusted him. He loved teaching and I love learning, so we were a damn good match'.<sup>141</sup> Of his research in the 1970s, Elvgren observes: 'One often gets the impression that one is being taught, entertained and indoctrinated all at the same time when talking with Peter Cheeseman'.<sup>142</sup> Cheeseman was passionate about education and was keen to ensure that his actors received expert training. Martin:

If you needed to be in a particular, I don't know it might be sword fighting or something there would be somebody there to teach you so you were always learning you know, plays about the army or something we'd got soldiers

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<sup>138</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>139</sup> Terson (2018).

<sup>140</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>141</sup> Brown (2018).

<sup>142</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 94.

would come in and teach us how to do something, this that and the other. It was authentic, it had a purpose.<sup>143</sup>

Expert visitors to rehearsals were a fairly regular occurrence. Martin recalls specifically a visit from John Wain, ‘Oxford professor of poetry at the time and playwright and he would spend 2 or 3 days with music stands doing the language of Shakespeare’.<sup>144</sup> However, Cheeseman was not only concerned with the actors’ artistic education. Nixon, as Business Manager, recalls his role in educating the actors:

Pete would get me to do sessions lecturing the company about where we stood money-wise...telling them about the Arts Council grants and the Local Authority grants, and where the money was going and how much was there for production and so on.<sup>145</sup>

Cheeseman ensured that every company member understood each other’s roles, instilling values and encouraging everyone to feel they were working towards a common goal. Cheeseman’s respect for others’ expertise permeated his approach to the management of the building. Whilst he ultimately presided over every decision as Joseph’s man on the ground, once he had faith in an individual, he was happy to relinquish some responsibility to them. Nixon is one such example:

He always kind of respected my background, my knowledge, there was never any question of – I mean, he was the Artistic Director, and he was in charge, but he always asked my opinion on anything to do with the money, on the finance and all that – always.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, Weaver, as wardrobe mistress, describes how Cheeseman ‘was very good at trusting his creative people with his vision and their vision’;<sup>147</sup> although Chitty does recall that

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<sup>143</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Nixon (2018).

<sup>146</sup> Nixon (2018).

<sup>147</sup> Weaver (2017).

he used to interfere a bit which I used to get cross about and I'd ask him not to and we had a deal where he said if he was ever going to criticise me in any way he would buy me a gin and tonic first.<sup>148</sup>

Interestingly, too, Chitty adds that 'he was a great theatre manager ... he believed that every decision that is made in the theatre should be made by an artist'.<sup>149</sup> However, Nixon recalls that in his recruitment

it said they needed a Business Manager and it said that an Arts graduate would be preferred, and I wrote back and said what you want is a Finance graduate with an Arts interest if you want a proper Business Manager and from that I got an interview up here.<sup>150</sup>

Cheeseman's passionate belief in his cause at the Vic could lead to him being, as Eaton describes, 'dogmatic to an infuriating degree' and he undoubtedly approached the responsibility of running the theatre with an intense gravity.<sup>151</sup> Shane

Connaughton, a member of the company from 1967-68, makes a comparison between Cheeseman and two actors in the company at the time – Ken Campbell and Mike

Leigh:

I always think that Ken is a serious person pretending to be mad; that Mike is a mad person pretending to be serious; and that Cheeseman is a serious person *being* serious!<sup>152</sup>

Such a young company was inclined to, as Stoney posits, 'joke him along a bit' and yet, there appeared to be a fundamental respect for the work he was undertaking.<sup>153</sup>

Warwick makes an interesting comparison moving from the National to the Vic:

Laurence Olivier prowled around from time to time pronouncing things and making everybody run around. They all seemed to run around him like anything. He was always called 'Sir'... [Of Cheeseman] Everybody respected him, yea, because he did such important work and work that nobody else was doing so you know it was brilliant to be involved in it and no, it wasn't deferential exactly but with respect because you could respect him, you know,

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<sup>148</sup> Chitty (2007).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Nixon (2018).

<sup>151</sup> Eaton (2017), p. 15.

<sup>152</sup> Coveney (1997), p. 73.

<sup>153</sup> Stoney (2007).



he was a man with a mission, and he was bloody well going to do it and you had to be part of it.<sup>154</sup>

Cheeseman's tenacity was undeniable, and every company member attests to it. Every decision made was in an effort to increase audience numbers and garner interest in the work being produced. Rumours abound for example, of Cheeseman handing out tickets on Hartshill Road for poorly attended shows, and yet Granville recalls that performances always continued, regardless of audience size:

There was one where it was starting to snow, very heavily in the middle of the pantomime and all of the bus drivers were saying 'we're going to get snowed in, we're not going to be able to get the kids back so the whole theatre emptied. And we all went 'Yea! Great' so we all went to the dressing rooms, taking our make-up off and all that and Peter called everybody out on stage and really told us off. Really, really told us off – 'you do not... you go back on...we have advertised a show, we'll be on, you do it. You go back on.' And we all went 'oh right' and that's what you did.<sup>155</sup>

Cheeseman's outlook in managing the theatre was rooted fundamentally in providing a public service to the people of North Staffordshire and as Martin affirms, 'he was fanatical, he put his whole self into the whole thing. It meant so much to him'.<sup>156</sup>

### **'Do not divide them': Joseph and Cheeseman dispute**

Rather than fostering closer ties between the two practitioners, Cheeseman's all-consuming commitment to the success of the Vic became the foundation of a dispute between Cheeseman and Joseph, which would lead to Cheeseman's dismissal in the summer of 1967. Cheeseman's tenacity and drive belied the fact that the Victoria Theatre was the brainchild of Joseph, and that it remained under the auspices of Joseph even during his role at the University of Manchester. Terson comments that Cheeseman had 'made Stoke his world ... when in fact it wasn't his world, it was

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<sup>154</sup> Warwick (2017).

<sup>155</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>156</sup> Martin (2017).

Stephen Joseph's company'.<sup>157</sup> Rodney Wood, a former Studio Theatre Company member:

The problem with Stoke was that both Stephen and Peter felt it was their theatre. Stephen had the resources to set up a permanent theatre-in-the-round, but I think Peter found the premises and pushed it through.<sup>158</sup>

Almost from the outset, the two men found themselves locked in an impossible position, in which Joseph had ultimate control of the theatre but Cheeseman was responsible for the day-to-day management of the institution. Even in Joseph's job offer to Cheeseman, Joseph recognised that

the main limitations are financial and the dogma arising from my own personal vision of what I want the company to be.<sup>159</sup>

Indeed, it was these two limitations that were to cause the inevitable fracturing of this important relationship. This ongoing and ultimately very public dispute divided people into those who believed that Cheeseman had acted dishonestly in claiming the Victoria Theatre for his own and Cheeseman's supporters, who championed his commitment to the local area and the theatre's success. The saddening breakdown of their creative relationship has been charted in detail in Leslie Powner's *The Origins of the Potteries' Victoria Theatre*, Terry Lane's *The Full Round* and Paul Elsam's *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur*. However, as a significant moment in the theatre's history it is important to outline it here, particularly as its painful resolution placed Cheeseman unquestionably at the helm of the Victoria by the end of 1967.

At the beginning of their association, Cheeseman idolised Joseph who was eleven years his senior, recognising him as 'the nearest to a genius I have ever

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<sup>157</sup> Terson (2018).

<sup>158</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 52.

<sup>159</sup> Lane (2006), p. 168.

encountered'.<sup>160</sup> After his demoralising run at Derby Playhouse, Cheeseman was ready to be inspired by Joseph, recalling that 'I had never met anyone who had such a clear, radical vision'.<sup>161</sup> Equally, Joseph relied on Cheeseman to be on the ground, garnering support for his mission. In his article, 'Theatre in the Provinces', Ronald Hill comments:

Sheer inspiration prompted him [Joseph] to put the running of the theatre into the hands of Peter Cheeseman from Derby Playhouse, a young man whose fanatical dedication and energy matched his own.<sup>162</sup>

Cheeseman was entirely convinced by Joseph's arguments to revitalise the theatre scene. Like Joseph, he believed fervently that theatre should never become 'a sacred flame nourished by the faithful few', and wanted instead to encourage 'its potential to help feed the unexpressed and usually inexpressible hunger of the many'.<sup>163</sup> Joseph convinced Cheeseman too that theatre-in-the-round was the form that would reignite interests in theatre and encourage working-class audiences to see theatre as, as Elsam posits, 'inclusive, meaningful and egalitarian'.<sup>164</sup>

Where their outlook differed however, was in the manner of achieving these ideals. Joseph's views on a permanent home for Studio Theatre Ltd were inherently contradictory. Whilst he claimed that 'since the company was formed, we have been looking for a place to establish a stable foundation',<sup>165</sup> Ayckbourn acknowledged that this permanence did not appeal to Joseph's individualist stance:

His quote about "All theatre should be designed to self-destruct in seven years," – not a joke – I mean, for most of us, we took that with the spirit,

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<sup>160</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Dream Time funding application form, National Endowment for Science, Technology and Arts*, 4 October 2003, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>161</sup> Gabriella Giannachi, Mary Luckhurst, eds., *On Directing: Interviews with Directors* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 14.

<sup>162</sup> Hill (1964), p. 17.

<sup>163</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Participation', *Cue* (Greenwich Theatre Magazine), October 1972, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>164</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 151.

<sup>165</sup> 'The do-it-yourself theatre finds home', *Daily Herald*, 22 August 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

rather than the letter of the law. But I think Stephen would have just smashed it down and started again.<sup>166</sup>

Cheeseman, in contrast, was anxious to build on the audiences garnered on the company's tours. In contrast to Joseph, who claimed that 'in adult life you try and create around yourself the atmosphere of your childhood, and mine was insecurity',<sup>167</sup> Cheeseman desired to be firmly rooted in one location:

His father's Civil Service job caused frequent moving, and Peter estimates that he must have attended ten schools and lived in forty-eight different houses. Cheeseman admits that his fervent desire to be identified with a single place probably stems from his varied geographical displacement as a child.<sup>168</sup>

For Cheeseman, then, the ultimate aim became the community's acceptance of himself and the Vic company. Indeed, in one of his last interviews, Cheeseman remarked that 'my prized possession is a miners' lamp saying, "To Peter and the other managers of the Vic, for their contribution to safety in mines"'.<sup>169</sup> Whilst Joseph's ambitions were fundamentally focused on changing attitudes to theatre-going and to promoting theatre-in-the-round *per se*, Cheeseman was eager to promote theatre-in-the-round for the people of Stoke-on-Trent in particular. He began to forge close connections with local businesses, Council members and the surrounding community. In almost daily correspondence between the two, Cheeseman regularly updated Joseph on his work at the Vic and often commented on these positive community links. In a letter shortly after the theatre's opening, he commented:

I attended court for the third time this morning for another short-term music licence. The magistrate said, "Granted and may you have full houses for many, many years", smiling genially. There seems to be a genuine fund of goodwill in this city which one keeps on uncovering!<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 53.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

<sup>168</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 93.

<sup>169</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Interview with Peter Cheeseman* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 24 April, 2008), held at Elsam archive.

<sup>170</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 22 November 1962.

This goodwill was further encouraged by the company's outreach work and as one local paper comments: 'There is a willing supply of helpers from schools, colleges, and works in the area and the theatre radiates eagerness throughout'.<sup>171</sup> Whilst Joseph had promoted the inclusive nature of theatre and aspired to encourage 'other social activities in the theatre, including dances and discussions, as well as meetings of outside groups',<sup>172</sup> he was less enthusiastic about Cheeseman's community involvement, particularly whilst the theatre continued to struggle financially:

I also don't understand "schools and works tour". How serious is this? How much money will it cost if any? I'd like to be kept in the picture, certainly as far as finances are concerned... You indicate so little that you are aware of the financial difficulties that I feel I must keep on about it. I'd like to be reassured.<sup>173</sup>

Increasingly Joseph's correspondence to Cheeseman focuses on the financial aspects of the business and he regularly chides Cheeseman for the 'adverse balance' that he received each week.<sup>174</sup> In a report to the directors of Studio Theatre Ltd on the first season at the Vic, Cheeseman notes:

We have lost a great deal of money in this first season, but we have gained the basis of an audience. Goodwill towards us here is real and considerable. Our high standards have won us respect in all quarters of the Potteries.<sup>175</sup>

Joseph was increasingly concerned about the money the theatre was losing, however. In a letter to Cheeseman in the Spring of 1963, just six months after the theatre's opening, Joseph believed that a new 'policy and budget' was required if the theatre was going to survive.<sup>176</sup> He did recognise Cheeseman's 'energy and talent', stating that the theatre's success 'depends tremendously on you personally' but regularly

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<sup>171</sup> 'Exhilarating theatre "in the round" at Newcastle', *Biddulph Chronicle*, 17 May 1963.

<sup>172</sup> Joseph (1962), p. 26.

<sup>173</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 1 June 1963.

<sup>174</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman 29 July 1963.

<sup>175</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Victoria Theatre Report on first season: 9 October 1962 to 3 August 1963* (1963), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>176</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 29 July 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

referred to the real risk of closure that threatened the theatre.<sup>177</sup> As these risks to the project continued in the subsequent months, Cheeseman made a telling statement in a letter to Joseph, representative of his personal investment in the theatre to date:

If you and the directors feel that the guarantees and economies are not sufficient to warrant the Studio Theatre Company keeping the Victoria Theatre open any longer, I would like the opportunity to take over the liabilities myself with local backing which I will secure.

Whilst this intention exhibited Cheeseman's unwavering commitment to the Victoria, the letter appeared to spark suspicion on Joseph's part:

Your suggestion that the Studio Theatre Company should hand the Victoria over to you is a little alarming. It is worrying to me to surmise that you imagine you can pay for the debts and make the company flourish on your own but not on account of the company... It is necessary to repeat that the Victoria Theatre represents an ambition of my company over a long period of time. My directors and most of the people who have worked for the company have had a permanent home in their minds a dream. It is difficult to watch this ideal being butchered by the sordid considerations of a few pounds... We are all optimistic, but we are also fairly realistic as well. You must look on my continual quibbles as being real attempts to make sure that this important venture does not fail. I think that the venture is in itself more important than the business-like affair that my directors are mainly concerned with, and I am sure that it is more important than your own ambitions. But at least let all these things work towards the same end. Do not divide them for goodness' sake. There is something important here, and I am going to be tenacious about that.<sup>178</sup>

Joseph maintains that his company directors are fully supportive of the venture in Stoke; however, from this moment forward in the correspondence, despite his pleas to Cheeseman to 'not divide them', there are signs of a slow disconnect between the two parties. Oddly, the two men are 'being tenacious' about the same goal – the success of the Victoria Theatre – and yet Joseph remains suspicious of Cheeseman's motives, and Cheeseman is resentful of his implications:

The only thing that matters to me at the moment is keeping this theatre open. I have absolute faith that it will succeed in time and can think of no other way of expressing this kind of faith more clearly to myself and to you than to say

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 29 July 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

that I would try to run it on my own account if the company decided to abandon it. You imply that my attitude is senseless and make another rude remark about my own ambitions. You must realise that I have a profound respect for the Victoria Theatre as the culmination of eight years hard work by yourself and many other people whom I have never met. My own ambitions do not stretch at the moment beyond the success of this theatre, in these terms.<sup>179</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman's absolute commitment should have been a huge advantage to the absent Joseph, there is a sense that he felt uneasy at Cheeseman's total appropriation of the theatre's management. In an interview in 1971, Stanley Page, an actor in the company made a revealing comment about a visit of Joseph to the theatre:

It's not Peter's fault; Peter had been made director of the theatre by Stephen. The press and the television were there, Christ knows what else. Stephen was standing on his own, you know. And I remember so clearly when he turned and said to me, "That's the bloody life, isn't it?" And he just walked off. He was completely out of it.<sup>180</sup>

Cheeseman had been employed to maintain the smooth running of the theatre whilst Joseph taught in Manchester; inevitably, Cheeseman was recognised in the community as the man associated with the Vic despite it being Joseph's original idea. It became apparent to Joseph that the further embedded Cheeseman became in the community of Stoke-on-Trent, the further distanced he himself became from his dream of finding a permanent home for the Studio Theatre Company. Ayckbourn:

I have always thought of Peter as the sticker and of Stephen as the bee that flits from flower to flower. If circumstances had been different and Stephen would have been the sole man in charge of opening at Stoke, that place would have closed eight months later, because Stephen always had such a terror of being trapped into one thing.<sup>181</sup>

We will never know what the outcome would have been if Joseph had been successful in his plans for a purpose-built theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme, or if he had declined the lecture post and remained as director in Stoke-on-Trent. As Elsam notes,

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<sup>179</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 30 July 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>180</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 63.

<sup>181</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 64.

Joseph's clear decision to move to Manchester at the culmination of his company's dream is suggestive of 'a growing sense of personal discomfort at the prospect of leading a permanent company'.<sup>182</sup> Elsam even posits that Joseph's 'provocations...were part of his planning towards succession'.<sup>183</sup> Unquestionably, Cheeseman's confidence and understanding of theatre management grew rapidly after the responsibility had been tendered to him by Joseph.

The fissure between two such tenacious individuals inevitably widened as time passed. Cheeseman forged ahead relentlessly in his efforts to build a permanent company of actors, and to encourage and sustain new audiences in the area. Joseph became increasingly concerned with the company's finances and with Cheeseman's intentions. By 1966, Joseph had been diagnosed with cancer that was to prove terminal, as a result of which perhaps, Joseph's paranoia surrounding Cheeseman's position grew dangerously. A letter to Cheeseman on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1966 stated that there was to be a significant change in the management of the Vic, in that Cheeseman would be obliged to 'hand over managerial duties to Mr. Nixon'.<sup>184</sup> Similarly, Joseph was keen to remove Kenneth Cooper, Managing Director of a local pottery firm and Roy Shaw, head of the Adult Education Department at Keele University, from the Board, both of whom had been appointed as, as Powner explains, 'a conduit for local views and opinions'.<sup>185</sup> Joseph's increasing sense of unease can be felt clearly in a letter to his acquaintance Ruth Bernstein on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1966 prior to the Studio Theatre AGM, in which he suggests that

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<sup>182</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 160.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>184</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 28 November 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>185</sup> Powner (2017), p. 191.



Mr. Cooper and Mr. Shaw seem to be part of the Cheeseman plot and, depending on what happens at the meeting, it may be important to vote against them.<sup>186</sup>

In the following month, Joseph became so convinced of an overthrow plot that he took the decision to terminate Cheeseman's appointment with effect in March 1967.

By December 20<sup>th</sup> 1966, Joseph had appointed Terry Lane, a former student of Joseph's and founder of Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, to replace Cheeseman.<sup>187</sup>

Cheeseman's correspondence reveals little of the turmoil he must have been experiencing during this period. Similarly, his closest contacts suggest that Cheeseman remained guarded throughout the dispute, with Terson recalling that 'the politics behind all that I don't know',<sup>188</sup> and Nixson stating that 'I can't honestly say that he talked a lot to me ... he always seemed to me to be getting on with it' and 'he never kind of wrung his hands'.<sup>189</sup> Nor does it appear that Cheeseman's actors had any sense of the particulars of the disagreement. Brown states that 'I didn't really know what it was about' and 'I think he wanted to protect the company from whatever was happening'.<sup>190</sup> Cheeseman's priority certainly seemed to remain the continuity of the company and their work at the theatre. In one response to Joseph's accusations, for example, Cheeseman writes:

I know that despite the problems of our personal relationship the last thing you would truly wish to do would be to cause any serious disturbance to the work of the Victoria Theatre at a moment like this.<sup>191</sup>

In a later interview with Elsam, Cheeseman again affirms his position:

I knew that he would be destroying anything - he would be destroying all his achievements. This was - what I was managing was Stephen's. But he couldn't see this. He would have just committed hari-kiri [sic].<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>187</sup> For a full account of Lane's experience of directing at the Vic, see Lane (2006).

<sup>188</sup> Terson (2018).

<sup>189</sup> Nixson (2018).

<sup>190</sup> Brown (2018).

<sup>191</sup> Powner (2017), p. 203.

<sup>192</sup> Cheeseman (2008).

This belief is in line with Ayckbourn's similar claim that Joseph had self-destructive tendencies.<sup>193</sup> Until Cheeseman's dismissal, the dispute had remained largely private. However, as news of Cheeseman's ousting hit the headlines in January 1967, the dispute moved firmly into the public domain, with the *Evening Sentinel* printing statements from Joseph and Cheeseman, and even the national papers following the story with *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mail* and *The Stage* all printing articles on Cheeseman's removal. Interestingly, whilst Joseph claimed in interviews that Cheeseman's removal was merely in the interests of the theatre's development and progress, the local press particularly highlighted Cheeseman's work in the district:

In the past four years, Peter Cheeseman's direction of three local "documentaries" in recent years...audiences at the New Vic have exactly doubled in the four years since the Director took charge...Besides being on the committee formed to organize the Bennett centenary celebrations, Mr. Cheeseman is also the acting Chairman of the proposed North Staffordshire arts association.<sup>194</sup>

Because Cheeseman's role had been so prominent in the area and the local links he had made were so strong, increasingly, Joseph was seen as an outsider attempting to oust Cheeseman unfairly. Nixon:

The local authorities wouldn't talk to anybody except Peter. Peter was their man. The town clerk, a man called Mr. Robinson was very strong pro-Peter and was ... absolutely adamant that there would be a local trust running the theatre not a London company, not a London trust... which Stephen's basically was and Robinson was determined that there would be a local trust otherwise there would be no more money from the local authorities to the theatre.<sup>195</sup>

This local backing extended to the university at Keele too with students coming out in protest when Cheeseman was denied entry to the theatre during Lane's brief tenure.

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<sup>193</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 53.

<sup>194</sup> 'Principals in the New Vic drama', *Evening Sentinel*, 9 January, 1967, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>195</sup> Nixon (2018).

The banner protest was organised by local newsagent Frank Bayley, who was later to become the subject of the theatre's 1971 documentary *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!*. It included a petition against Cheeseman's removal with over 500 signatures, 'a bigger petition, they claimed, than was once raised to keep the great footballer Stanley Matthews at Stoke City'.<sup>196</sup> The swell of local support behind Cheeseman was further boosted by regular letters printed in the *Evening Sentinel*, praising his documentary work at the theatre:

The Vic is an accepted part of Potteries life – an integral part, for Cheeseman has done more to connect the provincial theatre with its surroundings, with his 'Jolly Potters,' 'Staffordshire Rebels,' and, especially, his superb 'Knotty,' than possibly any other director in the country. Not even the Coventry or Nottingham playhouses can boast of such a kinship with their local communities.<sup>197</sup>

And others focusing on the risk to the theatre if Cheeseman was removed permanently:

Once Mr. Cheeseman's fertile and original ideas leave the Vic, this valiant little theatre will become just another provincial rep, and the reputation which it has so bravely achieved will fall by the wayside.<sup>198</sup>

There remains a cruel irony in this outpouring of support at such a moment of crisis. For both Joseph and Cheeseman, whose primary ambition was to reignite a passion for theatre in an area, this swell of feeling should have been an indication that their theatre was a success, that the public was willing to sign petitions and write to their local paper in support of Cheeseman. An article in *Six Towns* magazine affirmed:

That the affair should have aroused so much public concern must be a source of satisfaction to all lovers of live theatre in North Staffs and elsewhere. Only a few years ago the Theatre Royal was allowed to pass into the oblivion of Bingo with scarcely a murmur of protest. The extent and intensity of the

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<sup>196</sup> Coveney (2011), p. 30.

<sup>197</sup> Letters to the Editor, 'New Vic change shock for reader', *Evening Sentinel*, 11 January 1967, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>198</sup> Letters to the Editor, 'New Vic change shock for reader', *Evening Sentinel*, 11 January 1967, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

present outburst are proof at least of the existence of a substantial and virile following of the drama which was not evident even a short while ago.<sup>199</sup>

Ultimately, it was the public outcry that secured Cheeseman's position. His continued presence in the region and his proven track record for producing high quality, relevant work ensured that the local authorities were keen to establish a local Trust to run the theatre and to reinstate Cheeseman. The Arts Council too began to put pressure on Studio Theatre Ltd, suggesting that the grants for the theatre would be removed if a local Trust could not be founded. In August 1967, the Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Theatre Trust was formed, and Cheeseman appointed as artistic director. The company returned to the theatre with a production of a new Terson play, *Ballad of the Artificial Mash*. Interestingly, over half of Cheeseman's company who had left in April 1967, returned to re-open the theatre with him in August of the same year. During the summer months, Cheeseman had been able to secure television work for the company through his connection with BBC Midland and Leonard White at ABC. As part of the Bennett centenary celebrations, the BBC produced *Jock on the Go* (BBC2, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1967), a Terson adaptation of Arnold Bennett's *Jock at a Venture*, and ABC produced *The Heroism of Thomas Chadwick* (ABC, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1967) a pair of Bennett short stories adapted by Terson, as part of the Armchair Theatre series. Even in this relatively unfamiliar setting, however, Cheeseman struggled to take a backseat as Martin recalls:

I remember, Peter trying to be the director when there's a television director there. There was a bit of a clash but mainly it was because he, Peter ... didn't like the department that was doing the make-up and stuff. [As PC] 'Haven't you got any coal dust? Put some coal dust on them! These are coal miners not...' And this girl was dabbing little bits of black stuff on us. He made us go out and just get filth out of the streets. It was a bit of a battle going on.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> J. Sebastien Shaw, 'Potteries Charivari', *Six Towns Magazine*, February 1967, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>200</sup> Martin (2017).

Nevertheless, the television work was a success and provided employment for Cheeseman's company over the summer months, as they anticipated their return to the Vic. Lane claims that the odds were stacked in Cheeseman's favour as the dispute with Joseph became more lengthy, and Joseph's health diminished. In his account of directing the interim season at the Vic, Lane claims that 'successful though the company was, or perhaps because it was, Jo Hodgkinson pulled the plug'.<sup>201</sup> Certainly, Lane had steered the ship through difficulties, dealing with a company whose allegiances were elsewhere and battling against public demonstrations outside the theatre. Lane affirmed that 'Cheeseman was dug in for the duration and would never go away'.<sup>202</sup> Whether it was Cheeseman's tenacity, his local connections, or Joseph's unfortunate role as the apparent London outsider, his support in the district was secure. Local residents, Keele students and Stoke Council had petitioned for Cheeseman and they had won. A local Trust was running the theatre, guided by an artistic director who, as they saw it, had the interests of the Stoke people at heart. There is certainly no doubting Cheeseman's commitment - he was to remain in the position for a further thirty-one years. Undeniably, however, the rift between the two men had a profound effect on Cheeseman, not least because Joseph died on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1967, just two months after the Vic's re-opening. Interviewed in 1972, Cheeseman was able to recognise the similarities and differences between them:

Stephen and I are both domineering kinds of men, but in different ways. I am a little man, Stephen was a huge bloke. He was enormous. He had a big man's aggressiveness whilst I have a little man's aggressiveness.<sup>203</sup>

This 'aggressiveness' had encouraged Joseph and Cheeseman to forge ahead with spreading Joseph's ideals for theatre-in-the-round and to form the Victoria Theatre,

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<sup>201</sup> Lane (2006), p. 210.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>203</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 97.

but sadly this same aggressiveness made it impossible for the two men to work together harmoniously. Ultimately, the longer the two worked on the same project, the more apparent their differences became. Despite this, Cheeseman was always careful to recognise the immeasurable impact Joseph had made on his own choices as a director. In a funding application to write his autobiography in 2003, Cheeseman comments that ‘Stephen’s tragically premature death during this period underpinned my concern to realise the potential of his inspiring ideas’.<sup>204</sup> Joseph’s death in some ways seemed to spur Cheeseman on to achieve success at Stoke on Joseph’s behalf, and in almost every interview Cheeseman gave about his career, he pays tribute to Joseph as an inspiration to his future work. Similarly, his influence was apparent in Cheeseman’s day-to-day running of the theatre and his plans for its future. Eaton describes:

As part of my work on plans for a new theatre building, Peter encouraged me to read everything that Stephen Joseph had written on the subject. Peter’s deeply held respect and affection for Stephen was remarkable, given the bitterness of the row that had broken out between them and never been healed before Stephen’s death. ... Peter’s ambition was to build a theatre that embodied both Stephen’s vision and his own values.<sup>205</sup>

If Cheeseman’s drive and commitment had ever been in doubt, it seemed that the dispute and subsequent untimely death of his mentor was enough to ensure Cheeseman’s unyielding obligation to the company at the Vic and to the region of Stoke-on-Trent. With his position now secure at the theatre, Cheeseman continued to forge ahead with his plans for the Vic, re-assembling the permanent company to work on a repertoire of productions to engage the local audience of North Staffordshire. Not only did he need dedicated actors, however; Cheeseman understood that for a permanent company to be successful, it would need a dedicated writer too.

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<sup>204</sup> Cheeseman (2003), p. 3.

<sup>205</sup> Eaton (2017), p. 15.

### **Chapter Three - New Writing at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent**

The late fifties and early sixties is a period often celebrated for the surge of the New Wave. Predominantly young and male, the New Wave writers were interested, as Dominic Sandbrook states, in ‘the old world of the industrial working-class, the world of Northern terraces, poverty and violence’, and whilst the work never shared a coherent political message, any new writing during this period can be grouped, sometimes unhelpfully, under the same umbrella term.<sup>1</sup> The movement, if it can be termed as such, ensured that new settings and characters became commonplace on stage and television, with middle-class drawing-rooms often substituted for working-class kitchens. The significance of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is now much debated, with many arguing that the production was not as ground-breaking and revolutionary as had been reported in the contemporary press. Nevertheless, its prominence guaranteed the acceptance by many of the Royal Court as the ‘most important producer of new writing in the history of theatre’.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, George Devine’s plan for the Royal Court Theatre had always been ‘to have a theatre to encourage new writers’, and Philip Roberts argues comprehensively that ‘no other company has had a comparable effect on post-war theatre writing and production’.<sup>3</sup> If any other theatre is cited as important for the production of new writers in this period, it is Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop. Whilst these two theatres offered very different outlooks in their methods of production and their objectives, they were both undeniably significant in discovering new writers. Theatre Workshop often

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<sup>1</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* (London, Little, Brown, 2005), p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and xiii.

worked with resident writers and used the skills and talents of the whole company collaboratively to develop new writers' work. Indeed, Brendan Behan was said to have commented after the opening night of his new play *The Quare Fellow* that 'Miss Littlewood's company has performed a better play than I wrote'.<sup>4</sup> This collaborative work was particularly attractive to Cheeseman. Anecdotally, he recalled that he visited Littlewood's theatre at Stratford East whilst on leave from his National Service, spoke extensively with Gerry Raffles and had the opportunity to watch Littlewood in rehearsal.<sup>5</sup> His work on the documentary too has been linked to Littlewood's style, and much of the Theatre Workshop ethos chimes with that of the Vic. Nadine Holdsworth's summation of Littlewood's work in Stratford East could, in many ways, be a description of Cheeseman's work in Stoke:

She wanted to create a theatre that had the capacity to be as exciting and all-consuming as the cinema whilst keeping the immediacy of direct contact with an audience. She was a pioneer of the creative ensemble, devised performance, improvisation and for a theatre that moved beyond a polite regurgitation of middle-class life to capture the exuberance, wit and poetry of working-class lives and communities.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst they differed in their approach to improvisation and devised performance (areas that Cheeseman largely avoided), their attempts to appeal to working-class communities were very similar. Both practitioners aimed to do this by involving a writer in the collaborative process, ensuring that new writing was central to the company's work and eager for this writing to be relevant to the surrounding community. Indeed, with over sixteen new writers included in the 1962-71 period, the Vic could be justifiably titled a centre of new writing in the same way as Devine's Royal Court and Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. During this period, Cheeseman

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Fielding, 'An analysis of Twentieth Century Documentary Drama and its major innovators with particular reference to the work of Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.' (unpublished ungraduated dissertation, 1988), p. 30, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood* (Routledge, Oxon, 2006), p. 1.



developed the role of writer in residence, an Arts Council funded position which allowed a writer to become part of the permanent company in Stoke-on-Trent. This chapter will present the close relationships enjoyed between writers and the Vic company, and will reaffirm the importance placed on new writers in Cheeseman's programming. This chapter will explore the critical role of new writing in both Stephen Joseph's Studio Theatre Ltd and subsequently, at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent. In *The First Three Rounds*, in which Cheeseman summarised the first three seasons at the theatre, he highlighted the continuing importance of their new writing policy:

Stephen Joseph's original policy of presenting new plays is still fundamental to our work. Out of 46 programmes in the repertoire of the first three seasons at Hartshill, 15 were premieres of new plays. We have always been fortunate in having attracted talented writers to provide plays for us regularly. At the moment a team of four do so.<sup>7</sup>

The four individuals named by Cheeseman were Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Plater, Peter Terson and Brian Way, all four of whom went on to have successful writing careers albeit with varying degrees of recognition. Since the initial seasons at the Stoke theatre were to be so influential, this chapter will explore the relationships that Ayckbourn, Plater and Terson had with the theatre, before exploring Way's influence on children's theatre at Stoke in Chapter Four. The main focus of this chapter is the relationship between Cheeseman and Terson, since he was the first writer in residence at the Vic, and reflected the most perfect example of how Cheeseman saw the relationship between company and writer. The correspondence between Terson and Cheeseman in the archive, which spans over thirty years, allows a unique insight into the relationship between playwright and director. It could be argued that Terson has

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *First Three Rounds, A report from the Victoria Theatre, S-O-T at the beginning of the fourth season* (August 1965), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

been overlooked in the same way as the Vic, in that he was celebrated during the 1960s and 70s, and yet there has been little written about him more recently. This chapter aims to give a sense of the importance of new writing under Cheeseman; to demonstrate the particular prominence of Terson as a playwright during this period; and to set out in greater depth the relationship between writer and company.

### **Stephen Joseph's new writing policy**

The Vic's new writing policy was largely based on Stephen Joseph's ideals, which he had developed in the establishment of Studio Theatre Ltd. New writing had always been a cornerstone of Joseph's artistic policy, as fundamental to his philosophy as the presentation of plays in-the-round. To that end, many members of Studio Theatre Ltd became multi-taskers working as actors, directors, stage-managers and where necessary, as writers. David Campton, an original member of Joseph's company, recognised this:

In its heyday the Joseph company was staging more new plays per year than the Royal Court. After all, I doubt if the Royal Court importuned its writers with "We need a farce to round out the Summer Season", or "An adaptation of 'David Copperfield' in time for the Christmas tour, please". In those days I turned out farces, melodramas and domestic comedies to order.<sup>8</sup>

Figures who did not class themselves as writers when they joined the company were often encouraged to write new plays in order to progress the company's work. Alan Ayckbourn, who had been taken on as Acting Stage Manager in 1957, remembers how he was encouraged into writing by Joseph:

[Joseph] said to me: "If you want a better part, you'd better write one for yourself. Write a play, I'll do it. If it's any good." And I said: "Fine". And he said: "Write yourself a main part" – which was actually a very shrewd remark, because presumably, if the play had not worked at all there was no way I as an actor was going to risk my neck in it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David Campton, article for *Ragabo* sent to Peter Cheeseman as attachment undated, c. Summer 1975, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Watson, *Conversations with Ayckbourn* (London: Macdonald, 1981), p. 48.

Ayckbourn was one of a number of new writers who premiered their new work with Studio Theatre; Terry Lane in his biography of Stephen Joseph, identified ‘seven successful writers whose theatre work was debuted by him’.<sup>10</sup> These included Robert Bolt, James Saunders, Joan Macalpine, Richard Gill, Mike Stott, Alan Ayckbourn and David Campton, and Paul Elsam in his more recent history, adds Harold Pinter and Alan Plater to the already impressive list.<sup>11</sup> Campton, writing in the 1970s, recognised the wealth of material to which new writers were exposed as part of the company:

I acted, I directed, I relieved the Box Office Manager, I gave out programmes, served coffee, swept the stage, paid the wages, and wrote chatty paragraphs about the theatre for the local press. If you wonder what that had to do with playwriting, imagine sharing a dressing-room with actors after a scene in which all the jokes have ended in dull thuds on the floor; imagine trying to persuade doubting holiday-makers that 50p is better spent on your play than at ‘Razzle’ on the pier – it’s an education.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst this challenging environment might have been an inspiring training ground for new writers, for Joseph it made it increasingly difficult to pursue new work from national sources that he felt would have been fitting for the company. In a private letter, Joseph bemoaned the state of regional theatre:

Agents...very seldom allow us to do plays that have any chance at all...it is a sad thing but true that a try-out by a theatre such as ours (and the same thing is true for repertory theatres that do new plays) may actually do harm to a promising playwright since managers only read notices, and if the notices are few and unsympathetic (as is usually the case) the play (which in fact may be a good deal above average) never gets seen or read again.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these difficulties, however, Joseph remained committed to his policy, unable to visualise a company without new writing at its helm. He worked tirelessly in search of new writers, running regular training courses which had the additional benefit of

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Lane, *The Full Round: The several lives and theatrical legacy of Stephen Joseph* (Italy: Duca della Corgna, 2006), pp. 220-1.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Campton (c. 1975).

<sup>13</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 67.

allowing him to spot new talent. In his 1964 publication *Actor and Architect*,

however, Joseph clarified his stance on the position of the writer:

So far [David] Scase has emphasized that the beginning of theatre, or, as it were, the nexus of theatre, is concerned with plays and playwriting. With this I utterly disagree. I think that the experience of theatre is a business between actors and audiences. It is the actors who are the prime movers of the theatre, not the authors.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst this may seem an unusual statement from someone who had campaigned for new writers to work with the company and had established a successful writer's theatre, the explanation seems to lie in Joseph's use of the word 'experience' to describe his theatre 'business'. For him, a writer was essential in allowing a group of practitioners to progress and he or she was a vital part of the company as a whole, not because they were leading the company but because they were embedded within it and were, therefore, able to create a dynamic 'experience' for the actors to develop. Peter Cheeseman inherited this policy on the establishment of the Victoria Theatre in 1962, and from the outset, it was a tradition in which he wholeheartedly believed.

Writing in 1971, Cheeseman made his feelings clear:

The regular presentation of new plays remains our fundamental policy basis. It is not an arbitrary policy choice – rather the fundamental essential of any truly live theatre. A theatre must create its own work otherwise it cannot discover its own identity.<sup>15</sup>

This statement seems to develop Joseph's previous claims that theatre must be an 'experience' between actor and audience. Cheeseman was not selecting new plays arbitrarily simply because they were new, he was building collaborations with writers over a number of years. In the same article, Cheeseman gave further explanation of Joseph's earlier comment:

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Joseph and Tyrone Guthrie, *Actor and Architect* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 77.

Ever since Stephen Joseph founded the Studio Theatre Ltd, writers have been attached to the Vic...the emphasis has always been on a relationship with the writer rather than with any particular play.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it was not the play itself nor the act of writing which was ‘the nexus of theatre’ but the relationship that was fostered between playwright and company.

Cheeseman continued, exploring exactly why he personally felt this relationship was so crucial:

I do get the impression that many theatres (like most TV companies) just want a cut-and-dried script and thanks very much author: now piss off. Whereas I feel that the presence of a writer is a vital actor in the life of a theatre in a number of ways. His presence as the creator, the *primum mobile*, removes mystery, shows instead skill, gets the respect and therefore real co-operation of the actor, and increases the actor’s whole self-confidence...Authors working with us will come to share our pre-occupation, our knowledge of the audience and help to tackle the basic problems of winning attention.<sup>17</sup>

Cheeseman explored an interesting relationship here too, that of the dynamic between an actor and new writing. He seems to suggest that actors without a writer present or, at the very least known to the company, would be more inclined to abandon a project and be less confident in the success of the finished article. The struggle to garner audience’s attention also became paramount to all concerned - playwright, actor, stage manager, director - in equal measure, since all were equally invested in its potential success.

### **New writers at the Vic – Alan Ayckbourn**

At the root of the Victoria Theatre’s policy on new writing, in an adaption of Joseph’s philosophy, was the desire to find writers who would become embedded within the community of Stoke-on-Trent and, as time progressed, would inevitably be writing for the people of that region specifically. In his inclusion of new writing in the

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<sup>16</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-9.

programming, Cheeseman was not attempting to be avant-garde or deliberately push political boundaries (although arguably he did this with many new productions), but aiming to further foster the fundamental bond between the theatre and its community. Just a few years on in 1966, the critic Irving Wardle explained the phenomenon at Stoke-on-Trent to his readership of *The Times* (London):

Whatever the play happens to be, they somehow make clear that here we are in Stoke on Trent. It helps people to enjoy and respect the place they live in.<sup>18</sup>

This sense of place was achieved through a mixture of careful programming and talented writers, many of whom lived locally as part of the company. Ayckbourn's plays, for example, became an important part of the Vic's repertory from the very early days with Cheeseman noting that 'Alan Ayckbourn's comedies are likely to do good business at any time of the year'.<sup>19</sup> In later years, as Ayckbourn grew in popularity, Cheeseman described the productions functioning like 'a second tier of annual subsidy'.<sup>20</sup>

Ayckbourn was present to share many of Cheeseman's theatrical experiences including a close (albeit different) relationship with Joseph; touring with Studio Theatre Ltd; the hard, early years at Stoke; and ultimately undertaking an ostensibly similar role at Scarborough, as one of the longest-serving regional theatre directors in England. However, whilst there may have been similarities, these collective experiences in fact highlight the differences between their two characters. Ayckbourn: 'At that time, I think we were diametrically opposed about many things'.<sup>21</sup> Exploring some of Ayckbourn's choices, then, can help shed some light on the opposite choices made by Cheeseman. Further, Ayckbourn's close relationship with Joseph

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<sup>18</sup> Irving Wardle, *Illustrated London News*, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Comments on Business for Plays Produced during Financial Year 1963-4*, 3 April 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>20</sup> Watson (1981), p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

underpinned much of the early work of Studio Theatre Company, and his dominance therefore impacted significantly on the direction the Vic took in the early seasons.

Ayckbourn joined Studio Theatre Ltd in 1957 as Acting Stage Manager, going on to act and direct for a full four years before Cheeseman joined the company. Both men speak of the gruelling nature of the Studio Theatre tours and yet both have also acknowledged the unparalleled training that they received during this time. Since both undertook a variety of roles within the company, both were able to see the value in a multi-skilled team of practitioners who were happy to work together on a range of different productions.

With Cheeseman joining the company after Ayckbourn, a certain degree of rivalry was always evident between the two. In Paul Allen's biography, Ayckbourn recalled that he 'baited Peter', and that 'neither of them was really at ease deferring to the other'.<sup>22</sup> He sums up Ayckbourn's view of the difference between the two men:

Peter believed that for an actor to play a brain surgeon, he should steep himself in research about brain surgery: knowing as much as it was possible to find out about brain surgery would enable the actor to 'be' a brain surgeon for the next two hours or so. He, Alan, on the other hand believed that if the play was well enough written the actor would find the character in it and in himself. Peter wasn't altogether convinced by this description of his own approach.<sup>23</sup>

It was not simply in rehearsal style that the two differed. By 1963, Ayckbourn was feeling that his whole theatrical vision was becoming increasingly divergent from Cheeseman's. In later interviews Ayckbourn acknowledged that whilst he was never actively pursuing fame, his idea of theatre was 'a little bit more showbiz than Peter'.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, their correspondence does evidence an undeniable commitment between the two to pursue Joseph's ideals; the transfer of *Mr. Whatnot* is one such example.

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<sup>22</sup> Watson (1981), p. 90 and p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> Watson (1981), p. 54.

With *Mr. Whatnot*, Ayckbourn was beginning to branch out. The play centres around the piano tuner, Mint (the ‘Mr. Whatnot’ of the title – so-called because his aristocratic employers are never sufficiently interested to discover his actual name), who remains silent throughout the entire production. Frances Babbage notes:

*Mr Whatnot* is an extraordinary piece of theatre that built on Ayckbourn’s new proven skills as a farceur, but took the physical aspects of the comedy much further than hitherto.<sup>25</sup>

The text is made up of detailed stage directions and any production must include its own sound recording for the hundred-plus effects that accompany the production: tennis matches, afternoon tea, dinner and so on. On first reading Joseph commented that, ‘It seems to have the ingenuity and fun we have come to expect of Alan, together with an interesting exploration of performance techniques – his stage directions carry a great deal of weight’, but added that ‘the story is very insubstantial’.<sup>26</sup> Ayckbourn had written *Mr Whatnot* specifically for the Vic company and directed its world premiere himself in the autumn of 1963. The ‘insubstantial’ plot did not seem to trouble audiences, with *Mr Whatnot* enjoying overwhelmingly positive reviews. The local paper, the *Evening Sentinel*, commented on its originality:

The play is full of invention and makes use of an endless stream of comic tricks while still retaining an individuality of its own, in spite of the many references it sparks off in the mind.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the national press praised both the ‘energetic’ company and the talents of Ayckbourn who, ‘makes up for the lack of scenery and props in this theatre-in-the-round by developing a new type of comedy and farce which relies almost entirely on

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<sup>25</sup> Frances Babbage, ‘Alan Ayckbourn’, in *Modern British Playwriting: the 1960s*, ed. by Steve Nicholson (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 194.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 12 September 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>27</sup> *Mr Whatnot* review, n.d., *Evening Sentinel*, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



action rather than dialogue'.<sup>28</sup> Benedict Nightingale, writing in the *Guardian*

concurred:

An unusual, and unusually effective piece of theatrical experimentation was presented at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, last night... The author develops his situation inventively and rarely allows an incident to fray from overuse. The result is often extremely funny and deserves a much wider audience than it will find in Stoke.<sup>29</sup>

With such a positive reception on a local and national scale, it seemed that the production was going to be Ayckbourn's ticket to the West End. Whilst he was keen for the play to be a West End success for his career progression, Ayckbourn has also suggested since that the transfer was an opportunity to part company from Cheeseman and the Vic:

The theatre was not able to contain both Peter Cheeseman and me ... it was difficult for him to work with an associate director who in fact had introduced him to the round. And, as he developed – and he developed very fast – he got very strong ideas about what he wanted to do with that theatre, which didn't necessarily coincide with mine.<sup>30</sup>

Cheeseman supported the transfer, recognising the unresolvable artistic differences in one theatre. He recognised Ayckbourn's talents, however, and always demonstrated an unwavering loyalty to him, perhaps borne out of their work together under Joseph.

In an exchange with agent Peggy Ramsay, Cheeseman lauded *Mr Whatnot* as a 'marvellous' play.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in correspondence with the Drama Producer for the Midland region for the BBC, Anthony Cornish, Cheeseman effused:

I do hope you will come and visit us as we are technically in your region though geographically closer to Manchester. The result is that we are ignored of necessity by North and because of practical difficulties by Midland...Do

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<sup>28</sup> *Mr Whatnot* review, n.d., held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>29</sup> *Mr Whatnot* review, n.d., *Guardian*, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Watson (1981), p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 24 October 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

your damndest to see *Mr Whatnot* which is important, exciting and brilliantly entertaining.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, Cheeseman was not working entirely altruistically. His letter to Cornish demonstrates the difficulties that the theatre was undergoing in the early years, not least through its awkward location in a no-man's land between the Midlands and the North. There was no doubt that metropolitan success for Ayckbourn could ultimately work in the Vic's favour too. However, the transfer came at an inevitable price: Cheeseman's company was reduced significantly by the loss of Ayckbourn and talented mime artist and actor, Peter King, who transferred with the production in the title role. Disappointingly, the production did not enjoy the success of its Stoke premiere; in fact, the reviews could not have been more different:

The idea is quite a gay one, but its success depends not on its intrinsic qualities but on what it is applied to... Although they all squeeze every drop of flavour out of their parts, aided by prodigies of direction, the author has only given them stereotypes to work with... What it really needs is a good going-over with the scissors, wielded by someone rather more in touch with the current West End standards than Mr. Ayckbourn appears to be.<sup>33</sup>

The reviews suggest that Ayckbourn was lacking in experience and that the play was twee and old-fashioned. Further, they suggest that any 'flavour' had been added by 'prodigies of direction' – namely Peter Bridge's appointment of London director, Warren Jenkins. There is an undeniable prejudice against the play's roots in provincial theatre, with many of the best reviews damning with faint praise by referring to the production as 'mild' and 'charming', and the worst making patronising comparisons:

Perhaps back in Stoke-on-Trent all this smacked of the gay, daring, experimental theatre of the future. All those flashing lights and sound effects.

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Anthony Cornish, 4 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>33</sup> B.A. Young, 'Mr Whatnot', *Financial Times*, 7 August 1964, held at Alan Ayckbourn collection, Borthwick Institute.

Do Peter Bridge and Greville Poke, who imported it to London, really think there is a West End audience for this perfumed trifle?<sup>34</sup>

Not surprisingly with such notices, the play closed after just two weeks. Rather than highlighting the ground-breaking productions that were being performed at the Vic, the transfer seemed to emphasise the difference between a production written expressly for a permanent company, and one performed by a group of actors thrown together during the rehearsal process. Ayckbourn himself later attributed the failure to this fact, remembering that the original cast of *Mr Whatnot* ‘had all been working together non-stop for 18 months when we did it and my direction consisted of a series of grunts’.<sup>35</sup> The mutual understanding in the company made the comedic scenes effortlessly funny; this timing was unsurprisingly lacking in the West End transfer. It is worth remembering, however, that the production also became more complicated in its transfer to the proscenium stage. Rather than allowing Ayckbourn to direct his own production as in Stoke, Bridge insisted on drafting in Jenkins as director and Peter Rice as designer who between them included a series of unnecessary back projections and set additions. Cheeseman was in no doubt as to the reason for the production’s failure. In a letter to Ayckbourn he explained:

It was like a frantic jump from one gag (relevant to plot or not) to another. Every one of your great funny scenes had been ruined, particularly the footsteps. The twee element was emphasised by colour and stupid pictures where you had instinctively chosen black to underplay the twee. I think one of the worst things that happened was that several key moments that were not funny were lost: lyrical, tender, descriptive moments...All these cut off for the sake of gags and the balance was gone.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Milton Shulman, ‘What’s the sound effect for a big, big, yawn?’ *Evening Standard*, 8 August 1964, held at Alan Ayckbourn collection, Borthwick Institute.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Ayckbourn, ‘Belgrade Theatre: Your Complete Guide to the Plays and Players’, 1 (1974), p. 4, held at Alan Ayckbourn collection, Borthwick Institute.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Ayckbourn, 22 August 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

The 'great funny scenes' which had been produced so effortlessly by the Vic company had been overplayed in the transfer. The production's 'twee' qualities, condemned by the London critics as being characteristic of a provincial production, had in fact been added on its arrival in the West End. Ayckbourn, who had been powerless to stop these additions after relinquishing responsibility to Bridge and Jenkins, nevertheless observed the production's decline:

The crash has come as less of a shock since it was apparent at a fairly early stage. Never mind. Feel at a bit of a loose end now and am commuting to town regularly and watching the show die with a sort of macabre fascination... Sorry we let the side down. Still as long as we know.<sup>37</sup>

The underlying connection between the two practitioners is demonstrated most poignantly here. Despite Ayckbourn's decreased involvement, the London transfer seems to have been done under a particular banner, as if Ayckbourn saw his plays somehow as a wider advertisement for a specific group. Whether that was the company at the Victoria Theatre back in Stoke or the followers of Joseph and theatre-in-the-round, Ayckbourn clearly felt a sense of responsibility and therefore increased disappointment at the failure of the transfer. He seems to write not only in search of reassurance but also by way of apology. In Cheeseman's response, we are allowed a glimpse into the relationship between the two:

First, the morning after, I decided I couldn't go without doing what you couldn't do and going and shouting at Bridge my own opinions about the way he had bugged you up. I said that I thought it was a disaster and that in my opinion the only way of saving it was to let you take it over completely. I realised this was pretty impracticable at this stage but etc. I had to say this and hope it didn't do any harm... When you got to London you seemed to lose your nerve and be influenced by Jenkins's and Bridge's idea of what would

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from Alan Ayckbourn to Peter Cheeseman, 12 August 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

work. They were always wrong; you were always right. The most important thing to say is this – you must believe in yourself.<sup>38</sup>

The advice is almost paternalistic; exacting, yet supportive. Cheeseman was understandably angry with the production's reception, not least because of the patronising suggestions that Stoke audiences were content to accept a lower quality or milder offering than audiences of the West End. Whilst there would have been a genuine difference to some extent in familiarity and expectation between Stoke and London audiences, the idea that regional productions would be therefore of lower quality was clearly frustrating. We also see in this correspondence an almost familial connection between the two, despite their artistic differences, borne out of their shared belief in Joseph's vision and their mutual understanding of the challenge ahead in creating a successful regional theatre-in-the-round.

The transfer of *Mr. Whatnot* also highlighted the difficulties Cheeseman faced in relying too heavily on one member of the company to write, act and direct in productions. Joseph had warned Cheeseman of these potential problems as soon as West End management began to show interest in Ayckbourn's production:

The Peter Bridge phenomenon is useful, but for goodness' sake don't be beguiled by it; money for Alan and a bit of publicity by all means, but be wary of taking Bridge too seriously – any destruction he may cause in your backyard will not perturb him for a moment (he is out, anyhow, to make money with minimal risk – the risk is entirely yours).<sup>39</sup>

He highlighted the fact that whilst a West End hit could be good publicity, there was every chance that if things went wrong it would have the opposite effect for the Vic,

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Ayckbourn, 22 August, 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 1 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

with minimal impact on the London theatre. Cheeseman, though, was quick to respond:

I do not know how you imagine I could be beguiled by Peter Bridge. All in all the relationship of a West End manager with one of our productions can do us, at the very best, more harm than good. The centre of my efforts here is an attempt to create a genuine group of artists, which will only change slowly and organically. Violence will only bleed away our most valuable capital asset – the amount of time the group has been together.<sup>40</sup>

For Cheeseman, the bright lights of the West End never appealed. Whilst he was naturally gratified that writers were being spotted at Stoke-on-Trent, helping to develop a sense of the location as being theatrically progressive, national recognition was never a priority. Cheeseman's primary aim was for the company to become a permanent fixture of the community, to be accepted. As discussed previously, building a permanent repertory company was his way of appealing to the locality and to attract the type of actors who were interested in putting down roots and building relationships, rather than being seduced by the money or fame offered by a transfer. Rather than regarding London as the ultimate goal, for Cheeseman a transfer was seen as a severe disruption to the carefully balanced state of his repertory company. It affected casting for numerous shows for each actor and unsettled the relationships that he was trying so hard to foster between fellow actors and the wider community. Just as Littlewood found the constant disruption of her company difficult as shows from Stratford East transferred to the West End, Cheeseman found he was losing regular members of the company who were difficult to replace.<sup>41</sup> After the transfer of *Mr Whatnot*, for example, Cheeseman was forced to recast the children's Christmas show, *Pinocchio* to allow for the loss of Ayckbourn and King from the company.

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<sup>40</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 6 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>41</sup> Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood* (Routledge, Oxon, 2006), p. 74.

There is a sense that in transferring, the actors, writers or directors were somehow devaluing the work that was being produced by the company in Stoke.

### **Alan Plater**

While transfers were not a common problem for the Vic company, the issue did reoccur a few years later in 1966 with the West End transfer of Alan Plater's play, *A Smashing Day* (1966), which had caught the attention of *Beatles*' manager, Brian Epstein. Plater had made his theatrical debut at Stoke-on-Trent in 1963 with an adaptation of his TV script *Referees*. Unfortunately for Plater, his surreal drama was presented in the winter of 1963, recorded as 'one of the coldest winters on record. Bringing blizzards, snow drifts, blocks of ice, and temperatures lower than -20 °C'.<sup>42</sup> In a theatre in which the heating was minimal, and where audiences frequently sat huddled in their coats, the cold weather severely affected audience figures. However, these harsh conditions seemed to further cement the close relationship between writer and company. Cheeseman was keen to reassure Plater of the production's success:

We had a nice lift at the end of *Referees*, the moment the cold weather broke with a huge Saturday night house which was most encouraging. I thought you would be pleased to hear this.<sup>43</sup>

And Plater responded just a day later:

I've been meaning to write to say thank you to you, Alan and the entire company for their valiant efforts in Arctic conditions – delighted to hear the thaw gave you the sort of house you all deserve.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Met Office, 'Severe Winters'

<<http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/learning/learn-about-the-weather/weather-phenomena/case-studies/severe-winters>>, [accessed 26 November 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Plater, 4 February 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Alan Plater to Peter Cheeseman, 5 February 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

There is very much a sense of mutual respect between playwright and company (reinforced by the payment of 9% royalties on all new plays, compared with the 7% paid by most other theatres at the time), and a shared optimism that this relationship would continue into the future, rather than end with the production's final night.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in the same letter, Plater took the opportunity to confirm that he would be writing an original play for the Vic and that his agent, Peggy Ramsay, 'thinks it's a splendid idea'.<sup>46</sup>

Plater set to work on *Ted's Cathedral* (1963), and was able to tailor the piece for the specific needs of the company as he wryly confirmed in a letter to Cheeseman:

Casting doesn't present a problem really as I intend to write it specifically for the company with tailor made parts both in number and nature. Well, Shakespeare did this, I don't see why I should have special privileges.<sup>47</sup>

Having a writer linked to the company was mutually beneficial: the script was increasingly customised for the cast at the Victoria with Plater even adding an extra female character at Cheeseman's behest, but Plater's letters suggest that his writing also benefited from the collaboration of others in the company.<sup>48</sup> *Ted's Cathedral*, for example, moved back and forth between Cheeseman, Ayckbourn (who 'does a bit of writing himself') and Plater.<sup>49</sup> He was able to write a draft version which he knew would be polished and improved during the rehearsal process:

Also, that I've written it 'off the top' – run on a bit when I felt like it – on the assumption that we can tighten it in rehearsal etc. etc. Anyway, you read it and tell me.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Letter from Joyce Cheeseman to Maurice Rowdon, 19 November 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Alan Plater to Peter Cheeseman, March 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Alan Plater to Peter Cheeseman, March 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Alan Plater to Peter Cheeseman, July 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



Writing was seen as a process in which the whole company was actively involved. As a new writer this guidance and collaboration seems to have been welcomed by Plater, who had been more accustomed to writing for television. Indeed, *Ted's Cathedral* was commissioned by BBC North and produced in 1964.

Their collaboration continued and in 1966, Plater developed another of his television scripts for the stage, *A Smashing Day*. Cheeseman felt that in order to do justice to the production on stage, Plater's piece was in need of a score. Perhaps due to a childhood connection to the McCartney family, and in his endeavour to recruit the finest talents for the theatre, Cheeseman wrote to Brian Epstein, manager of The Beatles:<sup>51</sup>

What I would like to ask you is if you would be interested in passing this script onto Paul McCartney whom I have heard rather enjoyed Alan Plater's play (which he wrote for us) *Ted's Cathedral*, on the tele, and ask if he would be interested in writing it [the music] for us...I should add that, quite honestly, I am not interested in the idea of gathering any Beatle glory for this theatre from the exercise. If he wanted to write it anonymously as an experiment, I should be just as delighted.<sup>52</sup>

If we are to believe Cheeseman's claim, we can see a similar thread here in that he was not chasing 'Beatle glory', but was in search of talented individuals who could continue the quality of the company's work in Stoke-on-Trent. Presumably, a little extra publicity from a Beatle's involvement would not have been refused; however, the script was never passed on to McCartney, whom Epstein considered to be 'far too involved this year to consider writing or assisting with a musical of this nature'.<sup>53</sup> Epstein though took an interest himself, and by early 1965 Epstein had privately confirmed plans to produce *A Smashing Day* in the West End. The correspondence

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<sup>51</sup> Cheeseman's family frequently moved house due to his father's various postings with the air ministry. In Liverpool, his family's allotment neighboured that of the McCartney family and his younger brother became friends with Paul and his brother, Mike.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Epstein, 21 November 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Brian Epstein to Peter Cheeseman, 11 January 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

between the two confirms Cheeseman's preoccupation with, and to some degree his uncertainty about, such a transfer:

Since our meeting at your office I notice you have released vague information about your plans for *A Smashing Day*, without mentioning the play. I am just writing to ask if you would be kind enough to see that this theatre is given all possible credit for its relationship with Alan and the play when you are printing publicity and programme material should any future production arise. You will appreciate, I'm sure, that in our work here we are often responsible for doing the hard spade work of discovering and nurturing talented young actors and playwrights. What I am always anxious to ensure is that we receive due acknowledgement of our existence when a protégé achieves some measure of success. It's surprisingly easy for a small pioneering organisation to be overlooked.<sup>54</sup>

Again, whilst Cheeseman was keen for protégés of the theatre to succeed, his ultimate aim was to gain more publicity for the theatre and its cause. He references the 'hard spade work of discovering and nurturing' new talent, which all too often disappeared down South to the attractions of fame or increased salaries. Cheeseman had been disappointed once before in his relationship with Plater, when the BBC refused to use the Vic company for their production of *Ted's Cathedral* (1964). In an exchange with Plater he recognised the disappointment for the actors and the risk to their small company, lamenting the fact that

it's the kind of thing that eventually makes people leave a theatre like this and try to have it both ways. One's hope always is that they don't all go at once.<sup>55</sup>

After the confirmation of the transfer of *A Smashing Day* two years later, Cheeseman reaffirmed his stance in a letter to Ramsay, who had secured a 1% rights deal for the theatre:

What we really need more than money is praise, and I would like to ask that:  
1. As much acknowledgement as possible is given in general publicity of our

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Epstein, 24 April 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Plater, 15 October 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

relationship with Alan and the play...2. A note in the programme as follows: “Alan Plater is one of the team of dramatists contributing plays to the repertoire of the Victoria Theatre Company, Stoke-on-Trent, where *A Smashing Day* was first presented on 17 May 1965”.<sup>56</sup>

Cheeseman was insistent; his tone is evidence of the frustration he felt about being overlooked by the South and there is a clear sense that he felt he was battling away in a small, pioneering organisation against the tides of talent and funding that were seemingly flooding into the Capital. Any publicity was hard-earned, and Cheeseman was keen to maximise every potential avenue.

Unfortunately, in an almost inevitable re-run of Ayckbourn’s experience with *Mr. Whatnot*, Plater found himself at the mercy of Epstein’s proposals. *A Smashing Day* received poor notices, with *The Times* critic remarking that the production was ‘ineptly stylized, with blundering pantomime and inexpressive tableaux, and flat-footedly literal in its handling of the dialogue’,<sup>57</sup> and Bernard Levin of the *Daily Mail* agreeing that ‘at times the whole thing seems prefabricated out of a play-construction kit’.<sup>58</sup> Again, the issues raised did not stem from a poor-quality provincial production but from an inept London interpretation. Ramsay explicated the issue in a letter to Cheeseman:

Epstein is so conceited with all his money that instead of asking any other good professional Director to come down and take over (he might have given you a ring for a start) he did it himself with the absurd Vyvienne Moynihan. The moves were a huddle of people standing in rows stage centre, the lighting was awful, and the actors didn’t properly project. A deplorable evening, and none will have the guts to spit on Epstein, but will blame Alan.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 23 April 1965 held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>57</sup> Drama Critic, ‘Real Pop Theatre With a Liverpool Werther’, *The Times*, 12 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Levin, ‘Just like art by numbers’, *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 17 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Ramsay's letter continues, voicing her fears that new writers were being 'exploited' after leaving the Vic. She was particularly 'nervous' about their West End debuts after training in an arena space.<sup>60</sup> Cheeseman responded unequivocally:

They [Ayckbourn and Plater] both condoned the appointment of totally inadequate directors and sat and watched their plays butchered by them. Both of them took part in the butchery. Alan Plater actually re-wrote the last scene so that the play became an absurd sentimental melodrama about a young man who married the wrong girl, instead of a delicately balanced and positive play about a much more normal relationship...Both these authors should have said 'NO' to many points – neither of them wanted to...I think they were both ambitious and silly, and I hope they have learned their lesson.<sup>61</sup>

Cheeseman's frustration was understandable: not only did a West End transfer present him with a problem at home (in that casts and playlists needed to be reshuffled), but also an unsuccessful transfer had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the theatre.

Peggy Ramsay was an important supporter of the Victoria Theatre's work, acknowledging that the theatre was

a brilliant help to a new author – discerning and recognising their talent immediately, you do fascinating productions in your theatre – a real asset to our profession.<sup>62</sup>

She represented many of the writers who were to make their name with the company (including Ayckbourn, Plater, Terson, Saunders and others). As Colin Chambers affirms, Ramsay was a 'northern fan':

She loved the directness of the 'northern' emotions that she seldom found in the ossified South. She especially liked working-class writers because they broke through the effete culture of the West End, along with a new generation of northern directors and actors who no longer felt obliged to ape Home Counties pronunciation and behaviour.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 10 March 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 17 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>63</sup> Colin Chambers, *Peggy: The Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* (London: Nick Hern books, 1997), p. 120.

Despite her enthusiasm though, she firmly believed that ‘northern’ plays would have to be rethought for a London audience, and was particularly concerned that these writers were producing plays which worked well in-the round but did not transfer effectively to the proscenium:

People come up and see what you do and imagine it’s easy as pie to do exactly the same. What they don’t understand is that a play in-the-round is essentially freer and more oblique and more subtle than the proscenium which needs enlarging and needs projecting, so that everything “holds”. One doesn’t need this in-the-round.<sup>64</sup>

For Cheeseman, this anxiety was unfounded:

This theatre in the round to proscenium worry is a bit of a superstition – actors are very clever. They’re just not normally called on to use their full powers I think.<sup>65</sup>

He maintained that the reason for the failure of these transferred plays was not the change in space, but the alterations made to the plays themselves by London producers.

Cheeseman’s relationship with Ramsay was a fascinating one. On the one hand, he recognised that she had vastly more experience than him in promoting new writers, writing deferentially in a letter to Ramsay that he was ‘inexperienced’ and was willing to act ‘only with your advice as guidance’.<sup>66</sup> However, his letters to her seem to mask an element of frustration with the status quo:

I want to say clearly that I am not basically interested ever in West End transfers of productions here. I am trying to create and sustain a permanent company. This is precisely how one is able to get the very best out of young actors, and to jump at every glossy chance of worldly success outside Stoke would be to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, or let out the baby with the bath water, or whatever the appropriate proverb is.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 17 February 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 31 October 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 16 October 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 2 October 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

There was still a suggestion from London agents, such as Ramsay, that the ultimate success for a regional theatre was a transfer of their productions to the West End.

Cheeseman understandably found this both frustrating and insulting. In a later interview in Judith Cook's *Directors' Theatre*, Cheeseman continued to rail against the London prejudice which prevailed (and arguably, still does):

Delegates at CORT [Council of Repertory Theatres] conferences say “town” when they mean London. What do they think Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Stoke are – country? Do they see us all here mashing turnips or something or lying out in the sun on Balsall Heath before going to the village of Smethwick to see a play?<sup>68</sup>

This ongoing clash between London and the regions was felt strongly by Plater too, who remained profoundly influenced by his time at the Vic. In a recent interview, he regretted that ‘the history of British theatre so much is about the history of London theatre’.<sup>69</sup> Despite a successful writing career that spanned stage, film and television, Plater very much identified himself as a Northern writer, observing that much regional work is ‘many times more adventurous and gutsy than much West End fodder’.<sup>70</sup> Plater’s experience of *A Smashing Day* at the Vic and its subsequent transfer was an important one for the writer, who recognised his work at the Vic as a forerunner of *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968), which premiered to great acclaim at the Newcastle Playhouse and was later adapted for television. The play used the short stories of Sid Chaplin as its source material, and has been described by Plater as ‘a hymn of unqualified praise to the miners – who created a revolutionary weapon without having a revolutionary intent’.<sup>71</sup> Whilst the play does not follow Cheeseman’s strict use of actuality, the miners’ stories, interspersed with song, clearly reflect the

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<sup>68</sup> Judith Cook, *Directors' Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Alan Plater, *Interview with Alan Plater* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, 8 September 2008), Elsam archive.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Alan Plater, *Close the Coalhouse Door* (London: Methuen Playscripts, 1969).

Stoke influence on Plater. Whilst always maintaining a link with Cheeseman at the Vic, Plater continued his writing career for television, as well as pursuing his interest in theatre, founding the Hull Arts Centre in 1970.

### **Peter Terson**

Whilst new writing was of utmost importance to the company, Cheeseman's ultimate ambition was to locate a writer from the district. At the very least, he was searching for a writer who was content to remain in Stoke-on-Trent long-term in order to write about and for the theatre's immediate community, with no desire for a West End hit. Sharing this ambition was a young Physical Education school-teacher who had already sustained numerous rejections of his scripts from television and radio. Having read about the Victoria Theatre in the national press, Peter Patterson resolved to send a script of *The Runway* to Cheeseman. Recognising immediately Patterson's talent for truthful dialogue and his interest in a community, albeit the Vale of Evesham rather than the Potteries of Staffordshire, Cheeseman read the script, with 'enormous interest'.<sup>72</sup> Patterson's characters were, however, based so firmly in reality that it became necessary for him to change his name from Patterson to Terson in order 'to ensure there is not too much chance of the people in his village connecting him with the play should it be broadcast in any way'.<sup>73</sup> The theme of homosexuality that ran throughout *The Runaway* meant that Cheeseman was unable to produce Terson's first submission to him, fearing that the topic would mean that the play was immediately

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<sup>72</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 16 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 16 May 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

rejected by the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>74</sup> However in an initial exchange of letters,

Cheeseman was very positive in response to Terson's writing:

I would be very interested to either read any other plays that you have written, with a view to production here, or to meet you to talk about what writing schemes you may have in mind.<sup>75</sup>

Even at this early stage, Cheeseman confirmed that

I intend to send it to Miss. Margaret Ramsay, the leading London dramatic agent, as I think she would be interested in your work.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed she was, claiming that 'Mr. Patterson is very talented' and 'the author creates very fascinating characters and dialogue'.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly though, this initial script had 'practically no physical action' according to Ramsay and she considered it ideal as a radio play.<sup>78</sup>

Terson himself claimed in early correspondence that he had only recently

realised that my natural bent was to write stage plays. For the past five years I have been banging my head against the wall trying to churn out T.V. plays with an amazingly consistent lack of success.<sup>79</sup>

From the outset, he was more than happy to work collaboratively with Cheeseman.

The first draft of *A Night to Make the Angels Weep* was sent to Cheeseman in 1964 as

'a VERY rough first shot'<sup>80</sup> and the response was positive:

I have read *A Night...* and am very excited by it. Consider it as shortlisted for production here. I want to talk to you in detail about it, as there is a certain amount to be done before we can arrive at a script for rehearsal – I know you

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<sup>74</sup> In fact, by 1959, the Lord Chamberlain had taken the decision that the topic of homosexuality had become so prevalent that it was no longer defensible to exclude it from the stage entirely. That said, homosexuality was not legalised in the United Kingdom until 1967, and it continued to be a contentious issue for the Lord Chamberlain's office until the abolition of the role of the censor in the Theatres Act of 1968. (See Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900-1968, Volume Three: The Fifties and Volume Four: The Sixties* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2020).

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 16 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 2 March 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 27 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 22 March 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



expect this. But I beg you to do no revision now before our detailed conversation... Many congratulations on the first draft. I can't wait to get started on it.<sup>81</sup>

*A Night to Make the Angels Weep* was the beginning of a lifetime of collaboration between Cheeseman and Terson, with the new writer often searching for reassurance from the more established director. Terson's correspondence was laced with self-doubt, offering new scripts tentatively with such provisos as 'don't worry your mind about my heap of shit yet'.<sup>82</sup> Interviewed for John Russell Taylor's *The Second Wave: British Drama of the Sixties*, suggestive perhaps of his pre-eminence at the time, Terson made a comparison between his writing methods and the paintings he created whilst working:

I just slosh the paint on, as boldly and simply as you like, and the subjects are all very simple and obvious: *A Man, A Street* and so on. I don't know why I do them, and when I've done them I just chuck most of them away. I think my plays are very much like that. I suppose I must be some sort of crazy primitive or something.<sup>83</sup>

When discussing his working methods, Terson's writing was conveyed as a cathartic process; he talked frequently in correspondence about getting themes or ideas 'off my mind... just something I had to get aside', as if writing were his way of thinking through an idea.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Cheeseman made this observation early on in their correspondence where he commented that, 'Really, you never sit down to think – you just write another play instead, in which what you might of thought [sic] is embodied'.<sup>85</sup> At times, Terson even referred to this compulsion to write as akin to a disease: 'actually, tonight I've started a play. Much against my will. It seems to force

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 6 April 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 10 Oct 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>83</sup> John Russell Taylor, *The Second Wave: British Drama of the Sixties* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 108.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 12 December 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 17 November 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

its way out like dry sweat'.<sup>86</sup> Whilst Terson's dry humour is in evidence here, there does seem to be an element of truth in the agony that he described in putting his ideas on paper. Disliking the act of writing because of its 'loneliness',<sup>87</sup> Terson was more than happy to hand the script over in an unfinished form and often deferred to Cheeseman's authority on script revisions:

But look, Peter at the last assessment it's up to you because you're on the spot ... don't think twice about giving it the slashing treatment.<sup>88</sup>

As a writer, he seemed to understand the importance of the process of moving from a written script to a performed piece, and recognised that being 'on the spot' was extremely valuable in terms of making final decisions on the production. This process was clearly advantageous to both parties. Whilst early reaction to Terson's script recognised his 'genuine dramatic talent', frequently he was criticised for being overly verbose and unstructured.<sup>89</sup> Arts Council Readers' criticisms of *Night* for example, claimed that 'the story is arbitrary and the play loosely constructed' and that 'the play wants a lot of purging'.<sup>90</sup> Cheeseman and the cast set to work with Terson in rehearsals; Chris Martin, an actor with the company from 1964, remembers working with new writers as being a 'delicate business' and particularly with Terson, that 'there had to be a cut-off point' in order that actors were able to learn a final script.<sup>91</sup> By its first production however, after the collaborative work of playwright and company, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Ramsay wrote to Cheeseman after travelling to Stoke:

I loved the play. Peter is a really considerable writer – much better than people like Joe Orton, and I feel he will grow to be better than Rudkin, because he is

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, n.d, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>87</sup> Russell Taylor (1971), p. 110.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 4 May 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>89</sup> Arts Council Great Britain, 'Extracts from the readers' criticisms: *A Night to Make the Angels Weep*', 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Chris Martin, *Interview with Chris Martin* (interviewed by the author, 10 April 2017).

less pretentious and has a very earthy sense of humour (David has none), as well as a deep, poetic understanding of human beings – a lovely, lovely writer, and I want to thank you so much for suggesting that I might be allowed to represent him. It's an enormous pleasure to have such a talented author... It was quite my most enjoyable visit to Stoke and I think the best new play you've done there.<sup>92</sup>

It is interesting that Ramsay judged Terson alongside other new writers on her books and that she regarded him as a better playwright than Joe Orton and David Rudkin, both of whom would go on to become prominent in the 'new wave' of dramatists. Ramsay was not the only person to draw links between Terson and Rudkin; the Arts Council reviewers made the same connection, as did John Bowen, script adaptor for Associated Television (ATV) and later national newspaper reviews.<sup>93</sup> These connections were largely superficial and centred on the playwrights' fascination with depicting rural England. Most of Terson's early works were set in the Vale of Evesham, and depicted a hostile, rural environment inhabited by, as Elvgren describes, 'Terson's country people: fatalistic, superstitious, sceptical, insensitive and uncharitable'.<sup>94</sup> Terson presents the harsh reality of the countryside, which is brought to life vividly through his talent for re-creating colloquial dialogue. Benedict Nightingale notes this in a review of *The Might Reservoy* in 1964:

Mr. Terson is formidably gifted. He can write dialogue with natural but varied, exciting rhythms, bright language that is neither affected nor hackneyed; dialogue with some superficial resemblances to Pinter, but tougher and altogether less mannered. He can be funny and touching and serious all at the same time. Above all, he really grasps character, knows it, feels it.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Cheeseman, 24 June 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from John Bowen to Margaret Ramsay, 30 October 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>94</sup> For a detailed analysis of Terson's early plays, see Gillette Elvgren, 'Peter Terson's Vale of Evesham', *Modern Drama*, 18.2 (1975), pp. 173-187 (p. 177).

<sup>95</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'The Mighty Reservoy at Stoke-on-Trent', *The Guardian*, 30 September 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

There was an undoubted fervour surrounding Terson in his first seasons at the Vic. Cheeseman and Terson received letters from ATV, the BBC, Michael Codron and Kenneth Tynan amongst others, all bestowing praise on ‘a gifted chap’,<sup>96</sup> with Codron commenting that Terson’s writing was ‘the most gripping pieces of writing that I have experienced in the theatre for some time’.<sup>97</sup> For Cheeseman, having nurtured this talent, there was an element of pride in the recognition of Terson’s abilities; however, his experience of the disastrous West End transfer of Ayckbourn’s *Mr. Whatnot* continued to haunt him, and he was keen from the outset to draw up a gentleman’s agreement with the writer:

I hope you don’t find me neurotic in my concern to make clear to you and to Peggy the relationship in which you stand with us. I think you know I got such a terribly [sic] shock over the West End production of Alan Ayckbourn’s play *Mr. Whatnot*, that I am absolutely determined to see that the theatre benefits from the success of its artists and its authors and is not just drained of its lifeblood every time it looks healthy.

After a great deal of pondering, I thought the best way of putting over the relationship to Peggy is to insist that the theatre be treated in every respect (except financially) as if it were part author of the plays. This does not mean of course that I will want to demand higher percentages than those that would normally come to the theatre who first produces the plays. It seems to me that this idea is the very best way of expressing our interest in you and the plays and your relationship with us. I hope you agree to this, and of course in doing so realise that this will be a gentleman’s agreement between us which can be abandoned if ever either of us feel we want to do so.<sup>98</sup>

Martin recalls that Cheeseman had always resisted any form of contractual agreement with writers or actors since ‘it makes it all too formal and...we’re like a family’, and so the necessity of such an agreement is suggestive of the level of Cheeseman’s anxiety.<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, it does not seem to be the financial aspect that was paramount to Cheeseman, though money was exceptionally tight (Joseph had admitted in a letter

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from Kenneth Tynan to Margaret Ramsay, 3 November 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Michael Codron to Peter Cheeseman, 20 October 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 29 June 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>99</sup> Martin (2017).

to Cheeseman around the same time, to being in ‘despair’ over the financial state of the theatre<sup>100</sup>); rather, he was concerned with the threat to the ‘lifeblood’ of the theatre when faced with a West End transfer.

Equally, Cheeseman seemed somewhat fearful of Terson abandoning him for the temptations of fame in the Capital. In their early correspondence, Terson was evidently very aware of this anxiety and qualified any mention of fame or wealth with statements such as, ‘Not that I’m chasing commerce mind you. Still pure.’,<sup>101</sup> or in a later letter, ‘Any word from Codron? Not that I’m ambitious you know but I was only asking’.<sup>102</sup> Terson’s qualifications suggest the very idea of ambition conflicted intensely with Cheeseman’s outlook, disapproving of any discussion of London producers or financial remuneration. The only way to manage this anxiety, as Cheeseman proffered in his agreement with Terson, was the opportunity to treat the theatre as part author of the plays in order to ensure that the productions were unable to be publicised without some recognition of the theatre’s input. It seems apparent that Cheeseman was not searching for self-aggrandisement in this role despite Terson recognising him as being ‘more than a director, you are my artistic sense’.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Terson confirmed in his positive response to Cheeseman’s proposals that

the stuff I churn out is a sheer mass of words before the Victoria Theatre gets to work on it, and I for one will always feel that WE write the play in action, not just ME sitting in the outhouse.<sup>104</sup>

Rather than looking for any recognition of his input in the theatre’s role as ‘part author’, Cheeseman seemed concerned entirely with recognition for the theatre as a

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 24 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, undated, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>102</sup> Letter from Peter Terson (Patterson) to Peter Cheeseman, April 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, July 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

collective and for any publicity garnered by the playscript to be reflected back on its origins in Stoke.

Nevertheless, Terson was keen to affirm his co-operation with Cheeseman and to affiliate himself with Stoke and the world Cheeseman inhabited:

I am at home in the Victoria and feel about it the way YOU DO. It is my muck heap and I want to lie in it. It FEELS so right. I could no more right [sic] a play for the guilt of the Everyman or the phoney intellectuals of London than fly over the moon. I'm with you here kid, this great dream of making the Victoria something and getting the audience in. I tell you I am Shakespearean at heart and want them ENJOYING it not just being ever so "soimey" and precious. This, I think, is real theatre, to enjoy it like a football match as part of what you do, not part of what it is chic to do.<sup>105</sup>

Interestingly, Terson refers to the 'gilt' of the Everyman in Liverpool (recently set up in 1964) suggesting that in relative terms, the theatre had a certain opulence compared with the bare boards of the Vic. Perhaps, Terson's humour is in evidence again here since the Everyman had been set up to appeal to a different kind of audience than the more traditional Liverpool playhouse, and their theatre was by no means luxurious. A contemporary article notes that the Everyman company had 'dressing rooms in lavatories under the stage' and 'the central heating often didn't work, and when it did they couldn't afford the coke for the boiler, so they shivered'.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, there is a sense in Terson's words that the dream of the Victoria was something individual to them and to Stoke-on-Trent. Indeed, he voices the fundamental argument of the Vic's existence: that audiences will come to the theatre to 'enjoy it like a football match' rather than attend because it is 'chic', or it is something they ought to do. In a letter to the local paper during the same year, Cheeseman maintained that

the whole basis of the work being done in theatres like the Victoria in Stoke ... springs from a fervent belief that theatre is the most exciting popular entertainment for all. There is no enjoyment for those of us working in the

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<sup>105</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, July 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>106</sup> Ros Merkin, *Liverpool's Third Cathedral: the Liverpool Everyman Theatre In the Words of Those Who Were, and Are, There* (Liverpool and Merseyside Theatres Trust Ltd, 2004), p. 13.

Victoria Theatre in aiming to attract a small coterie audience. It becomes a meaningless activity viewed in this light.<sup>107</sup>

In sharing this view then, Terson had immediately aligned himself with Cheeseman, and recognised that he felt right in this regional setting, distancing himself from the ‘phoney intellectuals’ of London who had tempted Ayckbourn and Plater previously. Even within the relative normality of the Vic though, Terson still claims to have felt uncomfortable. In a recent interview, Terson considered himself different to the actors:

The actors were a different world from me, a different world. I mean, you know, a PE teacher sees everything at a certain level and that’s a very shallow level and the actors were, they were unafraid of delving into themselves, that was their job, you know to get in – what makes me tick? What am I? Can I be somebody else? – and that baffled me because the one thing I’ve tried to do is hide myself. And they were the opposite you know.<sup>108</sup>

Moving from the sports field to the theatre, Terson felt out of his depth, having ‘only seen about three plays in my life and two of them were pantomimes!’<sup>109</sup> However, the connection with Cheeseman made this transition less daunting. Because he and Cheeseman were ‘great friends the minute we met’, Terson claims that Cheeseman was able to ‘drag’ him out of teaching and into a theatrical world that was unfamiliar and intimidating.<sup>110</sup> He ascribes this friendship to a shared feeling of displacement:

I think we were great pals because in a way we were both alone with the actors – we lived in a different territory. He was more normal than he was theatrical.<sup>111</sup>

Despite their undeniable connection though, Terson found Cheeseman domineering at times. In his exchanges with Ramsay, Cheeseman had set himself and Terson against

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Cheeseman, Letter to the Editor, *Evening Sentinel*, 28 February 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Cheeseman, Letter to the Editor, *Evening Sentinel*, 28 February 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

the agent to a certain extent, musing over the ‘best way of putting over the relationship to Peggy’,<sup>112</sup> and Terson was quick to recognise that ‘your letter did have a sort of defiant tone, almost, against Peggy’.<sup>113</sup> Terson understood Cheeseman’s position and undoubtedly shared his outlook and philosophy on theatre and yet, Ramsay was his professional agent. He found himself in an impossible position between these two formidable characters:

I don’t want to find myself in a football match with me as the ball or any of that stuff. Let’s put it this way, all my stuff goes to YOU first, and I feel myself as part of the company in a writey way; but really, I think she should be able to feel that she is looking after my interests at her end.<sup>114</sup>

This issue arose repeatedly throughout Terson’s career. He found it almost impossible to tread a manageable path between a director on whom he relied so heavily in the role of dramaturge, and an agent who could have a potentially significant impact on the projection of his career. Certainly Ramsay was an excellent agent for a new writer, as Chambers asserts:

Peggy was well established as a force at the Court ... Peter Gill, as assistant director under Devine, recalls being dispatched by [George] Devine to Stoke-on-Trent to see a Peter Terson play immediately on receipt of a letter from Peggy extolling its merits.<sup>115</sup>

However, whilst Ramsay was an avid supporter of the playwright, Terson recalls her ‘wanting him to repeat the same play over again’ after her enjoyment of *A Night to Make the Angels Weep*.<sup>116</sup> She clearly recognised the importance of the playwright’s relationship with the theatre and wrote to Terson:

I entirely understand your feelings about P. Cheeseman and applaud them. At the moment my desire isn’t to disturb you from your fastness, but to try and encourage you to stretch yourself a bit technically.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 29 June 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, July 64, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Chambers (1997), p. 255.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 227.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Terson, 8 October 64, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



Both wanted great things for Terson: Cheeseman believed he could be an asset to the theatre and write collectively with the company, using his sharp ear for dialogue to appeal to the Stoke audience; Ramsay saw his potential as another Rudkin or Orton, and wanted to see him at the Arts or the Royal Court. Terson, however, seemed entirely overwhelmed by any kind of attention. Amidst all the discussions, he wrote to Cheeseman:

Look kid it all sounds so unnecessary, surely we aren't going to be all this good ... Only a year ago I would have let the Church Young Peoples put it on.<sup>118</sup>

Throughout their early work together, Cheeseman felt strongly that if Terson were to relocate to Stoke-on-Trent, his writing would progress. In a 1965 letter (after the theatre had staged two successful Terson productions), Terson wrote:

You know, you're right; it's about time I stopped writing from my little neurosis and worked in the theatre, MAKING UP THINGS... I am back to school today and boy, is it horrid, much worse than I'd ever imagined. For God's sake get that Bursary.<sup>119</sup>

Cheeseman had decided to apply to the Arts Council for a grant to allow Terson onto the theatre's staff as a resident playwright. He felt this would have numerous benefits, not least having a playwright writing for the community in which he was living and ridding Cheeseman of the anxiety of losing his writer to the West End. Terson was particularly concerned about his role in the theatre, and feeling that he was 'earning his keep' alongside the actors and technicians.<sup>120</sup> Cheeseman's response was straightforward:

I am going to suggest that we weigh in to a maximum of £5 a week, for the rest, make your salary up to £19 or £20 to be paid by the Arts Council, which

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<sup>118</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, September 1964, held at Victoria Theatre. Collection. In referring to the 'Church Young Peoples', Terson suggests that until recently, he would have allowed any level of amateur group to put on his plays without question.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, n.d but received 1 April 65, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection. Terson went 'back to school' in his role as P.E teacher and evidently, began thinking more seriously about leaving the profession for a full-time writer's position at the theatre.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

will make you feel, I think, a lot easier and truly resemble the kind of proportion of time you are likely to spend working at the theatre on your plays, giving odd talks, reading plays for me and advising on choice of programme and so on.<sup>121</sup>

In this way, Terson was to become a true member of the company, fully immersed in the workings of each of the plays, not just his own compositions. It would also allow him to move away from highly autobiographical plays which were problematic because they were ‘not produceable’ [sic] because they were so close to the reality of Terson’s friends or family, and had been written without any kind of permission being granted.<sup>122</sup> By summer 1965, the Arts Council had accepted Terson’s application, and he began work with a year’s contract as the UK’s first Arts Council-subsidised permanent writer for a resident company in January 1966. With Terson now firmly part of the company, and having made it clear that he was keen to discuss ‘the possibility of my staying on a more permanent basis’ after the initial year placement,<sup>123</sup> Cheeseman felt able to make a clear distinction between Terson and previous writers for the company in a typically spirited letter to Ramsay:

Peter Terson is a different case. He and I are good and close friends and can talk to one another with ruthless frankness: this is a good beginning. On top of this (and Peter and I have obviously discussed this in considerable detail) Peter is not ambitious in the same way as the two Alans. He is very happy working here and very satisfied. Of course, he would like his plays to be successful and have more money to spend, but it is nowhere near a prime motive. He has all the opportunities here to work on his writing and expand and live happily. This is all we both care about. We enjoy our work. If somebody wants to come along and buy one of our book-yard products then we would be happy to consider it, but we are not going to prostitute ourselves and condone butchery for the sake of a few quid – or a lot of quid. So, as long as you understand this no more needs to be said.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 6 April 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>122</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 12 December 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Peter Terson to Peter Cheeseman, 11 March 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>124</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Ramsay, 10 March 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Cheeseman had found in Terson a ‘great chum’,<sup>125</sup> someone who was focused predominantly on writing for a local community without a desire to reach West End audiences (although between 1967-1975, ten of Terson’s plays did receive West End showings).<sup>126</sup> From this point on, Terson and Cheeseman seemed to form a united front and Ramsay was forced to concede, for the initial period at least, that their union was a fruitful one for both sides. In correspondence with Penguin publishers, Ramsay eulogised about Cheeseman’s practices at the Vic:

We are awfully pleased that you are publishing this author [Terson], and we hope very much that you will keep your eye on Stoke authors, because Cheeseman has done something quite extraordinary in that part of the world – he has created a lively and absolutely contemporary theatre with a fascinating audience. He nearly always has a resident dramatist, and this is one of the few theatres in England who really care about dramatists, and really teach them and support them... I think Penguin ought to have some kind of record of the kind of work which is being done there so that their readers can know something about it.<sup>127</sup>

Certainly, Terson thrived on being part of a community and whilst reviews still criticised his lack of ‘decisive action’, they were quick to show their appreciation of a ‘born dramatist’:

He has an ability to combine mockery with strong affection; and a capacity for shaping local speech into a pattern of dialogue as economically intricate as a spider’s web.<sup>128</sup>

Terson’s Evesham plays represent an accurate depiction of ‘local speech’, giving voice to unseen characters. It is clear to see why his writing was so appealing to Cheeseman, despite its focus being the locale of Evesham, rather than North Staffordshire. Interestingly, for such an industrial region, Terson explored humanity’s

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<sup>125</sup> Peter Terson, *Interview with Peter Terson* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2018).

<sup>126</sup> Elvgren (1975), p. 173.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Margaret Ramsay to Giles Gordon, Penguin Books Ltd, 17 November 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Regional dramatist with a natural talent’, *The Times*, 24 Sep 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

connection with the land, presenting, as Elvgren describes, ‘the elemental and primitive presence of men who still dirty their hands in the fields’.<sup>129</sup>

Terson’s close partnership with the Vic was particularly beneficial to Cheeseman early in 1966 when he found himself struggling with the transfer of Plater’s production, *A Smashing Day*. Regarding casting, the disruption of the transfer should have been minimal compared with *Mr. Whatnot*, since Plater was not acting and directing with the company as Ayckbourn had been, however, Epstein decided that he needed the two actors (Ben Kingsley and Robert Powell), who had created the music for the show, to transfer with the production. Joyce Cheeseman (play reader for the company and Cheeseman’s wife) recalled the difficulties that were encountered due to the transfer:

This meant we had to get an actor up overnight to rehearse into a large part in *The Birthday Party* with only one week to go. Then to rehearse him into Krish’s [Ben Kingsley’s] part in *Tartuffe* for the following week. And, since Krish was the mainstay of *Mata Hari* – to cancel the final week of that and write up a show and rehearse it to fit in next. So for a fortnight now Peter has been rehearsing three shows at once, starting at 9.30am and ending at around 1am. You can imagine what that entails and life is like. We shall need to carry him away at the end of it all.<sup>130</sup>

Terson was drafted in to write a new piece to fill the gap left by Kingsley’s role in *Mata Hari* – he was able to collate a series of autobiographical fragments into *Sing An Arful Story*, a new musical documentary. Whilst the local paper recognised that the situation was ‘crisis theatre urgently hammered together with the audience almost in the building’, it admitted that

one was left with the feeling that it owed far more to the literary conventions of working-class youth than to life... The overall effect was rather like picking at a thin bone; diverting but not very filling.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Elvgren (1975), p. 186

<sup>130</sup> Letter from Joyce Cheeseman to Maurice Rowdon, 26 January 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Resolution, courage – but not enough for New Vic story’, *Evening Sentinel*, January 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Although the production had been hasty and the reviews poor, there was an immediate sense of the influence of Cheeseman and the company at the Vic on Terson's work. When forced to write in a hurry, he had chosen the documentary style, a preference of Cheeseman's and a style that was increasingly becoming synonymous with the Stoke company.

Terson went on to work closely with Cheeseman's wife, Joyce Holliday to adapt a number of Arnold Bennett novels, for example *Clayhanger* (1967), and his own adaptation of *Jock on the Go* (1966), which was his version of a Bennet short story, *Jock at a Venture* (1912). Holliday also went on to adapt Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1969), which enjoyed sell-out audiences at the Vic, and was then produced by Associated Television in 1971 with the Victoria Theatre company. She played a fundamental role in the company, initially as play reader, and later as a playwright herself, adapting Bennett's work, before developing her own style which was heavily influenced by the Stoke documentary. Holliday developed a close working relationship with Terson, often with the thankless task of dealing with the administration behind his multiple drafts of numerous plays that he continued to produce with great frequency. Between 1963-66, Terson had written over sixty stage plays, writing ten plays for the Vic in 1966 alone.<sup>132</sup>

### **Terson and beyond**

As with many of the playwrights who came to work at the Vic, one production led to a long and fruitful relationship with Terson producing more than fifteen original full-

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<sup>132</sup> Keith Plant, 'A Tale of Two Peters' (2015), unpublished article held at the Victoria Theatre Collection, p. 38

length plays and adaptations for the theatre.<sup>133</sup> Ayckbourn, Plater and Terson as discussed here all went on to form lifelong links with the theatre in Stoke and others had similar experiences. Brian Way, who will be discussed further in Chapter Four, was already an established artist by the time Cheeseman contacted him; however, the bond between Way's company *Theatre Centre* and Cheeseman's proved to be mutually beneficial and Way became instrumental in shaping the way in which the Vic handled theatre for children. It seemed that the principal policy of including a writer in the company was a significant contributory factor in the theatre's reputation in the early years. As Martin recalls, the plays were often 'brand new plays by unknown authors and hardly anyone came' and yet, the policy was never withdrawn.<sup>134</sup> New plays featured as part of a carefully balanced repertory season, alongside classics and, from 1964 onwards, the annual documentary. Cheeseman explained the company's aim of 'getting to know' the local audience better in a programme note in 1963:

We have tried out all kinds of plays and found out how our audiences have reacted to them. I hope you will all find that as time goes on, you will enjoy our shows all the more because we are getting to know one another better.<sup>135</sup>

The tone adopted here in the programme note gives us a good sense of the rapport that was building up steadily between the Vic and the community, with the confirmation that the play selection will be altered according to the audience's particular needs. Indeed, in an article about the Vic in *The Illustrated London News* in 1966, Irving Wardle noted that, 'whatever the play happens to be, they somehow make it clear that here we are in Stoke-on-Trent'.<sup>136</sup> Cheeseman found, however, that despite his efforts

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<sup>133</sup> Caroline Turner, 'Peter Cheeseman's work at the Old and New Victoria Theatres: a consideration of community theatre' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>134</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>135</sup> Cheeseman, Programme Note *Billy Liar* (1963), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>136</sup> Irving Wardle, *Illustrated London News*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

to make the theatre as accessible as possible, many in the locality had preconceived ideas of what the company's aims were:

People do try to fit us into a familiar category and there are many who have the notion that we are highbrow, because we often put on plays that are not very well-known. Those who know us a little better realise that we are not a highbrow theatre. But there are, I think, a lot of people who would like us to be one and are offended when we present *Billy Liar* or *Rattle of a Simple Man*, both plays whose chief fault seems to them to lie in their proven popularity.<sup>137</sup>

In this way, then, the Vic was struggling to satisfy two opposite camps; on the one hand, those people who had never been to the theatre and believed it to be intellectually superior, on the other those who felt that as a theatre in-the-round, the Vic should only be presenting highbrow material and were wrong to include popular pieces in their repertoire. Cheeseman had a simple solution to the problem:

We firmly believe that our best guide is our own faith in the plays we do. We never present any play that we genuinely do not like, putting it on simply because it is fashionably highbrow or because it may make money, holding our noses, as it were, while we do so.<sup>138</sup>

This balance of fifty per cent classics and fifty per cent new plays seemed to work well for the theatre with audiences growing annually. The average yearly attendance rose from 27% capacity in 1962-3 to 66% capacity in 1969-70. Whilst new plays did not always do well at the box office, Cheeseman's experimental programming began to draw in critics from the national newspapers with frequent reviews in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Stage* adding to an increasing sense of momentum to the work that the company was producing. Actors, like Dave Hill, recall anecdotally that

Stoke was the most adventurous theatre at the time, with a policy of new plays and classics ... and we decided we wanted to work there the most.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Cheeseman, programme note *Rattle of a Simple Man* (1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Michael Coveney, *Ken Campbell: The Great Caper* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), p. 30.

The new writing policy was successfully supported with a survey of 1971 confirming that

Of thirteen major repertories in Great Britain ... Stoke produced a total of seventy-one per cent original work (including documentaries and original novel adaptations.) The closest competitor was the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool with fifty per cent.<sup>140</sup>

Further, after pioneering the playwright in residence scheme with Terson, Cheeseman maintained the position at the theatre and went on to foster the talents of Tony Perrin, Ken Campbell, C.G. Bond and Bill Morrison, the subsequent four writers to hold the post up to 1971, all of whom later enjoyed established careers as dramatists for both stage and screen. Whilst in the role, each writer gradually learned how to please the North Staffordshire audience, and to accommodate Cheeseman's carefully selected repertoire. Tony Perrin, for example, wrote *Fighting Man*, a play that actor Chris Martin remembers having 'about six hundred f-u-c-ks in it', but also adapted Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and wrote a children's show, *Dick Whittington* for the Christmas slot.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, new writers were encouraged to develop their own style and Cheeseman was happy to challenge his audiences, if new work was viewed disapprovingly by regular attendees. One such example was Campbell's 1968 play *Jack Sheppard*, which featured an actress conducting an audience poll to ascertain whether or not an actor should take his trousers off. A disgruntled audience member wrote to the North Staffordshire Theatre Trust to express his disappointment:

Censorship has gone and the members of the theatrical world would appear to be in danger of vieing [sic] with one another to produce plays portraying the seamiest side of life as realistically as possible. It seems that the public must now take matters into their own hands and I exhort persons with reasonable intelligence who visit the theatre at this production to demonstrate their opposition in a positive way by vacating their seats and demanding a return of their money...As a rate payer both to the Stoke-on-Trent City Council and to

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<sup>140</sup> Gillette Elvgren, 'The Evolution of a Theatrical Style: A Study of the Interrelationship of select regional playwrights, the director, the community and the round stage at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1972), p. 28.

<sup>141</sup> Chris Martin (2017).



the Newcastle Borough Council...it greaves [sic] me that my money is being so grotesquely squandered on what can only be called “trash”.<sup>142</sup>

Cheeseman was quick to respond, in defence of Campbell’s work:

I believe it to be one of the most serious and one of the most distinguished plays we have ever put on. The light-hearted style is a natural but deliberate device used by Ken Campbell to tell a fairly horrifying story. Had you not erupted from your seat so early you would have found that it was a means of making a responsible moral statement to a modern society, about the nature of crime. I really do not believe that statements about morality or politics should be couched exclusively in solemn and boring language. You must, I am sure, be aware that the churches are empty and hardly anybody votes in local elections. This is in my view as much the fault of churchmen and local politicians who have failed to find a way of making their work seem relevant, as it is of the public who are so often accused of moral and political indifference...Perhaps the only comment I can make about this is to say that by now you should know us better than that...there are also a number of dangerous bigoted narrow-minded people who wish us to return to the piano leg draping, sweep it under the carpet, so called moral behaviour of the Victorians.<sup>143</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman was keen to satisfy and entertain the local audience, he also stood firm in his belief that new writing should be at the heart of the company’s repertoire, and as such, the company would not shy away from challenging subject matter.

Interestingly, however, in a later interview, Cheeseman used this exchange with Mr. Plumb to exemplify the naïve audiences of Stoke, who would remain shocked at events shown on stage in the 1960s, compared with London audiences for whom such acts had become more commonplace.<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, too Cheeseman became ‘great friends’ with Mr. Plum who continued to frequent the theatre regularly.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Letter from John Plumb (audience) to Sir Albert Bennett (Chairman of S-O-T and North Staffs Theatre Trust Ltd), 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1969, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Mr. J. Plumb, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1969, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>144</sup> Peter Cheeseman, ‘Peter Cheeseman, former artistic director of the Victoria Theatre, Staffordshire, talks to Kate Dorney about his experiences with the Lord Chamberlain’ <<http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Theatre-Archive-Project/024M-1CDR0025497X-0100V0>>, accessed 26<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

Writing for this particular audience in Stoke then, had a career-defining impact on each of the writers in residence, who have each cited Stoke as a direct influence on their style, particularly the significance of working collaboratively in one community, researching the documentaries and working in-the-round. In this way, Cheeseman's policy not only nourished the Vic but through it developed a number of dramatists who went on to have influence on new writing in British theatre more widely. It is worth noting that whilst chapters five and six examine Cheeseman's ground-breaking work on documentary theatre, this should not be remembered as his only legacy. Arguably his development of the funded writer in residence scheme, and his close work with writers such as Terson and others, has had just as great an impact on British theatre in a wider context.

## **Chapter Four: Children's Theatre**

This chapter will explore a little-known preoccupation of Cheeseman's: children's theatre. From the outset, as well as creating theatre that was relevant to the community, Cheeseman was convinced that one of the most effective ways in which he could transform the theatre-going habits of Stoke-on-Trent was to bring a high standard of children's theatre to the district. He understood that by engaging with educationalists in the region, he had more opportunity to reach children whose families may not ordinarily opt for the theatre as a leisure pursuit of choice. Whilst this policy had the benefit of increasing audience numbers at the Vic, Cheeseman always emphasised that the company needed 'to justify our existence in the community as *artists*', and that children's theatre was an excellent way of embedding themselves in the North Staffordshire community.<sup>1</sup> So far this thesis has foregrounded the practice and principles of Cheeseman, placing him at the centre of all the theatre's work, and identifying him as its absolute driving and controlling force. In this chapter, I will show that he was comfortable yielding control to those who he considered to be experts in their field. One such example was in the area of children's theatre, which Cheeseman believed to be an important but distinct field of expertise.

Cheeseman was not alone in his focus on children's theatre. In 1963, just a year after the Victoria Theatre's opening, the Newsom Report was published:

In short, drama, along with poetry and the other arts, is not a 'frill' which the less able can safely omit or relegate to a minor position on some Friday afternoons. Art is not an expensive substitute for reality. It is through creative arts, including the arts of language, that young people can be helped to come to terms with themselves more surely than by any other route.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Young People's Policy Statement: Victoria Theatre Stoke-on-Trent* (December 1969), p. 1, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>2</sup> *The Newsom Report: Half our Future* (London: HMSO, 1963) p. 157.

The report had as its remit to examine Britain's secondary school system after the Education Act of 1944, with a particular focus on children of 'academically average and less than average ability'.<sup>3</sup> It was unwavering in its support for the inclusion of good quality, practical drama in children's education. Similarly, the report advocated the importance of theatre in the cultural lives of children:

The stimulation of interest in the professional theatre, and encouragement to feel that it is part of their own, not an alien, culture, is particularly important for the older boys and girls, if they are not to miss this source of enrichment of their adult lives.<sup>4</sup>

The findings suggest that the 'enrichment' of cultural pursuits such as theatre-going, were equally important in children's lives as the educative advantages of drama in school. It recognised that amongst the 'below average' children in the report, there was a need to 'stimulate interest' in theatre-going, perhaps in an effort by the Conservative government 'so to improve the public system of education that we all become middle-class'.<sup>5</sup> Despite the report's findings, however, the Conservative government was reluctant to contribute funding for the establishment of quality children's drama provision. Tony Graham highlights the conflict that still existed within the system:

In 1961, the Arts Council claimed that adult theatre was their remit, theatre for children should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, which in turn allocated responsibility to local education authorities. This throws some light on the lack of a strategic policy for state funding for children's theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst moves were being made to suggest that children's drama could occupy an increasingly important position both educationally and culturally then, at the time of the theatre's inception there remained no ring-fenced funding for these projects.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Newsom Report* (1963), p. v.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> David Eccles, 'Education Policy', 4 January 1962 <discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>, [accessed 24 May 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Tony Graham, 'Building-based theatre', *Theatre for Children and Young People: 50 years of professional theatre in the UK*, ed. Stuart Bennett (Aurora Metro Publications Ltd, 2005), p. 77.

Despite this, Cheeseman pursued his policy, convinced of the necessity for children's theatre in the area. Without any formal training in children's education, however, he felt uncertain about how to proceed. Again, he turned to Stephen Joseph for guidance.

### **Brian Way and Theatre Centre**

In 1961, Joseph was already aware of the talents of Brian Way whom he described in an interview for Keele University newspaper:

In children's theatre, I think that it is really important that the children should participate. They should actually take part in the play and help decide how the story is going to run, and what people are to be called. This is the sort of thing that is being carried out, notably by Brian Way, whose work I have seen and admired intensely. It is to the eternal shame of the theatre in this country that a man like him can be allowed to experiment away in the Provinces without all of us knowing what he is doing, because the work is really important.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Way had had a major influence on Joseph's perception of successful children's theatre in his avocation of Way's theories: placing importance on children's participation in the story and the identification of characters. Yet again, Joseph had spotted the talents of a skilled practitioner who was 'experimenting away in the Provinces' with very little recognition before Way's work steadily achieved prominence in the world of children's theatre. Cheeseman recalled that, prior to their meeting in 1963, Joseph introduced Way as 'the genius of Children's Theatre in Britain'.<sup>8</sup> Reviewing a history of children's theatre in 2007 Anthony Jackson appears to agree, citing Peter Slade and Brian Way as seminal in the wave of change that followed in the movements of Theatre in Education and children's theatre.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Berry and Michael Knapp, 'Interview with Stephen Joseph', *Cum Grano* (Number 17, Spring 1961), p. 9, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'The debt we owe to Brian Way at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent', tribute to Brian Way (2006), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 134.

Joseph's approval of Way is unsurprising when we examine the philosophy behind his practice. Way, the son of a colonial governor in Jamaica, had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector in the Second World War before taking a stage management role at the Old Vic in the 1940s. At this initial stage of his career, Way became fascinated by the audiences of children who were bused to the theatre for the company's Shakespeare productions. Sitting in the wings in a prime position to watch the audience, Way made some key observations that were to inform his work with children for the rest of his career. He noticed:

The deepest and most sustained interest in the performance came from those sitting closest to the stage...Absorption and sustained interest generally decreased the farther back one sat from the stage, despite the fact that those often nearest to the back of the theatre were the right age group for understanding the language and content of the play.<sup>10</sup>

He observed that the children were chiefly concerned with the excitement of a trip to the theatre in itself and it became 'an adventure in its own right'. He recognised that the children's 'continuous babble' was very often 'based on a kind of social helpfulness' in which children were explaining complicated plots to their neighbours or debating, for example, 'whether Shylock's knife was real or fake'.<sup>11</sup> Those closer to the stage, Way revealed, were more concerned with the action and offering genuine advice to the characters. Since their requests were ignored, the children became increasingly frustrated and unresponsive to the action on stage and were 'often ready with a scornful "There, I told you so" when a later stage action proved them to have been right'.<sup>12</sup> Way claimed that participation is an unconscious reaction that adults had learned to repress:

For the majority of adult audiences, the rule, consciously or unconsciously assimilated, is so entrenched that it is difficult for people to break away from

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Way, *Audience Participation* (Boston: Walter H. Baker Co. Inc, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Way (1981), pp. 5-7.

<sup>12</sup> Way (1981), pp. 5-7.

it, even when “required” to do so by a particular form of theatre...young children do not know the rules of this particular game.<sup>13</sup>

Just as Joseph was arguing for a revolution in adult British theatre, Way was dissatisfied with the poor quality of productions for children which were either touring productions of the classics or, as David Johnston recalls ‘very pantomime and twee’.<sup>14</sup>

Way founded Theatre Centre with Margaret Faulkes in 1953 in an attempt to rectify these problems. Rather than taking school children on a theatre trip, Theatre Centre brought the play to schools, performing in school halls and gymnasiums. Way worked in-the-round (the first obvious connection with Joseph) because he felt strongly that children needed to be close to the action in order to be able to engage with it successfully:

As soon as we think of the “stage area” and the “auditorium” as one – *as a space in which anything can happen* – and as soon as the actors begin freely to use all of that space, then a whole new relationship is fostered between actor and audience as they share together the same psychological space, arising from a mutual sharing of the same physical space.<sup>15</sup>

For Way, working in-the-round allowed all of his audience to be fully engaged in the action, since there were only four front rows surrounding the stage. Equally, the round formation allowed actors to be as one with the audience, encouraging a mutually creative partnership rather than limiting children to the role of observer. He was anxious that children felt comfortable to engage in active participation, and believed this to be almost impossible in proscenium arch. He described the distance that existed in a traditional theatre set-up:

There is a gulf between actor and audience, partly physical and partly spiritual, that makes it impossible for true sharing to take place. Arena theatre

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Unfinished Histories, ‘David Johnston: Interview’, *Unfinished Histories*, 31 January 2013 <[www.unfinishedhistories.com](http://www.unfinishedhistories.com)> [accessed 19 May 2017].

<sup>15</sup> Way (1981), p. 10.

has no such gulf; the keynote is intimacy out of which participation begins to be possible.<sup>16</sup>

‘Arena’ in this context refers to John English’s touring Arena Theatre Company which explored thrust theatre, rather than the American ‘arena’ theatre explored by Joseph. In order to ensure the children’s focus though, Theatre Centre operated in-the-round and with very little in the way of sets and properties. Whilst this undoubtedly had practical and financial benefits for a touring company, Way had observed during his time with the Old Vic that ‘the less distraction there was in the way of scenery the more interest the youngsters took in the actors themselves’.<sup>17</sup>

He argued strongly that whilst there was a place for elaborate spectacle in the theatre,

present-day professionalism will always be an obstacle to such a Children’s Theatre... Tradition demands spectacle and finished artistry which destroy participation by offering a thing to be *watched* rather than in which to *take part*.<sup>18</sup>

In order to fully engage a children’s audience, Way was convinced that ‘taking part’ was the essential component. Hitherto, children’s theatre had relied on a largely artificial style of participation:

We need to look squarely at the fact that “playing down to kids” whether it be by the author, the actors or the directors, is first and foremost going to undermine the genuine basis of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual participation, and if the factors are even partially destroyed, then any physical or vocal participation will bear the scars of insincerity leading to forms of participation that range from mockery to anarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst Way detested the pantomimic participation that most children’s theatre incorporated, he argued that thoughtful participation remained a fundamental tool in successful productions for children. He believed that participation evolved so

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Way, with the collaboration of Warren Jenkins, *Pinocchio* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1954), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Way (1981), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Way (1954), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Way (1981), p. 3.



naturally in a group of young people who are fully engaged in a piece of theatre, that to ignore requests or solutions from a children's audience would be harmful to the production in question, and potentially the child's experience of theatre more widely.

### **Theatre Centre's *Pinocchio***

In Theatre Centre's production of *Pinocchio*, Way worked closely with John English and Warren Jenkins to create a less gruesome reworking of Carlo Collodi's serialised novel. The play was first performed in 1953 and became one of the company's most successful early productions. In the published script, Peter Slade (author of seminal study, *Child Drama* in the same year), prefaced the edition by focusing on Way's style of presentation:

This *Pinocchio* is the simple real "it's ME" that every child will recognise, from his earliest attempts at living and walking, through his troubles, to the end. This play shows each living member of the audience a simple consideration of life itself, and makes possible a healthy and proper participation by all the little *Pinocchios* in that place...If the actors will believe what they act, and not act down to their audience, and if they train themselves to be sensitive to the suspension of adult theatre timing, whilst participation is taking place, this play will prove of exceptional educational value.<sup>20</sup>

Slade emphasised that *Pinocchio* was a story that had relevance to a child beyond Walt Disney's simple fairytale aspect – Way's script was concerned particularly with *Pinocchio*'s attempts at becoming a 'real boy', and whilst the script may seem naïve, Slade claims that it is 'as charming in its innocence as it is believable in performance'.<sup>21</sup> Equally, it seems important to consider that the piece relied heavily on the quality of actors, since the written words were simply a framework for their

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Slade, 'Foreword', *Pinocchio* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1954), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

improvisation. The part of the Clown, for instance, has no speaking part and very little stage direction assigned to him and yet, Way recalls that

Warren Jenkins built up the part until it was almost the ‘biggest’ in the play. But no details have been recorded here, simply because those details belong to *that* production and *that* actor. Each actor and producer should together build their own ideas.<sup>22</sup>

The quality of improvisation, therefore, relied heavily on the actors to respond to the children’s ideas in an appropriate style for a Theatre Centre production. Way is careful in the stage directions to emphasise the importance of avoiding staged ‘comic business... or else the audience is tacitly invited to *watch* – not to *do*’.<sup>23</sup> Way’s directions suggest that comedy should not be avoided altogether but that the humour ought to be arrived at naturally, rather than through any kind of forced business which could be damaging to the sensitive atmosphere he is aiming to create. He describes the desired reaction to be one of ‘shared delight, rather than hysterical yells’.<sup>24</sup>

In his handbook, *Audience Participation*, Way recalls an anecdote of an early performance of *Pinocchio* to further exemplify the distinction he is making:

Later, when on high cliffs, Cat said: “Oh, Mr. Fox, I do wish I’d brought my parachute!” Cheap laugh, quickly capped by Fox saying: “You don’t need a parachute, Cat. You’re so full of wind you’ll float anyway”. More cheap laughs mainly from the grownups, but the youngsters were catching on to the cute phoney rules of the game by now, and belief ebbs away a little further. Then suddenly Mr. Fox said: “And here we are – the Field of Miracles!” A titter of uncertainty from the audience, quickly capped by Cat with the words: “Well, you could have Foxed me!” Uproarious laughter from all the adults. Not to be outdone, Fox replied with “What are you trying to do – make a puppet of me?” Now not only all the adults were laughing, but the three actors on stage as well! Some of the youngsters were laughing, too. Most were totally bewildered. All of the belief had died – for the sake of a few cheap and wholly unnecessary laughs.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Way (1954), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Way (1981), pp. 22-3.

This anecdote is revealing since it allows us an insight into Way's philosophy. There is a real frustration with the actors, who were clearly not approaching the work with the necessary level of gravity from Way's perspective. This frivolity enacted between the actors and adults of the audience was particularly detrimental to a child's involvement in the production and was, in effect, an embodiment of the problems in children's theatre that Way was trying to avoid. This reminiscence also displays an aspect of Way's character, and his approach to working with actors. His reputation in the business is recalled by David Johnston, who succeeded Way as Artistic Director of Theatre Centre in 1977:

'Well, boy' he used to call everyone – get the cigars out, get a whisky out...he was quite sort, felt quite colonial really. He liked telling stories and cracking jokes. He was a larger-than-life character... I guess a lot of people were scared of him.<sup>26</sup>

Way was undoubtedly a forceful character but one with an ultimately worthy cause, and his intentions remained constant throughout his career. Perhaps Way's commitment to his goal was an added attraction for Cheeseman, who shared an absolute preoccupation in seeing his own ambitions achieved for the Victoria Theatre. Indeed, Joyce Cheeseman recognised the similarity in a letter to Way a few years later:

I feel very much a buffer between two very busy and therefore slightly bad-tempered giants, and very much buffeted at the moment!<sup>27</sup>

These two were certainly 'giants' in their fields, resolute in their commitment to their goals whether that was community or children's theatre, and content that only the best quality theatre would reach their respective audiences. It is interesting that two such forceful characters could work effectively together, and is perhaps another reason

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<sup>26</sup> Johnston (2013).

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Joyce Cheeseman to Brian Way, 14 July 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

why Cheeseman was willing to relinquish control to those in whom he had complete confidence.

### **Early children's theatre at the Vic**

Prior to his involvement with Theatre Centre, Cheeseman had shown a strong drive to involve local school communities in the new theatre venture:

Over the next few weeks we are making a special effort to contact as many schools as possible in the North Staffordshire area to try and arrange party visits to the Victoria Theatre... We are also trying to organise a series of informal talks to be given by myself and my two other producers at the Victoria, either on our own or with artists from the company. We are very willing to come to schools at any time to talk about the theatre and related aspects. We should also be very pleased to make special arrangements for visiting school parties to meet and talk to producers and artists at the theatre, and to show them around the backstage and control areas.<sup>28</sup>

This was more than simply a mass invitation to a Vic production. Cheeseman was already aiming to build up long-term relationships with schools in offering talks or tours of the theatre, or company visits to interested schools. At this stage of the new theatre venture, it could have been simply an effective way of drumming up audiences but Cheeseman's continuing commitment to the theatre's education policy suggests he felt this was vital in ensuring the theatre a place at the heart of the community.

Throughout the theatre's first year, Cheeseman sent copious correspondence to local primary and secondary schools, youth clubs and young amateur dramatic societies not only inviting them to the theatre but also offering the services of any of the company in ways that might be beneficial.

In the provision of quality children's theatre, however, Cheeseman remained uncertain of how best to approach it. The productions offered at the Vic were often

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Headteachers, 6 November 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

unsuitable for a young audience. Indeed, the theatre became involved in a lengthy debate about the permitted age of audience members, resulting in a ban of children under the age of 14 at the majority of productions unless otherwise specified.

Cheeseman was clear from the outset, however, that young people should be offered quality provision by members of the permanent company and felt it was essential that schools were involved in some capacity. In his 'Young People's Policy Statement' in 1969, Cheeseman affirmed that

theatre for young people should be provided by the same artists as for the rest of the public and that there should be no relegation of 'acting for children' into a separate category by itself, with the possible consequent feeling amongst actors that this is part of the craft done early in the career but soon left behind.<sup>29</sup>

Funding was still a major issue for the company, however; as Cheeseman was not eager to take the reins personally on a children's theatre project, he wrote optimistically to Joseph with a suggestion of taking on Michael Croft and Geoffrey Reeves who were 'very interested' in starting up a youth theatre at the Vic.<sup>30</sup> Joseph's response however remained more concerned with the theatre's troubled finances than the expansion of its activities with a youth theatre, and the connection with Reeves and Croft was never pursued.<sup>31</sup>

Later that year, on Joseph's recommendation Cheeseman witnessed a Theatre Centre production and seemed to share Joseph's estimation of Way's 'genius'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed in a posthumous tribute to Way, Cheeseman suggested that he equalled Joseph in terms of theatrical vision:

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<sup>29</sup> Cheeseman (1969), p. 1, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, May 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection. Michael Croft had established the National Youth Theatre in 1956 and Geoffrey Reeves was his Assistant Director during 1963-1964.

<sup>31</sup> The connection with Michael Croft occurs again as he produces several Peter Terson plays at the National Youth Theatre (NYT), notably *Zigger Zagger* in 1970 which was the NYT's first new writing commission.

<sup>32</sup> Cheeseman (2006).

Stephen and Brian were both extraordinarily talented men, with a penetrating common sense which made you gasp: “Of course, it’s obvious – I never thought of it that way but now it’s so clear I can’t understand how I didn’t see it for myself!” Both had this special genius, Stephen in his understanding of the architecture of storytelling, Brian in his insight into the way children understand the storyteller. Both were men of principle, ready to stand alone and make a fuss.<sup>33</sup>

Cheeseman recognised and was attracted by the ability of both men to remain true to their principles, even if this caused them to be isolated in the industry to a certain extent. Similarly, he drew parallels between the common sense of both directors: for Joseph, it was obvious that theatre ought to be in-the-round in order to engage people more directly; for Way, it was obvious that children’s shows ought to cater for children’s needs, engaging them in sensitive audience participation, and treating them and their ideas with respect.

Cheeseman too was a practical director. He liked solutions to problems and, like Way and Joseph, was happy to stick by his principles regardless of the majority. During the transformation of the Theatre Royal into a Mecca bingo hall, the Gaumont in Hanley took over the region’s annual pantomime and whilst crowds flocked to see ‘Gerry and the Pacemakers’ appear in *Mother Goose* in 1963, Cheeseman maintained that there was ‘a crying need for the provision of special theatre for young people’ and a ‘great demand waiting to be satisfied’.<sup>34</sup> His common sense solution was to engage the best person for the job. He wrote directly to Brian Way, confirming that he was ‘enormously excited by what I saw’ and requesting:

1. Your arranging to visit a lot of schools in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle, Staffs., during your autumn tour; 2. the possibility of your company playing a Christmas show in the afternoon, while we play evenings, at the Victoria Theatre this year.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cheeseman (2006).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *First Three Rounds, A report from the Victoria Theatre, S-O-T at the beginning of the fourth season* (August 1965), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Way, 25 May 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Cheeseman appeared happy to hand over the entire theatre to Way with full confidence that he understood and had a talent for appealing to young audiences. When Way responded positively, suggesting that he could work in an ‘advisory capacity’ due to other commitments,<sup>36</sup> Cheeseman confessed that he was ‘nervous’ about the idea altogether and would prefer to

wait for a time when you could do the whole thing than venture into this specialised field with some hastily acquired advice from yourself.<sup>37</sup>

Cheeseman was always very careful to employ experts in the areas in which he felt he did not have sufficient knowledge, and children’s theatre was no exception. Faulkes and Way were quick to respond to ‘juggle a bit and we can probably try to do something’ for a Christmas show in Stoke, and to use the opportunity to expand their already extensive UK tours in the Staffordshire region.<sup>38</sup> They also offered the opportunity of presenting Saturday morning sessions at the theatre for a range of school-age children. At this point, Cheeseman’s hard work in corresponding and working actively in the community was beginning to pay off:

I have now written to Stoke and Newcastle Youth Organisers and sent your brochure. I’m on reasonably good terms with both and have done (gratis) courses for them here and in clubs so they should help...he [Newcastle Education Officer] is pushing it hard and is very sympathetic...he is going to try and secure from his committee a subsidy of 6d a head for the tickets from the authority.<sup>39</sup>

By all accounts, the goodwill of the local youth clubs and schools paid off and on a November Saturday the theatre was filled with 200 youngsters, ‘swept along on a wave of involvement’ in Theatre Centre’s adaptation of Louis MacNeice’s radio play,

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Brian Way to Peter Cheeseman, 26 June 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Way, 27 June 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Margaret Faulkes to Peter Cheeseman, 28 May 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Margaret Faulkes, 9 September 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

*Christopher Columbus*.<sup>40</sup> Previously, the *Columbus* experiment had only been attempted once at the Library Theatre in Manchester and once by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop. The success of these sessions, along with Theatre Centre's tours in the locality, and the apparent need for provision for children's theatre in the district, ensured guaranteed bookings for Cheeseman, when he confirmed Way's company for a Christmas performance of *Pinocchio* in 1963.

This production was by far the most well-attended production in the theatre's short history. In a letter to Faulkes, Cheeseman effused:

Before the show opened we had booked more seats than we ever sold for the whole run of the last Christmas play and large bookings are still coming in. The advance booking has broken all our records so far.<sup>41</sup>

Despite its innovative use of audience participation, the North Staffordshire audience warmed to Theatre Centre's work. Local reviews were wholeheartedly positive:

During the first interval, *Pinocchio* and Gepetto (Peter King and Bernard Gallagher) spend the entire 15 minutes sleeping on the stage, usually surrounded by a small group of inquisitive children. On one occasion each woke at the start of the second act to find a chocolate beside his head, left by a small girl who had sat patiently with them throughout the interval.<sup>42</sup>

The Vic company certainly seemed to have captured the spirit of Theatre Centre's work for children. The quiet, sensitive participation described here is exactly Way's style. In his notes on the published script of *Pinocchio*, Way explains that:

Participation thus builds up slowly by attention to small details rather than broad effects. Six hundred children shouting hysterically does not necessarily mean that participation is taking place; one child running forward with a cloth for an over-eaten actor to wipe his mouth may mean that it is. The sensitive actor knows, and behaves accordingly.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 'Theatre venture gives pupils chance to act', *Evening Sentinel*, 13 November 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Way, 30 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>42</sup> 'Pinocchio is most popular show ever', *Evening Sentinel*, 7 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>43</sup> Way (1954), p. 8.



Way's work with the actors had clearly paid off, ensuring that they did not waste 'hard work trying to get laughs' in order to avoid inviting the audience to 'watch not do'.<sup>44</sup> A letter to the Editor of the local paper commented on the 'reality' of the actors' business:

I took my young daughter and niece to see "Pinocchio" at the Victoria Theatre. This was the first time I had attended a performance given by Theatre-in-the-Round players and I was really delighted. I even found myself joining the children in the imaginary chase of the fox and the cat. It was not until the end of the performance that I realised the players had used very little scenery. There really was no need for it as their acting was so real.<sup>45</sup>

Word spread and bookings continued to roll in. The *Evening Sentinel* reported that 'because of the very heavy demand for tickets ... nine extra matinee performances have been arranged'.<sup>46</sup> Joseph too acknowledged the production's success:

I very much enjoyed *Pinocchio*. For my money this was the best audience I have seen in the Victoria Theatre, not only for numbers but also for vitality. My fish and chip theatre is no more than an adult extension of this.<sup>47</sup>

Cheeseman was delighted and wrote to Way expressing his gratitude:

I am particularly grateful to have learned so much about children's theatre from you all – this is going to be one of the lasting benefits of the show and I hope will enable me to conduct our future association more efficiently! The company, though thinner than when we met before, are enjoying themselves very much indeed.<sup>48</sup>

There is a sense here of the effort involved in producing the children's show. The actors needed to be prepared for any eventuality presented by the audience, and have sufficient energy to keep young audiences engaged. Since Cheeseman was resolute in his belief that the children's shows did not require a separate cast, the actors in

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<sup>44</sup> Way (1954), p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> 'A tribute to 'Pinocchio', *Evening Sentinel*, 8 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>46</sup> 'Extra matinees to meet demand for 'Pinocchio', *Evening Sentinel*, 27 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Stephen Joseph to Peter Cheeseman, 21 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Brian Way, 30 December 1963, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

*Pinocchio* were rehearsing and playing in the main repertoire concurrently.

Cheeseman recognised the difficulty of this for the actors but understood that a children's show at Christmas was demanded by the audience, and was excellent for business. He wrote to Alan Plater explaining the problem:

*Pinocchio* was a great success and a great experience. People demand children's theatre at Christmas but I would like to do it all the time, as well as adult theatre – one in the day and one in the evening. But we couldn't rehearse if we did this unless we had two companies.<sup>49</sup>

Audiences welcomed the high-quality children's shows to the area. However, principal criticisms were either concerned that the company was 'not going to fall into the familiar trap' of only 'entertaining the children at Christmas', or that the adults should be given some provision over the Christmas period in addition to the children's show.<sup>50</sup> Cheeseman's solution to this was to begin to plan for a separate company with the same quality of actors as the Vic. In October 1965, Cheeseman wrote to Jean Bullwinkle at Arts Council Great Britain with future plans for a 'full-time second company with its own auditorium doing performances for children and related activities'.<sup>51</sup> He had confirmed too in his summary report of the theatre that:

We are now determined to expand the scope of this joint work and take a firm step in the direction of our eventual aim: the setting up of a permanent children's theatre in the area.<sup>52</sup>

### **Children's theatre across the country**

Cheeseman was perhaps encouraged in his endeavour by the advent of a Labour government in 1964 that was increasingly committed to improving the provision of

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<sup>49</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Plater, 4 February 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Philippa Adams to Peter Cheeseman, 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Jean Bullwinkle, Drama Department ACGB, 12 October 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Cheeseman (1965).

arts in regional and national arenas. In a new 'Policy for the Arts' paper presented to parliament in 1965, Harold Wilson's government confirmed that the Arts Council budget would be increased, allowing it to 'raise from about £10,000 to £50,000 the sum allocated for awards and assistance to young artists in all fields'.<sup>53</sup> The report recognised the difficulties faced by 'provincial repertory theatres', especially in garnering new audiences:

Many working people have been conditioned by their education and environment to consider the best in music, painting, sculpture and literature outside their reach. A younger generation, however, more self-confident than their elders, and beginning to be given some feeling for drama, music and the visual arts in their school years, are more hopeful material.<sup>54</sup>

This 'younger generation' became the focus for a new wave of attention from many of the repertory theatres. No doubt encouraged by the extra funding that was available for children's work, the late 1960s saw an increase in youth programmes and the growth of Theatre in Education (TIE). Tony Jackson argues that some theatres were more interested in the increased funding, rather than the improvement of children's provision:

For some repertory theatre directors the newly available funds meant no more than an extra incentive to mount the Shakespeare production they had been planning anyway but link it to the local examination syllabus in order to qualify for the additional cash. Some theatres placed their priority on building new audiences, on promoting an appreciation of what adult theatre had to offer, rather than providing theatre for young people in their own right.<sup>55</sup>

This claim, however, cannot be levelled at Cheeseman. Whilst his programming certainly took the 'local examination syllabus' into account, he was not simply working for 'additional cash'. His commitment to youth work can be seen from early correspondence with Joseph and Way, and the links to Theatre Centre had been

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<sup>53</sup> Jennie Lee, *A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps*, Cmnd 2601 (London: HMSO, 1965), p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Jackson ed., *Learning through Theatre: New Perspectives on Theatre in Education* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 18.

established before any additional funding had been made available. Ultimately, Cheeseman's driving passion was to spread enthusiasm for the theatre. In a letter to the Editor of the local paper, Cheeseman stated his motives plainly:

It just seems to us that children deserve the stimulus, excitement and pleasure that imaginative theatre can give.<sup>56</sup>

It could be argued that in other areas, Cheeseman saw himself as much as an educator as a director. David recalls that he wanted to 'educate and entertain...that was his thing'.<sup>57</sup> In his introduction to *The Knotty*, Cheeseman himself describes how the documentaries are 'an interesting educational application. The whole process is rather like a class project'.<sup>58</sup> However, in an article written in 1968, Cheeseman claimed that:

There are a number of pressures on all of us in this situation to justify ourselves as for instance dollar or prestige earning. Much more common is the temptation to justify ourselves as educational. I think it's important that we don't get tempted into either posture.<sup>59</sup>

It seems that Cheeseman approached much of his directing as an educator and was always eager for his actors to receive expert tuition from various sources; however, in working with schools, he resisted being labelled as educational, fearing perhaps that this description might reduce the impact and enthusiasm for the work being produced. Thus, whilst Cheeseman was keen to engage with schools and colleges, the theatre's work with children stood apart from the wave of Theatre in Education that was sweeping through repertory theatres and schools in the mid-1960s.

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<sup>56</sup> Letters to the Editor, 'Children and the theatre', *Evening Sentinel*, 20 January 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>57</sup> Many of the company at the time describe Cheeseman as an educator, as do numerous interviewers and reviewers. For example, see Elvgren Jr., Gillette, 'Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.1 (1974), p. 87, and interviews with Chris Martin (2017), Gillian Brown (2018), and Alan David (2018).

<sup>58</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. xx.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'A theatre and the community it serves', *The Stage* (9 May 1968).

The birth of the TIE movement is largely recognised to be in 1965 at Coventry's Belgrade Theatre with the employment of four actor-teachers who were employed to tour primary and secondary schools with educational programmes. Although Way had been touring schools since the late 1950s, his work had not aimed for 'social change' in the way that many pioneering TIE companies did.<sup>60</sup> Indeed as the TIE movement gained momentum, many groups were keen to distance themselves from the more traditional children's theatre models of Theatre Centre and Caryl Jenner's Unicorn Theatre, which had been established as part of the CEMA touring work in the Second World War. Tony Graham however questions the distinction:

Children's theatre was seen as safe, apolitical and lacking in vision. Whereas Jenner had once been in the vanguard of social change, the Unicorn was now seen by some to have lagged behind, and to have immunised itself against the 60's revolution. How true was this? A closer look at the writers commissioned, their subject matter, the approach to making theatre, and casting policies reveals a highly enlightened, independent artistic leadership at the Unicorn.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Stuart Bennett (one of the first actor-teachers at the Belgrade, Coventry in 1967) recognised that though the TIE work had a more educational angle, Way's work on audience participation had been seminal. Despite the supposed schism between TIE and children's theatre, Bennett affirms that the Belgrade had in fact 'followed the Theatre Centre model'.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Johnston recalled that by the 1970s, Theatre Centre's work was beginning to be regarded as outdated:

You might blow a wind, or you might all hold hands to help a person get over a hill or something, that form of participation which by then people were feeling was very old-fashioned but actually when you saw it done in school, it could be very, very moving.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson (1993), p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Tony Graham, 'Building-based theatre', *Theatre for Children and Young People: 50 years of professional theatre in the UK*, ed. Stuart Bennett (Aurora Metro Publications Ltd, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Johnston (2013).

There was undoubtedly a shift in focus from Way's retelling of traditional stories to the more edgy, issue-based work of the TIE models; however, it is hard to deny Way's influence on this work. His ultimate philosophy remained as a bedrock of all TIE practices: that audience participation 'is a phenomenon that exists within the children themselves', and therefore was an essential prerequisite in successful children's theatre; that children ought never to be 'played down' to; that actors should approach the work seriously and sensitively, and should never engage in frivolity at the expense of children in the audience.<sup>64</sup>

### **Later children's theatre at the Vic**

It is interesting to note that, for a theatre so involved in documentary, Cheeseman did not pursue this style in theatre for children, as many TIE companies did. The Christmas shows remained an annual fixture with Way authoring or co-authoring six productions for the Vic, some of which were repeated up to three times during the company's twenty-four years in Hartshill. Way followed *Pinocchio* with a specially commissioned adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1964, a production that he hoped would include

beauty, humour, some genuine knock-about comedy, adventure, magic, and, very much connected with the latter, a great deal of integrated audience participation from both directed and stimulated point of view.<sup>65</sup>

Cheeseman cast Amelia Taylor, daughter of historian A. J. P Taylor, in the title role and reviews suggest another success for the company, with the local paper remarking on the spontaneous participation that occurred amongst the children in the audience:

Sometimes running down on to the Victoria Theatre Stage to give practical help to the actors in their various conflicts with the Wicked Fairy Godmother, sometimes curling up breathlessly in their seats and putting all their

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<sup>64</sup> Way (1981), p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Brian Way to Peter Cheeseman, 30 June 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

imagination and concentration into helping the Good Fairy weave a spell. They are part of the story at every stage.<sup>66</sup>

Again, Way's work on participation seemed to have worked its magic on the audience. Taylor commented too on the Victoria Theatre being particularly suited to Way's production, since 'the atmosphere of the Victoria is intimate enough for the children to feel right in the thick of the action'.<sup>67</sup> Audiences were improving and children's theatre at the Vic was growing in popularity. This was not achieved without hard work, however. In a letter to Terson, Cheeseman again gave a sense of the effort of staging such a production:

Just finished getting *Sleeping Beauty* on, which was a nightmare. Five nights up all night. Have grown a beard and am nearly dead.<sup>68</sup>

With sell-out audiences though, the children's shows were worth being 'nearly dead' for. Of all of Way's productions at the Vic, *A Christmas Carol* (1965) was the one that received the least favourable reviews from both the critics and audience feedback. The adaptation had been commissioned by Cheeseman but interestingly, provided little opportunity for audience participation as in previous productions for children. A review in the local paper praised the company's ingenious use of costume, sound and lighting to sustain the continuity of 'literally dozens of tiny scenes', and the talents of the cast whose 'quick-changing improvisation make light the task of sharing 84 parts among the 11 players'.<sup>69</sup> However, it criticised the lack of humour in the piece, a comment echoed in a selection of audience letters which claimed that the production

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<sup>66</sup> 'Former New Vic actress in TV 'Z Cars' role', *Evening Sentinel*, undated, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Gardner, 'History is all bunk, says the princess', *The Stage*, undated, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Peter Terson, 19 December 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>69</sup> J.S. Abberley, "'Scrooge' chills young blood', *Evening Sentinel*, 16 December, 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

was ‘frankly boring’.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, with a figure of 12,269 for 42 performances, *A Christmas Carol* had the biggest gross audience of any show presented at Hartshill since the theatre opened in 1962, and Cheeseman was heartened by the popularity of children’s productions in the region.<sup>71</sup>

When Cheeseman commissioned Ken Campbell to create a children’s show in 1967, the outcome was an altogether different experience from working with Brian Way. Cheeseman had cast Campbell as the Porter in his 1965 *Macbeth* (in which Ron Daniels played the eponymous role) and presumably impressed with his performance, he invited Campbell to re-join the company in 1966 as Valentine in *Twelfth Night* and as an occasional playwright. When it came to the children’s show, Campbell recalled being given a degree of freedom in his choice of topic:

Cheeseman’s one condition was that, apart from appealing to kids, the Christmas show should be called something famous. Campbell rifled through the *Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes* and chose Old King Cole because a) he was a merry old soul and b) the story didn’t have a plot. ‘As long as some geezer calling himself Old King Cole turned up at some time or other and there was some mention of fiddlers,’ said Campbell, ‘we’d seem to be in the clear as far as the Trade Descriptions Act was concerned’.<sup>72</sup>

Even when working alongside Way, Cheeseman had maintained that whatever the content, the title of the piece needed to be familiar in order to attract parents who

should not be put off by a strange title and an unknown-sounding story from bringing their children to something they would really enjoy, and take them instead to watch some dirty music-hall sketches at the Grand, Hanley, simply because they call themselves *Cinderella*.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from Mr. Meredith to Peter Cheeseman, 30 December 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>71</sup> *Evening Sentinel*, January 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Coveney, *Ken Campbell: The Great Caper* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), p. 34.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Joyce Cheeseman to Brian Way, 14 July 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



Campbell followed Cheeseman's brief, but his style could not have been further from that of Way. Far from being 'charming in its innocence',<sup>74</sup> Michael Coveney describes the inimitable style of Campbell's first work for children:

Campbell harnessed elements of pantomime with the theatrical properties of an all-action game show like *It's a Knockout* and suffused it all with the sheer linguistic glee of nonsense-speak and comic-strip yuckiness of bottom jokes, dancing sausages, wet underpants, and green-jelly-and-gravy sandwiches.<sup>75</sup>

Suddenly this theatrical experience was appealing to children in a very different way, and audiences were mixed in their reactions. Many wrote effusive letters confirming that the production was 'your best yet!';<sup>76</sup> others wrote in dismay, condemning the change of style:

The six teachers (aged 20 to 50) who are all supporters of your theatre and who visited "Old King Cole" were unanimous in their condemnation of the production. In brief their comments are that the play was not suitable for the age group of children they took because of (a) vulgar dialogue e.g. "silly old bag", "OK Rev", "cut the twaddle", "knickers to that" ... (b) coarse and disrespectful relationship between mother and daughter, setting a bad example... (c) stage business very often repulsive.<sup>77</sup>

Evidently, Campbell's humour proved distasteful and inappropriate with many of the complaints centring on a suggestion that the production was setting a bad example to young viewers. Cheeseman, however, was quick to respond. Whilst foregrounding his arguments in a humble apology, he was unreserved in his criticisms of the correspondent:

I think that your teachers are misunderstanding one of the fundamental features of children's play and games, and also children's theatre. This is that element which allows them (and us when we grow up) to indulge in many experiences vicariously or objectively. In this way we channel off impulses and fears which would harm us and our community if we were not permitted any other means of expressing them. Your teachers' idea that a play should be a kind of parade or tableau of good examples I must admit I find naïve. I must

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<sup>74</sup> Slade (1954), p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Coveney (2011), p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Walter Read, Madeley College of Education to Peter Cheeseman, 8 January 1968, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection..

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Mr. Bailey, Headteacher at Sir John Offley Primary School to Peter Cheeseman, 20 December 1967, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

also admit that their attitude depresses me profoundly, particularly when most primary education these days is so enlightened.<sup>78</sup>

These incisive arguments present clearly Cheeseman's belief in the production and, perhaps, more widely in the value of theatre; that theatre (both for children and adults alike) ought to be pushing the boundaries, as a way of an audience 'channelling off impulses and fears' rather than simply being a 'tableau of good examples'.

Interestingly, however, Campbell remembered that initially Cheeseman had not been so convinced by the original production:

They didn't just like it, they went bananas...Dave Hill as Baron Wadd had to leave the stage for half a minute to steel his nerve to continue the circus. Peter Cheeseman, however, was alarmed – he feared the mass hysteria that the play was creating could be dangerous – so we quickly reworked bits so they weren't quite so panic-inspiring...in fact, little was lost and, thanks to the Cheeseman wisdom, all audiences and casts have survived the experience ever since.<sup>79</sup>

It seems then, that Cheeseman had already worked to tone down the performance in light of the 'mass hysteria' that was being provoked. The participation element was verging on pantomime, and some letters of complaint bemoaned the production's aim of 'trying to involve the children in a way that only encourages them to scream' and encouraging them to 'be silly and badly behaved generally', rather than the more thoughtful participation that had been encouraged by Way's work.<sup>80</sup> In response, Cheeseman agreed that

in the level of participation we were not very successful this year. It is my hope that our relationship with this children's writer will develop as a result of this production, and that we have genuine participation with our next Christmas play.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Response from Peter Cheeseman to Mr. Bailey, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1968, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>79</sup> Coveney (2011), p. 35.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from H. Lovatt, Head of Beeches Junior School to Peter Cheeseman, 18 January 1968, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to H. Lovatt, Beeches School, 15 March 1968, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Whilst Cheeseman had enjoyed the ‘licensed anarchy’ that Campbell’s play had created, he was anxious to return to Way’s ‘inspiring’ form of participatory theatre.<sup>82</sup> In his tribute to Way, Cheeseman acknowledged that every children’s play created at the theatre, if not written by Way, was ‘based on Brian’s principles’.<sup>83</sup>

### **End of children’s theatre plans**

With the growing popularity of the company’s children’s productions, a second permanent theatre for children seemed imminent. In a letter to the Arts Council Drama Department in 1965, Cheeseman explained his plans:

The first major developments in our Children’s Theatre activities will take place in August, 1967 if all goes well. We will then be working towards the establishment in two, three or four years of a full time second company with its own auditorium doing performances for children and related activities.<sup>84</sup>

In September 1966, Cheeseman appointed Marion Dudley to extend

the theatre’s already considerable work in the field of talks, lectures and demonstrations in local schools, largely by introducing theatre to the younger children.<sup>85</sup>

She also had a remit to administer a season of theatre in the Spring of 1967 that would run alongside the adult programme. These plans, however, did not progress as intended since the dispute that broke out between Cheeseman and Joseph culminated in Cheeseman’s temporary dismissal in 1967, and therefore prevented him from

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<sup>82</sup> Coveney (2011), p. 83.

<sup>83</sup> Cheeseman (2006). Campbell’s talents continued to be used in adult productions and the theatre’s outreach work in the form of the Vic Roadshow.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Jean Bullwinkle, Drama Department ACGB, 12 October 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>85</sup> *Evening Sentinel*, 14 September 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

furthering discussions for a second permanent home for children's theatre.<sup>86</sup> Had Cheeseman been successful in his plans for a second company for children's theatre to run alongside the repertoire of the main house, the Victoria Theatre would have been one of the first repertory theatres to do so. Whilst many theatres were developing their programmes of TIE, Cheeseman was keen to develop a strong base for children's theatre at the Vic in its role as an additional service to the community.

When he returned to his post as Artistic Director in 1967, he explained his frustration:

We seem to have been hoping and planning for so long but making no progress. Re-budgeting after the recent disturbance at Stoke and subsequent closure made it impossible for us to staff on the administrative side up to the level before the closure, and a certain amount of the activity which we had indulged in in schools and youth clubs had to be thinned off.<sup>87</sup>

Cheeseman comments too on the discussions with the Local Authority, which have been 'going on for nearly two years'.<sup>88</sup> He seems to regret the loss of momentum for the children's theatre caused by the theatre dispute, and is unwilling to let the company's work with schools and youth clubs go to waste. He therefore designed an ingenious scheme which would allow the company to continue their additional work for children, and be recompensed by the local council. At the time, the council employed one Drama Advisor for the North Staffordshire region; instead of this, Cheeseman encouraged the Stoke-on-Trent council to employ the Vic theatre as a Drama Advisory Service. Thus, the theatre received an extra grant from the Council in order to provide visits and demonstrations to local schools and colleges by members of the company and technicians. The theatre also received a special grant from the Arts Council in order to increase the company's work with young people. In

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<sup>86</sup> For more information on the dispute between Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman, see Chapter Two.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Material for Council of Repertory Theatres Young People's Theatre Section Bulletin (October 1968), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Material for Council of Repertory Theatres Young People's Theatre Section Bulletin (October 1968), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

a bulletin for the Council of Repertory Theatres (CORT), Cheeseman explained how the money had been allocated:

The Arts Council grant has enabled us to add two other people to the total strength. This means that at Christmas we are able to provide for two age groups and to get out and about by putting on two plays simultaneously... the City grant also helped us to spread the schools work undertaken to other local Authorities in the area and both grants will enable us to undertake a great deal more of this work which so many companies are now doing in the schools.<sup>89</sup>

Cheeseman was acutely aware that the schools work was important to move the theatre's work forward in the region, and to receive the extra grants being offered by the Labour government. In a letter from Caryl Jenner, founder of Unicorn Theatre, she commented on the increased acceptance of children's theatre and the constant battle for funding:

I'm genuinely glad to see that at last substantial increases in grants are coming the way of so many reps – even though it's going to make life worse than before for the Children's Theatre Companies because of the disparity in wages!<sup>90</sup>

Whilst the theatre's annual shows continued, Cheeseman remained committed to developing theatre for children in the area. In a letter to HMI Drama Department in 1973, there is evidence that Cheeseman was still looking for a way to disseminate his company's knowledge in order to improve provision in the local community:

I would be awfully interested to discuss this situation with you as I believe theatres should do a radical reassessment of their roles in respect of school. I think it is unrealistic, in terms of the logistics of the situation, to aim to provide a regular service to schools. I believe what few theatres there are, compared with the number of schools and the number of children, should aim at providing a service for teachers and youth leaders who in themselves can provide the important service to the children.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Caryl Jenner to Peter Cheeseman, 14 April 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Bert Parnaby HMI, Drama, Dep of Education and Science, 3 December 1973, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

Again, the theatre continued to have ambitions to provide a ‘service’ to the region of North Staffordshire and, more specifically in this example, to the children and educational establishments of the area.

Whilst the plans for a purpose-built theatre for children were never realised, the Vic continued to develop its outreach programmes even before they were termed as such. The company’s schemes were remunerated in 1974, when the Labour government formed the ‘Quality of Life’ programme in which four areas of the country (Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Dumbarton and Deeside) were selected for ‘leisure experiments’, to encourage community involvement in the regeneration of urban areas.<sup>92</sup>

Cheeseman was included on the steering committee, and the theatre became heavily involved, running the Community Theatre Scheme from 1974 – 1976. As part of this scheme, actors ran holiday playschemes at local parks, visited Mother and Baby groups, and developed touring Road Shows which visited community centres, residential homes, pubs and clubs. Interestingly, Cheeseman re-employed the talents of Ken Campbell to create a number of the shows which consisted of a compilation of songs, instrumentals and comedy sketches. Evidently, the level of audience participation that Campbell had perfected during the children’s shows, and the zany humour he had created in his own Ken Campbell Roadshow (1971), was precisely what the company needed in their community-based work. Children’s theatre, then, whilst not always recognised as an aspect of Cheeseman’s work, was yet another example of the company’s determination to embed themselves in the Stoke-on-Trent region. Their commitment to producing quality productions, Cheeseman’s plans for a second permanent children’s theatre company (albeit never realised), and the

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<sup>92</sup> The following information is taken from ‘Leisure and the Quality of Life’ folders held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

company's wholehearted efforts to engage the community in a variety of work outside the theatre, demonstrate the importance of children's theatre in the ethos of the Vic company.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, the impact of the 'Quality of Life' scheme had far reaching effects, such as the visit to the social club at the local Hem Heath Colliery which resulted in the theatre's involvement in the National Coal Board's Pit Safety Competition in 1977 and ultimately, the documentary play *Miner Dig the Coal* (1981). The miners from Hem Heath colliery were the first to make a public donation to the New Vic Appeal.

## **Chapter Five: Development of the documentary style**

Whilst the documentary remained only a small part of the Vic company's annual repertoire, it was, nevertheless, fundamental to the company's work. This chapter charts the development of the Stoke documentary style, examining the original motivation behind the productions, and the processes and rules to which the company adhered. Whilst I will make reference to specific documentaries that were created at the Victoria Theatre, my aim is not to generate a chronology of productions, but rather to examine Peter Cheeseman's influences and explore how these were assimilated into the company's outlook. Further, I will examine the processes by which these unique productions were created, and chart the refinement of the company's methods, as the documentary became an annual feature in the theatre's repertoire. Whilst this topic has been previously examined in relation to Cheeseman and his work at Stoke, there has never been a study that includes extensive interview material from company members. These memories provide a particular insight into the documentary process at the Vic, and the rationale behind some of the decisions that were made.

The Stoke documentary was born out of a crisis point in which the company found themselves without a writer for the first time. Alan Ayckbourn had left the company in 1964 with his transfer to the West End, Alan Plater was only writing occasionally for the company, and Peter Terson was yet to move to Stoke-on-Trent in his role as resident writer. Rather than abandon Joseph's policy of new writing, however, Cheeseman embarked on an innovative course to ensure that the theatre was able to offer something not only original but, crucially, relevant to the district. From the theatre's opening, Cheeseman had been keen to root the Victoria firmly in the region



of Stoke-on-Trent, and to convince the local community that the theatre was about and for them. To this end, Cheeseman aspired to employ a writer from the district who would have an understanding of the Potteries' culture and history, however, writers from the district proved difficult to find. His journey into documentary theatre began then, out of necessity rather than being driven by an entirely philosophical perspective. As a History undergraduate, Cheeseman's decision to delve into the archives for inspiration was an instinctive one. Cheeseman was aware that

we only get the knowledge and experience of the past through a distorting mirror. So I want to look for important stories which the community could tell itself. That's the most important thing for me.<sup>94</sup>

He began researching in local libraries and archives to find an 'important story' that would translate into an effective piece of drama. The topic selected by Cheeseman was the history of the industrial revolution, and its impact upon the region of Staffordshire. In a manifestation of the theatre's affinity with the local area, the title was chosen by the local landlord whose pub was 'The Jolly Potters'. Cheeseman recalled the episode:

When we broke for lunch we took the opportunity of proximity to a cosy local Bass house to drop in for a drink. The landlord Doug Birks is a great joker. He struck a dramatic attitude as we made for the bar, 'And the title of your next play is' he declared 'The Jolly Potters'. It was the name of his pub and a number of other locals. It was the obvious title for our first local documentary.<sup>95</sup>

The title became an ironic one as the company's research centred particularly on the lead-up to and consequences of the Chartist riots, which took place in Staffordshire in the 1840s. The riots were a reaction to the industrial depression and atrocious living and working conditions suffered by employees at the time, and the documentary presented the struggle of the workers against their employers. Tackling the history

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<sup>94</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Documentary Theatre – A Professional Repertory Theatre Perspective', *Documentary Arts Report*, 2 (1986), p. 10.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. xi.

from the perspective of the working-class was an angle to which Cheeseman would return repeatedly in subsequent documentary productions.

### **Influences on Cheeseman**

We can trace a number of specific influences on the development of the documentary style at Stoke. One of the earliest came in the shape of a performance at Merseyside Unity Theatre, when Cheeseman would have been just eighteen:

I saw a production of a Living Newspaper at Merseyside Unity Theatre, a thing about Joe Hill, the Trade Union Leader and that had a particular flavour that stuck in my head, a flavour compounded of a particular approach to music, it told a story in song and very simple direct speech and I suppose it had a quality that interested me and I thought I'd like to do something like that one day.<sup>96</sup>

The production was a revue-style show produced in 1950 which told the story of this working-class hero in a series of short episodic scenes.<sup>97</sup> Joe Hill, who was imprisoned for murder in Salt Lake City in 1914, was the author of popular songs for the Industrial Workers of the World trade union (IWW). Throughout his trial and in his media portrayal Hill became, as Thomas Marvin asserts, a 'labor martyr', since

in a series of letters and telegrams, he presented the image of an innocent man, wrongly accused, who suffered his imprisonment with courage and dignity.<sup>98</sup>

His ability to encapsulate the philosophies of the IWW into simple, memorable songs, endeared Hill to the workers' movement, and his execution in 1915 further rallied supporters of his cause. In a telegram, Hill commanded 'Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!' which was reconfigured into the workers' mantra: 'Don't

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<sup>96</sup> Sara Fielding, 'An analysis of Twentieth Century Documentary Drama and its major innovators with particular reference to the work of Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.' (unpublished ungraduated dissertation, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> Merseyside Left Theatre was formed in the 1930s as part of the Unity Theatre movement and became Merseyside Unity Theatre in 1944. The company introduced the Living Newspaper form to the UK.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas F. Marvin, 'Joe Hill and the Rhetoric of Radicalism', *Journal of American Culture* 34.3 (2011), pp. 247-263 (p. 254).

mourn – organize!’<sup>99</sup> Whilst Cheeseman’s interest did not lie in such direct appeals for activism, his concern for the plight of the working-man became a recurrent theme in the Stoke documentaries, which often interpreted events from a working-class perspective. Unity’s technique of telling Hill’s story in song became central in Cheeseman’s presentation of documentary material. Indeed, the idea was further cemented by his experience of Joan Littlewood’s production of *Oh What a Lovely War* in 1963.<sup>100</sup> In a letter to Arnold Wesker in which he described *The Jolly Potters*, Cheeseman explained that he will be

using the old Unity Theatre living newspaper formula which Joan Littlewood works with such effect in *Oh What a Lovely War*.<sup>101</sup>

This pivotal production had a great influence on theatre practitioners in general.

Derek Paget notes its significance as akin to the 1956 production of *Look Back in*

*Anger*:

*Oh What a Lovely War* offered young practitioners a model for a kind of performance manifestly alternative to mainstream theatre of the day – a model in which the claim to truth inherent in the concept of documentary was embedded in the theatrical event.<sup>102</sup>

Undoubtedly, the production had a profound effect on Cheeseman, he claimed it was the ‘direct inspiration’ for his documentary work.<sup>103</sup> He was particularly attracted by the ‘interplay of song and speech’<sup>104</sup> used in the production to present factual material in an engaging way, and was keen to develop

a style of our own which would make theatre livelier and more attractive than the current conventional play format.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Fielding (1987), p. 30.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Arnold Wesker, 6 May 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>102</sup> Derek Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 26.2 (2010), pp. 173-193 (p. 174).

<sup>103</sup> Fielding (1987), p. 30.

<sup>104</sup> Cheeseman (1986), p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. x.

Whilst Cheeseman was keen to exploit his actors' own particular talents, he admitted that 'the job that has taken longest to do ... coping with the, for me, necessary musical element'.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, in *The Jolly Potters* Cheeseman enlisted local student folk band The Keele Row to perform with the company. The songs used were a combination of traditional folk songs of the time, written by Potters' poets and found in the radical pro-Union 19<sup>th</sup> century publication, *The Potters Examiner* and original compositions by the singers, using historical material.<sup>107</sup> The importance of music and song in the documentaries will be covered in more detail later in the chapter.

### **Process in the Stoke documentary**

The musical documentary, then, seemed to be an excellent solution to engage and develop a new audience at the Vic and to help the company discover its own style; however, the task itself was far from simple. In numerous interviews, Cheeseman attested to the arduousness of the challenge:

If you wanted to choose the most difficult way of creating a play that you can imagine, you would choose the technique of creating a play out of documentary material, the way we have practised it.<sup>108</sup>

In order to give the company the necessary time to gather the material in the early documentaries, a small cast production was shown in repertoire. The difficulty of researching and absorbing this dense historical material is evidenced in a short film made by Philip Donnellan for the BBC in 1965, charting the company's struggles in the lead-up to the first night of *The Staffordshire Rebels* (1965), their second

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<sup>106</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xii.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Cheeseman, Programme for *The Jolly Potters* (1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. 7.

documentary. The production focused on events of the Civil War in Staffordshire,<sup>109</sup> and the film evidences the entire company's involvement in the research:

The whole place is full of paper – photostats of bills, letters, local records – Cheeseman's fascinated by it all...now they're all at it. Dressing rooms are full of maps and drawings – it's way outside the usual actor's diet.<sup>110</sup>

It seems that in this young company there was a sense of excitement at being involved in such an unusual project, but an underlying anxiety too, as articulated by Tony Handy, a member of the company who was filmed presenting to a class of school children:<sup>111</sup>

The trouble that I immediately found with this is that it's a terrifying experience because normally an actor – you're given the script, you're told the character you're going to play and you have it in front of you but in this case one has got to create the script and it's absolutely terrifying to be placed in this situation.<sup>112</sup>

For many actors, their position as a member of the Victoria Theatre Company was their first permanent professional role, their relative youth and inexperience often rendered them less resistant than older actors might have been to new methods. Their trepidation, however, was understandable. Not only were they being expected to research and make sense of historical documents from the English Civil War, they were also being asked to adapt these findings into something entertaining. Stanley Page remembered that during the first rehearsals of *The Jolly Potters*, all the actors

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<sup>109</sup> Charles II escaped through South Staffordshire after the battle of Worcester, and Judge John Bradshaw (President of the High Court of Justice in Charles II's trial) and Thomas Harrison (noted friend and supporter of Oliver Cromwell) were both born in the locality.

<sup>110</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*, dir. by Christopher Martin (BBC, 1965).

<sup>111</sup> The company was involved in an ongoing programme of outreach work, speaking to a variety of institutions including schools, colleges, women's institutes etc. in an effort to involve the local community and encourage them to visit the theatre. For further information, see Peter Cheeseman, *First Three Rounds, A report from the Victoria Theatre, S-O-T at the beginning of the fourth season* (August 1965).

<sup>112</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*.

‘thought it was going to be the most appalling thing ever’.<sup>113</sup> Ron Daniels recalled the documentary process as a ‘huge, scary adventure’.<sup>114</sup>

By the Vic’s third documentary, *The Knotty* (1966), which charted the rise and fall of the North Staffordshire railway, Cheeseman had begun to refine the company’s methodology. Whilst the early documentaries had used improvisation to link short historical scenes, by *The Knotty*, Cheeseman had largely abandoned his use of ‘imaginative or comic reconstructions in our own words’.<sup>115</sup> Cheeseman had always been cautious of allowing actors too much freedom with the historical material, and this pre-disposition was to become increasingly foregrounded as he developed his exacting methods of dealing with source material. In his article on verbatim theatre, Paget includes Cheeseman’s definition of the company’s work:

The key to our work is the painstaking use of primary source material - painstaking, protracted and scrupulous use of historical evidence.<sup>116</sup>

For Cheeseman, a self-confessed ‘puritan’ when it came to dealing with historical sources, it was essential that the company’s work was an accurate representation of the research.<sup>117</sup> Rather than improvise a particular scene, Cheeseman believed that ‘if there is no primary source material available on a particular topic, no scene can be made about it’.<sup>118</sup>

By 1966 there had been an important change in the make-up of the company, with the advent of Terson as the Vic’s writer in residence. The research process of *The Knotty* therefore began with the two Peters working closely in the initial six-month period to

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<sup>113</sup> Gillette Elvgren, ‘The Evolution of a Theatrical Style: A Study of the Interrelationship of select regional playwrights, the director, the community and the round stage at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1972), p. 233.

<sup>114</sup> Ron Daniels, *Interview with Ron Daniels* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2017).

<sup>115</sup> Cheeseman (1964).

<sup>116</sup> Derek Paget, ‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1987), pp. 317-336 (p. 317).

<sup>117</sup> Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 42.

<sup>118</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xiv.

unearth as much primary source material as was available. Whilst this involved a range of historical documents from press cuttings to minutes of board meetings, *The Knotty* was also the first time that oral testimony was used as a primary source, since the subject matter had taken place in recent history. Whilst both *The Jolly Potters* (1964) and *The Staffordshire Rebels* (1965) had dealt with Staffordshire's more distant past, the 1800s and 1600s respectively, *The Knotty* centred on the North Staffordshire railway line, only relatively recently amalgamated in 1923 and still known locally as 'The Knotty' because of its symbolic Staffordshire knot logo. Cheeseman and Terson were therefore able to conduct a series of recorded interviews with ex-employees of the Knotty and members of the community who had vivid memories of the local line. Actors became involved with the research after the preliminary work had been completed. Interestingly, in a recent interview, Terson noted that he felt better equipped than many of the actors to interview members of the community:

My research was different from the actors, you know. To me, I was just talking naturally 'what was it like?' you know ... they weren't as good as me just to talk to people.<sup>119</sup>

Terson's ability to discover real stories in the community and to record the conversations allowed the documentaries to become increasingly relevant to the district, as the actors were able to use typical Potteries' phrases or speech patterns in their delivery. Cheeseman's inspiration for using the tape recorder came chiefly from the BBC Radio Ballads, originally produced in 1958 by Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. One such, *The Ballad of John Axon*, told the story of a steam-locomotive driver from Stockport, who had refused to abandon his runaway train, and lost his own life in order to save many others. It was the first to marry the

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Terson, *Interview with Peter Terson* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2018).

ballad form with actual tape recordings of Axon's family and colleagues. Well-received by listeners, *The Ballad of John Axon* became the first in a series of eight radio ballads produced by Parker at the BBC between 1957 and 1964. The ballads were never planned as a series, and the programmes varied considerably in their subject matter, with stories taken from a range of communities, from fishing villages to miners, travellers to polio sufferers. However, their distinctive style could be traced throughout, particularly, the variety of regional accents ingeniously edited together with music and sound effects from the communities. At a time when the voice of the BBC remained an upper-class, southern English accent, to hear authentic regional voices rather than words spoken by an actor was ground-breaking in itself. Many have argued that the *Radio Ballads* 'shaped the work of a generation of musicians, broadcasters and media writers, for whom they were a benchmark'<sup>120</sup> and in a programme celebrating their anniversary Sean Street argued that 'it's not too much of an exaggeration to say it changed the face, or the sound of radio'.<sup>121</sup> MacColl recognised their influence on the work of Theatre Workshop too:

Recording for radio ballads led to the conclusion that educated people use language for the purpose of hiding behind it, non-educated people tend to use the language for expressing both their feelings and their ideas at the same time.<sup>122</sup>

For Cheeseman, this innovative use of the tape-recorder had a distinctly formative effect, and correspondence between the two suggests that Parker remained an important influence as Cheeseman's interest in the documentary style developed. Indeed, in April 1965 Parker led a day's workshop on documentary with the Vic

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<sup>120</sup> Stephen Linstead, 'Exploring culture with The Radio Ballads: using aesthetics to facilitate change', *Management Decision*, 44.4 (2006), pp. 474-485 (p. 476).

<sup>121</sup> Falling Tree Productions, 'Like Blackpool went through Rock', <<https://soundcloud.com/fallingtreeproductions/like-blackpool-went-through-rock>>, [accessed 5 March 2018].

<sup>122</sup> Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 165.



company. The workshop, entitled ‘Day of Rapport Between Theatre-in-the-Round, Stoke and BBC Documentary, Sound & TV’, was held at the theatre and began with forty-five minutes of *Jolly Potters* recordings followed by ‘a critical assessment in discussion with Charles Parker’.<sup>123</sup> After lunch, the company listened and watched extracts from Radio Ballads and documentary films produced by Philip Donnellan; for example, *Sunderland Oak*, a film about shipbuilding (1961) and *On the Long Journey* (1963), a documentary film by Donnellan following a group of young people in Sheffield. The day concluded with a discussion about method.<sup>124</sup> In a letter after the workshop, Cheeseman wrote to Donnellan acclaiming the event:

I know that the film and tapes had a tremendous impact, in fact they are a constant source of conversation since. It was a most unusual occasion and has had an unusual impact. I think we all watched and listened harder than we’ve ever done before, and it all went in very deeply. This is the first time the new permanent company have been all together and the common experience could not have been more valuable.<sup>125</sup>

Cheeseman and Donnellan’s relationship developed still further when Donnellan decided to produce a BBC film of the company in rehearsal for *The Staffordshire Rebels* later that year.<sup>126</sup>

Interestingly, David Watt argues that it was not only the *Radio Ballads* that influenced Cheeseman, but also Parker’s contribution to community theatre with his adaptation of the *Radio Ballads*, *The Maker and the Tool*, which were staged as part of the Centre 42 festivals in 1961-2.<sup>127</sup> Certainly, there is a clear link with Parker’s

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<sup>123</sup> Peter Cheeseman notes on ‘A Day of Rapport Between Theatre-in-the-Round, Stoke and BBC Documentary, Sound & TV’, 25 April 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Philip Donnellan, 20 April 1965, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>126</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*.

<sup>127</sup> Centre 42 organised an arts festival in Wellingborough in 1961 (which included Parker’s production of *The Maker and the Tool*) and the following year the festival performed in six different towns. The company opened their base at the Roundhouse in 1964. After running up considerable debts and facing criticism from both right and left-wing voices, however, Arnold Wesker announced the termination of Centre 42 in 1970.

fascination with actuality and the methods Cheeseman eventually employed. In a lecture describing his approach to the first Radio Ballad, Parker explained that he had planned to dramatise the story of Axon, only visiting his widow and colleagues to gather more information and yet, he found their language so rich that he set upon another course:

The phrase he [another railway worker] used, ‘the railways...’ it’s a tradition, a way of life, ‘the railways go to the back of your spine like Blackpool goes through rock’ and this made me realise that I didn’t need to go to dramatists nor to go to actors to get material to be a direct ingredient in a dramatic radio performance. I could go straight to the people and the language of the people.<sup>128</sup>

*The Knotty* then was the perfect opportunity for Cheeseman and Terson to begin to experiment with incorporating oral history testimony into their research and final production. One of the starting points of the documentary was the reminiscence of Harry Sharratt, a retired train driver on the North Staffordshire railway line, who was on the Victoria Theatre staff.<sup>129</sup> Cheeseman and Terson realised that they had a valuable resource in the memories of Sharratt, not only for the information he provided but also in the richness of his delivery which could be captured on the portable tape recorder. His recorded voice is used over the loudspeaker to open the scene, ‘Knocking Up’:

If you were cleaning on the night shift at about three a.m. they would give you written instructions to go and knock up four or five drivers and firemen, all at different times.<sup>130</sup>

This excerpt of actuality was interspersed with action on stage and led into the two actors singing

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<sup>128</sup> ‘The Charles Parker Archive Trust’

<[http://www.cpatrust.org.uk/mp3/Charles\\_Parker.mp3](http://www.cpatrust.org.uk/mp3/Charles_Parker.mp3)>, [accessed 5 March 2018].

<sup>129</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. 94.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

‘The Moon Song’, a favourite Edwardian ballad which Frank Oakes (traffic) and Harry Sharratt (driver) told us they used to sing together in the shunting yards and on the footplate on the night shift.<sup>131</sup>

In the notes to the scene, ‘Len Preston’s Grandad’, Cheeseman recognised one of the difficulties of working with oral testimony. In this scene, the recorded voice of Len Preston, one of the first Knotty veterans to be recorded by Terson, was played over the loudspeaker whilst the actors silently demonstrated the actions he described:

The scene was created from a section of the tape recording of the original interview but had to be re-recorded to improve the audibility of the recording with a little loss of spontaneity. This is one of the hazards of this kind of work, as the careful circumstances which get the best results from a quality point of view often inhibit the person being interviewed.<sup>132</sup>

Cheeseman was clearly aware of the loss of authenticity in re-recording but equally, there was a necessity to ensure the recordings were audible. The comment alone serves as an example of Cheeseman’s attention to detail and his observance of the authority of the source material. Indeed, in a later interview, he recalled his increasingly exacting approach after meeting with the BBC team:

When I met Charles Parker and Philip Donnellan ... they drove me in a direction to which I was already pre-disposed, that the important thing was the authority of actuality, and it became very clear that you can’t get an actor to read a history book and then improvise attitudes with any real authority.<sup>133</sup>

Cheeseman’s view had shifted. Whilst the earlier documentaries had been based largely on primary source material, there remained a disclaimer in the programme of *The Jolly Potters*:

Some of the scenes are imaginative or comic reconstructions in our own words, but the story is always a true one.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. 92.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>133</sup> Graham Woodruff, ‘Nice Girls’: the Vic Gives a Voice to Women of the Working Class’, *New Theatre Quarterly* 11.42 (1995), pp. 109-127 (p. 114).

<sup>134</sup> Programme for *The Jolly Potters* (1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

From *The Knotty* (1966) onwards, however, Cheeseman abandoned his use of improvisation in the documentary, believing that the practice undermined the truthful representation of the material. The concept of truth is in itself a complex one and Cheeseman was not unaware of the difficulties that faced him and his company. As Thomas Postlewait and Charlotte M. Canning acknowledge in their essay on 'Representing the Past', truth becomes a thorny issue:

The aim of telling the truth about past events is a necessary first principle of historical inquiry, but whose truth, what truth, which truth? Many truths deserve and require representation.<sup>135</sup>

Cheeseman approached the task prudently, mindful of the company's responsibility in representing a variety of interpretations of past events, whilst still maintaining a coherent and entertaining plot line. In order to ensure that a 'multiplicity of voices'<sup>136</sup> was heard, Cheeseman developed a process which he referred to as

a kind of inverted pyramid, gradually involving more and more people till the middle of rehearsals, when the entire company is directly contributing to the making of the show.<sup>137</sup>

Within three months of production, with the repertoire again organised so as to include a very small cast play immediately before the documentary, Cheeseman and the resident writer would present their research findings to a 'research committee', the remainder of the company who were not involved in the small cast production<sup>138</sup>:

This is a process in which a committee has an extremely important creative function. Providing that every member of the research committee has listened to or read all the collected material, then those people are allowed to participate in the discussion whose end product is the structure of the piece.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>136</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xv.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>139</sup> Cheeseman (1986), p. 8.

For Cheeseman, this collective approach was essential since it lessened the possibility of a subjective presentation of the facts and

tends to preserve the contradiction of viewpoint inherent in every historical event, controlled as it is by a number of people.<sup>140</sup>

That is not to suggest that Cheeseman was not ultimately in charge. Barbara Day, Production Secretary in 1970, remembers Cheeseman's exacting standards whilst researching the life of Hugh Bourne for *The Burning Mountain* (1970):

I remember once there was a book, I think an 18<sup>th</sup> century book, that none of the libraries had and was very difficult to get hold of and Peter going off to London for a few days and saying 'I want that book on my desk when I'm back on Monday!' and I didn't actually have it on his desk but by the time he got back on Monday, I'd tracked down two local people who actually had copies of the book and I could tell him it was coming.<sup>141</sup>

The production, which was the company's fifth documentary, charted the life of Hugh Bourne (1772-1852). Bourne was born and raised in Stoke-on-Trent and was founder of the Primitive Methodist movement. The source material was dense and difficult and yet Cheeseman was not deterred. He relished the challenge in making such difficult subject material accessible for his audiences. Indeed, Daniels describes how Cheeseman 'thrived on... the whole organisation and the administration let alone the sort of conception of the documentaries'.<sup>142</sup>

It is interesting to note too that Cheeseman never claimed authorship of the documentaries, always insisting that they were formed collectively. This chimes with MacColl's ideals of achieving anonymity through collective work:

The controlling notion for Theatre Workshop was that *all* aspects of production, including writing, were essentially *collective*, a concept born in pre-war days... 'My ideal,' says MacColl, 'was the anonymous author, the anonymous song-writer, and you only achieve anonymity by becoming part of the whole'.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xiv.

<sup>141</sup> Barbara Day (née Gartside), *Interview with Barbara Day (née Gartside)* (interviewed by the author, 13 November 2017).

<sup>142</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>143</sup> Paget (1990), p. 67.

However, Howard Goorney's memories of the early days of Theatre Workshop suggest the writing was only collective to a point:

We were each given a specific subject – say, the Gresford Pit disaster – went off to the Reference Library, and came back with as much information as possible, in the form of facts, not just comment or opinion. Ewan and Joan would decide on the most effective way of presenting each scene, and Ewan would write it.<sup>144</sup>

For Cheeseman, however, it was essential that actors had full responsibility for their material from rehearsal through to production. James Hayes, in his memoir *Shouting in the Evenings*, recalls the process:

No-one gets a script, just a blank notebook. The two Peters, Cheeseman and Terson, have a proposed story and a rough theatrical shape in which to tell it. It consists of a running list, detailing the subject of each scene and song, and the order in which they will appear in the show. Small groups of actors are then allotted certain scenes and are showered with all the research material related to them. They then work as a group and begin the creative process.<sup>145</sup>

Whilst the benefits of this collective endeavour are apparent, being 'showered with research material' must have been daunting, particularly when the company's time constraints were taken into consideration: the company had only five or six weeks to create and rehearse the production.<sup>146</sup>

### **Acting in the documentary**

This level of anxiety within a relatively inexperienced group of actors had the potential to be extremely damaging but in the Stoke company there remained a belief in the project as a whole, as explained in the 1965 BBC film by a young Ben

Kingsley:

I'm worried for myself but I'm not worried for the show. I think it will work. I think you can draw a graph of rehearsals anyway – sort of starts up here and

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<sup>144</sup> Goorney (1981), p. 22.

<sup>145</sup> James Hayes, *Shouting in the Evenings* (Cornwall: Troubadour Publishing Ltd, 2016), p. 123.

<sup>146</sup> Gillette Elvgren, 'Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent', *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1, March 1974, p. 92.

then goes down and starts climbing up again and I think we're just on the up climb now. Two days ago we were right at the bottom – it was pretty depressing but it's going to be alright.<sup>147</sup>

It could be argued that this blind faith that 'it's going to be alright' exemplified the total belief that the company held in their director. Day remembers the beginning of rehearsals for the documentary:

They began with everyone coming on stage, really, the whole cast and sort of sitting around in a rather forlorn way because we were beginning from nothing, or not from nothing but it's like a tangle of wool and you don't know which end to get hold of first.<sup>148</sup>

It was essential then that in response to this 'tangle', there was a clear leader.

Cheeseman was comfortable in this role. As Daniels remembers, there was

the sense of putting everything together from scratch and huge enterprise all over the place... he kept his cool and calm and found his way into this huge excess of material.<sup>149</sup>

In an early scene in the BBC film, we see an example of this leadership played out.

The company sit in the auditorium whilst Cheeseman paces up and down one edge of the square stage, almost in the role of university lecturer, and the acting company as his wide-eyed, eager students. His enthusiastic introduction to the material gives some insight perhaps into the actors' underlying belief in the project:

Ladies and gentlemen, investigate the material as actors not as university dons – don't feel you've got to wear another hat... your yardstick when you're selecting material is 'Can I make this work? Can I come on the stage and do this effectively? ... If you are using the sense of truthfulness that guides you in the rest of your work then what we shall say about the Civil War will be valid and relevant and exciting and entertaining.'<sup>150</sup>

It is interesting that Cheeseman calls on his young actors to view the material through their own eyes. Whilst this was perhaps intended to allay any intellectual fears actors may have had about approaching such material, it also suggests that the historical

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<sup>147</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*.

<sup>148</sup> Day (2017).

<sup>149</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>150</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*.

material was somehow reinvigorated by the actors' youthfulness. In giving the actors a certain level of autonomy over the selection of material and encouraging their fresh presentation of the events, Cheeseman was able to arrive at an end-product that was 'relevant and exciting'. Indeed, he noted in 1966 that 'we've got young audiences at this theatre' and 'they like this kind of thing very much'.<sup>151</sup>

Certainly the acting company remembered working on the documentaries with fondness. In a recent interview with Paul Elsam, Kingsley still recalls *The Staffordshire Rebels* as 'a beautiful documentary' with 'beautiful songs, and delightfully bizarre sequences',<sup>152</sup> while Hayes remembers his involvement in *The Knotty* as 'a highlight in my life'.<sup>153</sup> In the same way that working in-the-round encouraged collaboration amongst the actors, the documentary process drew the company together in solidarity, since there was no opportunity for any one actor to take a star turn. The actors seemed bound together by their shared apprehension and exhilaration and in interviews, many have reflected on their time working on the documentaries as thrilling and educational.<sup>154</sup>

Cheeseman recognised the scale of the task that he was presenting to his actors. In one interview he described the 'white hair and ulcers' that the documentary process induced in an actor; however, he was entirely committed to this strict approach to the material and privileging the 'authority of actuality'.<sup>155</sup> Rather than employing Littlewood's techniques to display this actuality on screen projections, as in *Oh What a Lovely War*, Cheeseman was determined that the actor should be the primary

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<sup>151</sup> John Stevenson, 'Cities find drama in their own backyards', *Daily Mail*, August 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>152</sup> Ben Kingsley, *Interview with Ben Kingsley* (interviewed by Paul Elsam, July 2008), Elsam archive.

<sup>153</sup> Hayes (2016), p. 131.

<sup>154</sup> Daniels (2017), Chris Martin, *Interview with Chris Martin* (interviewed by the author, 10 April 2017), Hillary Griffiths (née Weaver), *Interview with Hillary Griffiths (Weaver)* (interviewed by the author, 16 October, 2017) and Jasmine Warwick, *Interview with Jasmine Warwick* (interviewed by the author, 9 October 2017).

<sup>155</sup> Woodruff (1995), p. 114.



vehicle, by which the audience recognised that they were watching the presentation of factual material:

In our simply converted theatre in the round projection is technically complex and expensive. It seemed to me in any case not to be an essential element of theatre documentary, though the development of a new and special style of acting which honestly exposed the factual quality of the material did.<sup>156</sup>

Actors would read extracts and the full citations from original documents and would make a number of costume changes in full view of the audience to further emphasise the fact that actors were a representation of historical characters. The stress was always on communicating the information rather than spending extensive work on character acting. Daniels recalls that

these documentaries weren't things that required great acting that's not what they were about, they were all essentially about instant performances.<sup>157</sup>

Chris Martin too suggested that even in performing as Harry Sharratt in *The Knotty*, he was 'just representing him really'.<sup>158</sup> To some extent there is an element of Brechtian distancing in Cheeseman's style, and whilst he never claimed to follow any particular directorial methodology, he was undoubtedly influenced by the work of the Berliner Ensemble.<sup>159</sup> Cheeseman encouraged his company to develop a particular style of acting for the documentary, urging actors to present the material rather than to act it. Bill Morrison explained Cheeseman's advice:

You are merely picking up a character for a few minutes to display and then set down. The basic reality on the stage is not the reality of the character you play, but your own existence. The first statement that is always made is that "Here I am, an actor on the stage, and I am going to show you things".<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xii.

<sup>157</sup> Daniels (2017).

<sup>158</sup> Martin (2017).

<sup>159</sup> Cheeseman saw *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* while he was on officer training and remembers it having a profound effect on him. The Vic also presented the premiere of the English performance of *Drums in the Night* in September 1969, translated by Richard Bleckley.

<sup>160</sup> Elvgren (1974), p. 94.

To some extent the advice was almost contradictory – Cheeseman was advocating ‘truthfulness’ whilst discouraging ‘straining after irrelevant characterisation’; however, the ‘truthfulness’ seemed to be that of ‘your own existence’ rather than in the portrayal of a character.<sup>161</sup> Cheeseman advocated forming a ‘totally candid and honest basic relationship with the audience to start with’, in order that the audience was aware of the factual information and able to follow the events as they took place, rather than engaging with any one particular character.<sup>162</sup> The slight paradox arises, however, in that actors felt more connected to individual characters after interviewing and researching them. A. Rauthman, for example, who was part of the 1970 company of *The Burning Mountain*, suggested that

in this play you have probed the depths of the character by the research you have done...so you know him in that way, you have written his lines, you know him in far greater depth. The lines have been created through the script, they are your lines. They are lines of people you know, you interviewed them.<sup>163</sup>

In his advice to the actors before the first night of *The Staffordshire Rebels*, however, Cheeseman gave a stark warning:

A great deal of this show is engrossing because of the information you are giving people and not because of something emotionally exciting that you are doing in itself. Now as you’re getting a grip of it, there is a dangerous tendency starting, to hog certain scenes emotionally... Now unless each one of you is actually conveying the sense of what you’re saying to the audience on every line, no matter what an orgy you may be getting out of it, the show will be an utter failure.<sup>164</sup>

Again, Cheeseman re-iterated the importance of the actor as the ‘principal instrument’ in relating the facts to the audience. Their job was to present information clearly rather than engender a particular sympathy for their character. That is not to say that

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<sup>161</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. 85.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p. xvii.

<sup>163</sup> Caroline Turner, ‘Peter Cheeseman’s work at the Old and New Victoria Theatres: a consideration of community theatre’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1995), p. 106.

<sup>164</sup> *Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*.

the documentaries were devoid of feeling, rather that any emotion experienced by the audience was to come directly as a response to the material rather than by any elaborate performance by an actor.

### **Role of the Writer in the Documentary**

The role of the resident writer within the documentary process was an unfamiliar one, in which the writer became principal researcher only. Cheeseman, in an article for *Documentary Arts Report* explained this:

Nothing is pre-determined by a writer. Our writers will lead the research and uncover the documents and memories on which the shows will be based: nothing more.<sup>165</sup>

The writer became someone who was extremely useful in the research team, but for his understanding of how the material could be produced on stage rather than for their writing ability. Cheeseman:

You can't write a documentary – it's a contradiction in terms. You can only edit documentary material.<sup>166</sup>

That is not to say that Cheeseman undervalued his writers. Indeed, he was keen to acknowledge the importance of new writing in the company's repertoire in his introduction to the published edition of *The Knotty*:

Many writers construe the present fashion for documentary theatre as an attack on the status and validity of the writer in the theatre. May I emphatically disassociate myself from such a viewpoint and admit I cannot share the intolerance of writers' plays which some of my professional theatre colleagues have expressed in order to propose the excellence of documentaries. In any one year here we present about fourteen new productions, of which only one is likely to be a documentary like *The Knotty*.<sup>167</sup>

In order to maintain this large number of new productions at the theatre, it was essential that writers felt engaged and inspired by the region and by the style of work

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<sup>165</sup> Cheeseman (May 1968).

<sup>166</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 223.

<sup>167</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. vii.

being produced at the Vic. The documentaries then, were as useful to writers as an exercise as they were in embedding the theatre in the district. In involving writers in the research process, Cheeseman was allowing them to not only get to know the district and its history and meet local residents during interviews, but also he was presenting them with a potentially new way of undertaking the writing process as a whole. In Elvgren's article, Cheeseman elaborated on this intention:

I want to show writers possible ways of doing things other than the naturalistic, because I think writers are very often bound by the conventions which they have seen. They need to see things on the stage and then they write a play like that. I do not intend them to copy the whole style of the documentary, I just intend to show them, 'Look, this is how you can have a battle on stage', or 'this is a relationship between a song and stage action'. The structure, I felt, was never as important as its parts. It does not say, 'I want you to write like this other writer here'. It's our invitation – 'Look, this is the kind of thing I am working towards, does that grab you?'<sup>168</sup>

It is almost as if the documentaries were a representation of the theatre's philosophy and if that did not 'grab you' then there was little reason to pursue an artistic connection. Writers brought useful skills to the research team, and many who became resident at the Vic could be said to be influenced by the Stoke method. Terson, for example, was directly influenced by his research work on *The Knotty*:

Out of that technique of looking for material and writing a play with that material came *Jock-on-the-Go*... You know, the technique of speaking directly to the audience, the rapid change of scenes, singing and all that.<sup>169</sup>

Those techniques were used to great acclaim in many of Terson's subsequent plays for example, in his television play *The Last Train through Harecastle Tunnel* (1969), and in his acclaimed play for the National Youth Theatre, *Zigger Zagger* (1970). Not only did Terson use material that he amassed whilst researching *The Knotty* for *The Last Train*, he was also stylistically influenced by the documentaries with John

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<sup>168</sup> Elvgren (1974), p. 98.

<sup>169</sup> Elvgren (1972), p. 382.

Russell Taylor describing it as ‘picaresque, following its railway-obsessed young hero through a succession of strange encounters’<sup>170</sup> and Michael Croft praising *Zigger Zagger* for its ‘directness’.<sup>171</sup> Similarly, Cheeseman claimed that both Tony Perrin and Ken Campbell were directly influenced by the documentary style and each ‘responded in subsequent plays in their own highly original and personal way’.<sup>172</sup> Other writers associated with the theatre also experimented with the style. Alan Plater, for example, produced two musical documentaries for stage and screen, *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968) and *Don’t Build a Bridge, Drain the River* (1970). Joyce Holliday, as mentioned previously, enjoyed a successful writing career which was hugely influenced by the documentary style.<sup>173</sup> Bob Eaton too, who began his career as Assistant Director to Cheeseman in 1971, went on to enjoy success with the musical form and was clearly influenced by the documentary style.<sup>174</sup> It is almost impossible to reference every influenced writer here, particularly as the influence may not always be direct. Derek Paget:

Work such as Charles Parker’s and even Cheeseman’s is now often being received by younger practitioners through the *tradition* it established, rather than from direct experience of the work itself.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Keith Plant, ‘A Tale of Two Tersons’, unpublished article, held at Victoria Theatre Collection and John Russell Taylor, *The Second Wave: British Drama of the Sixties* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 121.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p. 393.

<sup>172</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 79.

<sup>173</sup> Holliday wrote twenty-four half-hour programmes for BBC Radio Stoke on the local mining industry, and on North Staffordshire during the First World War, all of which were based on recorded interviews. She produced a number of documentary plays for the New Vic, for Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre and for television, including *The Women’s Story* (1979) *What Did You Do in the War, Mummy?* (1985), *Anywhere to Anywhere* (1985) and *It’s a Bit Lively Outside* (1987).

<sup>174</sup> Bob Eaton was Associate Director at the New Vic, Stoke and has been Artistic Director of three theatre companies: The Liverpool Everyman, The Coventry Belgrade and The London Bubble. He has written and co-written over twenty plays and musicals, a number of which have documentary influences, for example, *Lennon* (1982) which only used quotes from other people about John Lennon to create the production and *I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire*, a musical based on the munitions factory workers and written with the help of the Roses of Swynnerton, a group of women who worked at a Staffordshire munitions factory in WW2.

<<https://www.bobeatontheatredirector.com>>, [accessed 18 March 2019].

<sup>175</sup> Paget (1987), p. 319.

However, whether it is conscious emulation or not, it is hard to imagine the subsequent wave of documentary drama occurring in regional theatre without the example set in Stoke-on-Trent.

### **Stories in the community and *Fight for Shelton Bar***

One of Cheeseman's principal aims in creating the documentaries was to demonstrate the theatre's genuine interest in the people of Stoke-on-Trent and their livelihoods:

I believe it is very important ...to give utterance to the voice of the community itself, to tell stories from within the community that would not otherwise be heard, to deal with important local issues in depth and detail.<sup>176</sup>

It seems that Cheeseman's concern with authentic depiction was as much about doing justice to the community stories that were being staged, as it was about creating an effective production. The stories themselves often grew out of the company making genuine connections with people in the North Staffordshire district. *The Knotty* (1966) was based largely on the memories of Vic employee Harry Sharratt; *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971) depicted the memories of Frank Bayley, the newsagent who worked opposite the theatre and sold the actors their cigarettes and newspapers, and who had been a prisoner of war in Italy; and *Miner Dig the Coal* (1981) was created after Cheeseman struck up a rapport with the miners at Hem Heath Colliery during the theatre's touring roadshows. A significant milestone in the theatre's relationship with the community occurred with the Vic's involvement in the campaign to save Shelton Bar Iron and Steelworks in 1973.<sup>177</sup> It was particularly notable since

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<sup>176</sup> *Full Theatre Policy Document: New Victoria Theatre*, 1988, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>177</sup> The campaign was a protracted battle between the Shelton Works Action Committee and the British Steel Corporation over the Corporation's plans to close down steel-making at the Shelton site. The Victoria Theatre became involved in 1973 and the documentary was produced in 1974, remaining in the theatre's repertoire for over a year. Whilst the campaign arguably slowed the closure of the site, nevertheless, in 1978 the main plant was closed. The rolling mill continued to operate until its closure in 2000.

the Action Committee approached the theatre to ask them to create a documentary about their appeal, rather than in previous instances in which Cheeseman had conceived the projects. Here was the first example of the community utilising the theatre as a public service. The proverbial ‘corner theatre’, as useful to the working life of the people of Stoke-on-Trent as the corner shop or newsagent. Unsurprisingly, Cheeseman responded warmly, and immediately visited the Action Committee at the steelworks. Albert Cooper, a steelworker who became closely involved with the theatre after *Fight for Shelton Bar*, remembers his initial reaction to the idea of the documentary:

We were very suspicious of, well I was particularly ... I couldn't imagine a musical about a boring, you know ... we didn't have a campaign that was based on marches and demonstrations and whatever, it was all based on logic. On reports and paperwork and so on, loads of it, which I was involved in. I couldn't imagine how you could make that into a musical.<sup>178</sup>

Typically, however, Cheeseman was able to take this seemingly dry campaign and inject it with human stories and compassion. In the published edition to *Fight for Shelton Bar*, Cheeseman summarised his interpretation of the campaign:

But this is what the fight was for - to preserve a precious human institution that was harmonious and industrially efficient. This is the kind of works where there are often three generations of the same family working together, and a network of uncles, brothers, grandfathers, sons, sisters and brothers-in-law stretching across its 3,000 workers.<sup>179</sup>

Immediately, Cheeseman provided the human interest in a story which hitherto had not galvanised the locality, despite the two-year campaign of the Action Committee, which had attempted to raise awareness of the potential loss of 2,000 jobs and an increase in the unemployment of Stoke-on-Trent by 3%.<sup>180</sup> That is not to say, however, that Cheeseman focused on the human angle and disregarded the material

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<sup>178</sup> Albert Cooper, *Interview with Albert Cooper* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

<sup>179</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Fight for Shelton Bar* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), p. 51.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

produced at Shelton. Indeed, it could be said that Cheeseman was drawn to the poetry and drama inherent in the industrial setting, viewing steelworks and railways and mines not as industries separate to the arts but as close collaborators. There is a sense that for Cheeseman, art and industry should be indivisible, the one feeding the other in a cycle of inspiration.

The research and production of *Fight for Shelton Bar* further embedded Cheeseman's respect for industry, which he documented in the published edition:

All the years I had worked in Stoke I had passed Shelton bar on my way to Hanley to shop, and thought to myself how lucky I was to be in an exciting and fulfilling job compared to what I imagined was the mucky drudgery of the steelworks. The revelation to me was the attachment that the steelmen had to their jobs, mixed with pride, with real dignity, sometimes even exultation. Around the edge are the inevitable Wanderers and drifters. At the core is a total and historic dedication. It is very hard to convey this quality to middle-class people whose understandings are distorted by the shallow philosophies of commerce.<sup>181</sup>

In this sense, the documentary became not only about the Action Committee's struggle but also an opportunity to enlighten the often middle-class theatre-goers about the passion behind the steelworks. Cheeseman wanted to tell his audiences that the steel industry was not something to be denounced as 'mucky drudgery', but something which should be celebrated in their community as a historic, distinguished profession. After hours of recording and careful research at the plant, with the steelworkers and their families, *Fight for Shelton Bar* was first produced in 1974 and stayed in the company's repertoire for around a year until the Action Committee succeeded in their fight to save the steelworks, albeit for a short time only.

*Fight for Shelton Bar* was the first of the documentaries that was more directly political since it was concerned with events that were unfolding as the production was staged. Each night after the performance, a member of the Action Committee would

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<sup>181</sup> Cheeseman (1977), p. 56.



stand up and address the audience to explain the current state of the campaign. Baz

Kershaw:

The threat to the works was an ironic kind of luck for Peter Cheeseman, for it happened at just the historical point when the Stoke documentaries had reached a kind of sophisticated maturity, able to handle complex socio-political situations with more than a modicum of theatrical clarity.<sup>182</sup>

Certainly, the process became increasingly complex since the company were having to manage a constantly shifting plot. This was dealt with effectively with, for example, Attilio Favorini claiming that

not despite but because of the wonderful hesitations, digressions, and repetitions into dialogue, and the start and stop of the action, the script generates tremendous tension and emotion.<sup>183</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman was keen not to take credit for the outcome of the campaign, the Action Committee felt that the documentary did have a hand in its initial success. It spread the word in the district and later initiated a televised BBC production in November 1974, thus raising the national profile of the campaign too. Cooper, for example, remembered one evening when Sir Monty Finniston, Chairman of British Steel, arrived in Stoke to watch the performance and agreed to address the audience at the end, providing there was no prior warning given to the media.<sup>184</sup>

Whilst *Fight for Shelton Bar* had a direct agenda, then, generally Cheeseman aimed to avoid such overtly political topics for the documentary. Watt argues that Cheeseman's productions shared something of Parker's vision of presenting the community back to itself, without any deliberate shaping of the material: an "associational" technique

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<sup>182</sup> Baz Kershaw, 'Theatre and Community: Alternative and Community Theatre in Britain, 1960-1985; An investigation into cultural history and performance efficacy (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 1991), p. 250.

<sup>183</sup> Attilio Favorini, ed., *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (Michigan: Ecco Press, 1995), p. xxxii.

<sup>184</sup> Cooper (2018).

rather than the didactic mode of conventional left-wing documentary'.<sup>185</sup> Certainly, Cheeseman claimed that his documentaries deliberately avoided taking a political standpoint:

I believe in the power of the artist, but I believe his job is something that is important in itself. It is not a function of politics, a manipulation of power. Art is independent of education, it lives on its own....The important part of the artist's credentials is that he should be completely independent. He must be free from any association with a formal political alignment, otherwise he has lost his credence. Who will believe him? Year in and year out we learn that politicians tell lies. For the sake of a long-term relationship to a community the artist must keep himself free. ... We have to find a way of asking disturbing questions which do not take a single viewpoint or single political alignment.<sup>186</sup>

For Cheeseman then the purpose of his documentaries was primarily to embed the theatre within the Potteries' landscape, for the community to recognise themselves on stage and believe that the company was interested in them and their stories. Whilst Cheeseman had been influenced to some extent by the style of the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) of the 1930s, particularly in their bare stages and 'montages of mime and song',<sup>187</sup> in his overall philosophy he could not have been more different from the WTM's ideology which Raphael Samuel describes:

All art was propaganda and the theatre itself a splendid weapon of struggle, both as a means of consciousness-raising and of dramatizing specific issues. They rejected what they called the 'theatre of illusion' and instead put forward a theatre of ideas.<sup>188</sup>

For Cheeseman, in contrast, the play ultimately must serve as entertainment rather than agitation. Whilst it could be argued that later documentaries at Stoke, such as *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974), *The Dirty Hill* (1990) and *Nice Girls* (1993) did become 'weapons of struggle', Cheeseman's main body of documentary work could be

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<sup>185</sup> David Watt, 'The Maker and the Tool: Charles Parker, Documentary Performance, and the Search for a Popular Culture', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 19.1 (2003), pp. 41-66 (p. 46).

<sup>186</sup> Elvgren (1974), p. 91.

<sup>187</sup> Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 46.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

described as ‘socially conscious rather than politically engaged’, a distinction that Samuel made between left-wing dramas of the early 1900s and the WTM of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>189</sup> In an interview with Robin Soans, Cheeseman explained:

I never believed that a theatre performance was likely to make somebody change their vote. But I do think that we can help to create a positive social environment and a higher level of self-regard for the members of a community making it more likely that they will vote at all.<sup>190</sup>

Cheeseman was central to the beginning of a movement which became increasingly politicised, but he deliberately avoided being labelled as such. Catherine Itzin argues the importance of Cheeseman’s work but suggested that he was ‘only peripherally related to the “mainstream” political theatre movement’,<sup>191</sup> while Kershaw in his unpublished dissertation argues that Cheeseman was on the ‘fringe of alternative theatre, or, more accurately perhaps, the margins of the mainstream’.<sup>192</sup> Arguably, however, a position on the ‘margins of the mainstream’ is inherently political; the cultural marginalisation of communities such as Stoke-on-Trent was the very topic that Cheeseman was aiming to address. His aim in producing the documentaries was to encourage ‘that sense of pride and self-confidence that every district outside London desperately needs’, and was primarily concerned with giving a voice to the largely overlooked working-class community.<sup>193</sup> Topics, whilst chosen for their local interest, were always viewed through a socially progressive lens, with for example, *The Jolly Potters* examining the dire working and living conditions for the lower classes in the 1890s, and *The Knotty* depicting the life of railway workers on the North Staffordshire railway line. *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* and later *Fight for Shelton Bar, Miner Dig the Coal, The Dirty Hill* and *Nice Girls* all

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<sup>189</sup> Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove (1985), p. xviii.

<sup>190</sup> Robin Soans, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: Oberon Books, 2005), p. 104.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>192</sup> Kershaw (1991), p. 212.

<sup>193</sup> Paget (1987), p. 322.

emphasised a working-class perspective. Kershaw describes the Stoke style as ‘an effective form of non-didactic realism’, suggesting that by constructing a specific identity with its community it was resisting the status quo, without being overtly political.<sup>194</sup>

Certainly, the documentaries sit comfortably with the wave of working-class voices that were steadily coming to the fore in literature and on stage and screen during the late 1950s and 60s. Whilst it is too simplistic to suggest that theatre and the arts were overrun with kitchen-sink dramas and realistic works of fiction alone, there is an undeniable trend in writing of the New Wave that Dominic Sandbrook identifies:

Like the plays of Wesker or Delaney, New Wave novels focused on the experience of provincial working-class life...The fiction of Alan Sillitoe or Stan Barstow was rooted in the mundane world of ordinary everyday lives, concerned not with innovative literary technique but with rendering the experience and character of the working class in realistic terms.<sup>195</sup>

It was this realism that Cheeseman was concerned with in his depiction of the Stoke-on-Trent community, being keen to portray it accurately using residents’ own words and voices, rather than shaping historical events for a particular political end.

Cheeseman’s agenda was left-wing in the sense that it was about fighting for the under-dog, championing culture in an industrial Northern region over the prevailing dominance of London and yet, he was resistant to the forming of overtly political ties to a particular party. Arguably, this lack of alignment may be one reason why Cheeseman’s work has not been memorialised in quite the same way as other ‘alternative’ theatre companies, 7:84, for example, that were allied strongly to a political cause.

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<sup>194</sup> Kershaw (1991), p. 258.

<sup>195</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* (London, Little, Brown, 2005), p. 186.

## Stage Design in the Documentaries

Where the documentaries were concerned with recent history, Cheeseman was careful to engage the subjects of the documentary directly, not only interviewing them but also inviting them into rehearsals to ensure the authenticity of the events depicted, and to further embed the theatre in the North Staffordshire district. This collaboration with the documentary subjects was therefore essential if the company was to be successful in their accurate portrayals of complicated industrial processes. It was this attention to detail that allowed an audience to be entirely immersed in the action without the need for complicated stage sets. Photographs document the involvement of steelworkers in rehearsals for *Fight for Shelton Bar* and in the published edition, Cheeseman explained how particular scenes were created:

After we had spent a lot of time at the blast furnace, Tom Bevington came into rehearsals to watch our attempts to reproduce the processes, showed the actors carefully how to spread the sand to reline the runner, how to place the tools to warm them before they touched the molten iron, how to take a sample and cast it, how to stand near the furnace. By gradual reduction as we worked on the scene, all the inessential physical components were removed, so that there wasn't a mass of objects to be got rid of for the next scenes, and more important, so that the action was clear to the audience with only enough visual elements to explain and to stimulate a real imaginative participation in it.<sup>196</sup>

To a certain extent, this was a Cheeseman speciality - the ability to create the illusion of reality out of seemingly thin air. Working in-the-round enabled him to focus the audience's attention, as Graham Woodruff notes in his analysis of the 1993 Vic documentary *Nice Girls*: 'it can represent nowhere, everywhere or somewhere special'.<sup>197</sup> His productions were often remembered as strangely evocative, playing with small cast numbers and relatively bare stage sets. Ronald Hill's review of *The Jolly Potters* described one such example:

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<sup>196</sup> Cheeseman (1977), p. 54.

<sup>197</sup> Woodruff (1995), p. 116.

The actual mob in all its fury were seen for something like ten seconds. Exactly five performers were involved and yet for that brief passage of time I could swear that a cast of thousands had passed before us.<sup>198</sup>

Similarly Steven Granville, eventually an actor with the company, remembered vividly his reaction to *The Knotty* as an audience member:

There was several people on stage and one of them was smoking a cigar. Scene ended, lights changed, off they went and all there was in this thing was the cigar smoke. And then two actors came on who had been watching the scene...and they walked forward and it was a steam engine. Because the way they were leaning and looking with their heads cocked over...the sound of a whistle or a train and I was looking at a steam engine.<sup>199</sup>

It was this aesthetic simplicity and ingenuity that allowed the company to bring potentially dry subject matter to life, sparking the audience's imagination and drawing them into the action. As noted in Chapter One, theatre-in-the-round added to the power of these production aspects since the vicinity of the audience allowed the actors to engage directly with the audience, all of whom they could clearly see from the stage. The design of the space then was fundamental, and the partnership of Cheeseman and Alison Chitty seemed to be particularly effective. Chitty was a design student who arrived at the Vic on an Arts Council bursary in 1970 and stayed for eight years; she developed a particularly minimalist style working with Cheeseman in-the-round. In an interview in 2007, Chitty explained that

I began to see with very economical use of anything physical, like props or furniture, how expressive you could be...I feel like I learned this in Stoke, I believe that to make space for the audience to take part, they have a better time.<sup>200</sup>

Remembering her design for *Fight for Shelton Bar*, Chitty described being part of the research team and that she and Cheeseman 'went overnight once' to the steelworks, in

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<sup>198</sup> Ronald Hill, 'A Memorable Production at Stoke-on-Trent', *Theatre World*, Sep 1964, pp. 23-4, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>199</sup> Granville (2018).

<sup>200</sup> Alison Chitty, *Interview with Alison Chitty* (Interviewed by Elizabeth Wright, 16 July 2007 and 10 October 2007), held at British Library, Sound and Moving Image Collection, Ref Nos C1173/19 and C1173/19A.

order to research the ‘experience’ of working there. Overawed by the height and scale of the factory, Chitty was able to craft plastic walkways that were painted to look like rusting metal and suspend these above the stage to give a sense of this enormity. The floor cloth was spattered with bleach to give the impression of burnt metal and lines of fierce gold and red lights illuminated the entrances, suggestive of molten metal in the furnaces. The floor became, as Chitty described, ‘an incredibly important visual element’ at the Vic, since everyone looked down onto it and therefore it replaced the need for more complicated designs, liberating Chitty and Cheeseman and allowing them to work, as she explained, ‘more sculpturally’.<sup>201</sup>

This sculptural design also increased the importance of sound design for the Vic’s stage, not only in the documentaries but in their productions more broadly.

Cheeseman and his design team paid specific attention to details, ensuring that sound effects were, wherever possible, recorded at the source and songs were of the period.<sup>202</sup> Whether this was the impact of Ayckbourn’s innovative use of sound in *Mr. Whatnot* or Parker, MacColl and Seeger’s pioneering work on the BBC *Radio Ballads*, sound design arguably came to replace the necessity for complicated sets, freeing up the stage and actors, and allowing swift character and scene changes. This was particularly fundamental to the documentary style, since there were often numerous episodic scenes and few characters that ran throughout the whole piece. Cheeseman’s use of sound and music allowed the company to present complex historical or political issues in a relatively simple way. In *The Knotty*, for example, the ‘Pole Dance’ tells the story of how twenty-four railway companies became one: Cheeseman recalled, ‘It was a complicated political, social and economic story, and

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<sup>201</sup> Chitty (2007)

<sup>202</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xvi.

music did that job for us'.<sup>203</sup> At other times, Cheeseman has described music as being 'essential to provide an emotional momentum'.<sup>204</sup> It is easy to overlook the fact that all of Cheeseman's documentary productions were musical documentaries; indeed, music became so important to the company that in 1966, Cheeseman appointed a musical director – Jeff Parton, 'a well-known Potteries folk singer' who learnt the original songs and taught members of the company.<sup>205</sup> In the early productions, the company relied on folk music to punctuate the narrative; as their documentary work progressed, music was carefully selected from the period in question, if any was available, and lyrics were written from the research interviews.

### **Regionality and Response**

Cheeseman's prevailing focus on Stoke-on-Trent ensured that the documentaries were always firmly rooted in the area, with topics being chosen to engage an almost exclusively local audience. In an interview with Judith Cook in 1974, he confirmed this:

We have never made any compromise in the direction of making shows comprehensible to people from outside the district. There is no point – they are our special contribution to its life, and any visitor who drops in must expect to feel like a visitor.<sup>206</sup>

The community responded warmly. Reviews in the local newspaper for *The Jolly Potters*, described the production being 'received with acclamation',<sup>207</sup> whilst the *Daily Mail* reviewer commented on the 'thunderous reception when the misery of the

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<sup>203</sup> Cheeseman (1986), p. 8.

<sup>204</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. vii.

<sup>205</sup> *Evening Sentinel*, 25 August 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>206</sup> Judith Cook, *Directors' Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 33.

<sup>207</sup> R.S. 'Inspired story of Potters' fight for justice', *Evening Sentinel*, 15 July 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.



potbank was over'.<sup>208</sup> Audience correspondence too is suggestive of the positive reception:

May I congratulate your company on a spectacle not only enjoyable but also life enhancing. A sense of occasion, of truth and after being linked vitally to a past that matters to the present made it the stuff from which something larger than just theatre emerges...the hope that the city might become meaningful.<sup>209</sup>

This response was one that seemed to be shared by audience member and non-theatre-goer alike. Cheeseman:

Even that huge mass of people who don't come to the theatre and never intend to seems to contain a large number who regard us fiercely as a cherished local possession.<sup>210</sup>

Although this is hard to quantify, the publicity that the documentaries garnered for the theatre encouraged more favourable articles particularly in the local press, and became fundamental in the community's acceptance of the Vic as part of the Potteries landscape. They were proof that the company was, as Cheeseman described, 'serious about our attachment to the district'.<sup>211</sup> Despite their sharp focus on a specific locality, the documentaries proved to be popular outside of Stoke-on-Trent too. Cheeseman explained that 'shows which were ruthlessly narrowed in their address to our own home community turn out to be the ones which other districts want to see'.<sup>212</sup> *The Knotty*, for example, was a resounding success with the production playing to over 12,000 people in a period of eight weeks in 1966.<sup>213</sup> Nationally too *The Knotty* received acclaim:

By the standards of any commercial theatre enterprise this kind of subject matter must sound impossibly dull. But, in fact, given sympathetic handling and occasionally inspired presentation, it is fascinating ... And if the

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<sup>208</sup> R.M. 'These 'Jolly' times portrayed with passion and irony', *Daily Mail*, 15 July 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>209</sup> Letter from Eric Robinson to Peter Cheeseman, 8 August 1964, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>210</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. 19.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Elvgren (1974), p. 90.

inspiration is purely local, the techniques used to produce the finished product are utterly sophisticated... this is essentially a triumph for the theatre, and of the entire company.<sup>214</sup>

Theatre-goers from outside the district began to recognise the level of ‘sophistication’ of work produced at the Vic, which they perhaps had not expected. Vivian Nixon, a regular London theatre-goer and later to become the theatre’s Business Manager, recalled seeing *The Knotty* on his interview day and being ‘totally knocked out – I could not believe it would be that standard’.<sup>215</sup> Cheeseman himself recognised the improvement, writing to Alan Plater after the opening night:

At last we have got our annual documentary on and it promises to be a big improvement on previous years. Just as much sweat though getting it on; we’re all worn out.<sup>216</sup>

From *The Knotty* onwards, the documentaries grew in popularity and became nationally acknowledged with a published edition of *The Knotty* announced in 1970, a production of *The Burning Mountain* touring to London to open the Cockpit Theatre (1970), and a televised production of *Fight for Shelton Bar* in 1974, followed by a published edition of the script.<sup>217</sup>

For Cheeseman, though, it was the reaction of the local community that remained his paramount concern. Letters to the local paper suggested the strength of feeling from those who had seen the documentaries. Veteran workers of the North Staffordshire railway, for example, having seen *The Knotty*, wrote to the *Evening Sentinel* ‘to pay a tribute to this talented company ... it was an evening we shall long remember.’<sup>218</sup>

Equally, this letter to the theatre from an audience member must have delighted

Cheeseman:

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<sup>214</sup> John Stevenson, ‘A splendid ride on ‘The Knotty’, *Daily Mail*, July 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>215</sup> Vivian Nixon, *Interview with Vivian Nixon* (interviewed by the author, 5 January 2018).

<sup>216</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Alan Plater, 15 July 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>217</sup> Cheeseman (1970) and Cheeseman (1977).

<sup>218</sup> T.A. Stubbs, Letter to *Evening Sentinel*, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1966, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

My sister and I attended the theatre last night to see the “Knotty” with the tickets you so kindly sent to us. I must say we were doubtful about coming, wondering if it would be “above” us. It is the first time we have been to the Vic, and I felt I must write to say how very much we enjoyed it.<sup>219</sup>

Not only does the letter exhibit Cheeseman’s tireless efforts in recruiting new audience members by sending out tickets, it also demonstrates that the documentary had done its job – for at least one pair of theatregoers – by dispelling the myth that theatre was ‘above’ anyone. The archive has countless examples of such enthusiastic responses. Whilst it is impossible to ascertain a definitive breakdown of the audience for the documentaries, it seems likely that with the increased audience figures, there was a considerable number who attended the documentary and had not been to the theatre previously. Cheeseman knew that one documentary was not going to transform someone into a regular theatregoer, but he believed that gradually the community would begin to trust that the company’s intentions in the district were genuine. As Albert Cooper confirmed: ‘You’ve got to be seen to be true to the roots of the community...which he very much was’.<sup>220</sup> While the success of a theatre’s relationship with its community is difficult to quantify, Cheeseman claimed that

my hope was that these shows would really intensify our relationship with the district and give this relationship a concrete form on the stage. They have done.<sup>221</sup>

Moreover, he believed that the consistent funding that the theatre received from the Local Authorities was directly attributable to their work on the documentaries:

I have also little doubt that this aspect of our policy was a major factor in influencing the local authorities in the grim economic climate to increase our grants so vastly just now. They know that public opinion was solidly behind them and there has been hardly a single voice of criticism raised against their actions.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Letter from J.A. Bailey to Miss Black, n.d, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>220</sup> Cooper (2018).

<sup>221</sup> Peter Cheeseman, ‘A theatre and the community it serves’, *The Stage* (9 May 1968), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

This sentiment was in distinct contrast to some of the negative reactions against Joseph and Cheeseman's initial venture when the theatre was first mooted in Stoke-on-Trent. To have 'hardly a single voice of criticism' against the local Council's increase in funding for the theatre is a notable shift compared with the general complaint in the district that 'there is not sufficient public demand for a civic theatre that would justify a large amount of public money being spent on it or lent for the purpose'.<sup>223</sup>

In his introduction to *The Knotty*, Cheeseman explicated his desire

to bridge the cultural gap which separates the artist from the majority of the community and which I believe to be a gap created by style not subject matter.<sup>224</sup>

Cheeseman was not alone in these ideals. In 1961, Arnold Wesker had founded Centre 42 and directed the 'Centre 42 Festivals' which shared a very similar aim:

A gap exists between the artist and the community. Art has lost its rightful place in the community. By this we mean that whereas it should be the natural heritage of the community it has become the preserve of a minority – making it something apart from life... We believe that we must strive to bridge the gap between the artists and the public and to break down all barriers, social, economic, and psychological, that stand between the people of this country and full participation in the arts.<sup>225</sup>

Wesker, though castigated later by McGrath for displaying a 'bourgeois concept of culture',<sup>226</sup> believed strongly that culture had been 'hi-jacked' as a middle-class pursuit and that given the opportunity to engage wholeheartedly in 'culture', the worker 'is capable of infinitely more'.<sup>227</sup> This standpoint left Wesker vulnerable to criticism of 'cultural imperialism ... a concept of culture as product to be sold by

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<sup>223</sup> 'And more letters about theatre in the round', *Evening Sentinel*, July 1962, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>224</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. x.

<sup>225</sup> Arnold Wesker, report to the Management Committee of Centre 42 in 1961, quoted in Watt (2003), p. 42.

<sup>226</sup> Itzin (1980), p. 104.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

‘superior’ artists to ‘inferior’ workers for their betterment’.<sup>228</sup> Cheeseman suffered similar criticism, mostly at the hands of disgruntled writers, who claimed that ‘the Vic goes in for too much education - a kind of middle brow moralising’.<sup>229</sup> Cheeseman, though, remained steadfast in his ambitions for the Vic and shared Wesker’s opinion that any plays produced ought to be

not only for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be a legitimate form of self-expression, but for those whom the phrase “form of expression” may mean nothing whatsoever.<sup>230</sup>

The shared outlook of Cheeseman and Wesker is confirmed in a series of correspondence between the two, in which Cheeseman invited Wesker to be a guest director at the Vic in 1968. After much deliberation, Wesker turned down Cheeseman’s offer but suggested that Garry O’Connor, then assistant to Michel Saint-Denis at the RSC, could direct a Chekhov at the Vic. Cheeseman’s response was characteristically frank:

We are very disappointed you can’t do the production at that time we discussed but do understand your problem... it was kind of you to write about Gary O’Connor [sic] but I certainly wouldn’t want him to come down and direct for us. When you come down you are likely to be the first guest director we have ever had, and as I explained, I think, I am only doing this because I feel we all know you well enough through your writing to know that there is enough common ground to make the whole project a sensible and exciting one.<sup>231</sup>

It was Wesker particularly with whom Cheeseman shared common ground. Both were concerned with the make-up of their audiences, aiming to convince working-class communities that theatre was not an elite activity but something that would appeal to them. In a casebook on Wesker’s work, Clive Barker comments on the ‘ultimate

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<sup>228</sup> Itzin (1980), p. 104

<sup>229</sup> Letter from Tony Perrin to Peter Cheeseman, 7 February 1970, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>230</sup> *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, ed. by Reade D. Dornan (NY and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), p. 2.

<sup>231</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Arnold Wesker, 8 October 1968, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

astonishing achievement' of the Centre 42 Festivals in proving that 'any community has within it the capacity and power to create its own culture'.<sup>232</sup> For Cheeseman, this remained his fundamental motivation behind the documentaries, describing it as building a 'relationship with one coherent community to make the theatre at home there in its battered landscape'.<sup>233</sup> The documentaries were just one more example of Cheeseman's work in engaging those members of the community who felt that the theatre was reserved for a privileged few.

### **Influence of the Stoke documentary**

Cheeseman has been cited as the stimulus for a wave of local documentaries that swept regional theatres in the late 1960s and 70s with the majority of the larger repertory theatres - Sheffield, Newcastle and Nottingham, for example - experimenting with the style, as affirmed in Elvgren's overview of the documentary in 1974.<sup>234</sup> Cheeseman's influence has spread internationally too. In his overview of documentary theatre in the USA, Gary Fisher Dawson acknowledged that

one can only imagine the countless number of others who, perhaps, have been inspired on both sides of the Atlantic by the Cheeseman approach

and David Watt referenced the often-forgotten influence of the Stoke documentary on Canadian and Australian documentary theatre.<sup>235</sup> In Australia, for example, Watt claimed that whilst many have assumed that 'the form was invented for *Aftershocks*' -

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<sup>232</sup> Clive Barker, 'Vision and Reality', *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, ed. by Reade D. Dorman (NY and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), p. 94.

<sup>233</sup> Robin Soans (2005), p. 104.

<sup>234</sup> *Stirrings in Sheffield on a Saturday Night* at Sheffield Playhouse (1966); *Owd Yer Tight* at Nottingham Playhouse (1965); *Close the Coalhouse Door* at Newcastle Playhouse (1968), cited in Elvgren (Mar., 1974), p. 86.

<sup>235</sup> Gary, Fisher Dawson, 'Defining Documentary Theatre', *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Praeger Publishers, 1999), p. 16.

a 'strictly verbatim' documentary initiated by a community organisation - in fact, the piece was created as an

interesting experiment in accepting the ramifications of Cheeseman's hard rule that a verbatim play should not present anything onstage for which there is not a documentary referent.<sup>236</sup>

Cheeseman himself queried the overuse of the term 'documentary' in 1970, believing that

whatever the motives, everybody seems to want to do it, and inevitably in the theatre there is a lot of loose talk about it...It is becoming a fashionable theatrical virtue to be doing a documentary.<sup>237</sup>

Steve Nicholson, in his overview of playwriting in the 1960s, recognised both the popularity and the confusion surrounding the genre:

Documentary theatre was 'now fashionably in'. Although there was no shared understanding of what the term meant – both Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* and Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt* were described as 'documentary' by some critics.<sup>238</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman never attempted to define the term 'documentary', he was keen to outline his own methods of working with documentary material, a process that Favorini described as 'standing out for its radical historiography'.<sup>239</sup> Understandably, Cheeseman was eager to clarify the stringent principles by which his company operated when producing a documentary, and was keen to distance the Vic from other theatres that were using the documentary label for productions which were in fact only

historical or contemporary plays in which the names of the characters on stage are the same as the ones they had in real life.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> David Watt, 'Local Knowledges, Memories, and Community: From Oral History to Performance', *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz and E.J. Westlake (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), pp. 189-212.

<sup>237</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. vii.

<sup>238</sup> Steve Nicholson, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1960s* (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 62.

<sup>239</sup> *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater*, ed. by Attilio Favorini (The Ecco Press, 1995), p. xxx.

<sup>240</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. vii.

Cheeseman's influence on verbatim theatre specifically will be considered further in the following case study of the Vic's sixth documentary. For Cheeseman, the production of the annual documentary had very little to do with being fashionably in and much more to do with building a lasting relationship with the community of Stoke-on-Trent. The productions began out of necessity rather than from a purely philosophical perspective, as Cheeseman affirmed in his interview with Soans: 'I had no notion that documentary theatre would become such a prominent part of its repertoire'.<sup>241</sup> Indeed, whilst the documentary is the one genre most associated with Stoke, it must be remembered that in Cheeseman's thirty-seven-year tenure of the Vic and New Vic, there was a total of just eleven documentaries. Whilst the documentary represented much that the theatre stood for, it was its position in the carefully selected repertoire, and the genuine interest that the permanent company took in the region of North Staffordshire that fully established the Vic as an authentic community theatre. The danger of Stoke being remembered only for the documentary, is that much of the other important work that was produced there is overlooked. Similarly, in revisiting only the more prominent documentaries in Stoke's repertoire - typically *The Knotty*, *Fight for Shelton Bar*, or *Nice Girls* - the handful of others can easily be forgotten. The following chapter will provide an in-depth case study of the Vic's sixth documentary, *Hands Up – For You the War is Ended!*, in an effort to redress the balance.

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<sup>241</sup> Soans (2005), p. 104.



## **Chapter Six: Hands Up - For You the War is Ended! – a casebook**

By 1971, the Stoke theatre was slowly becoming a renowned regional space, synonymous with Cheeseman's documentaries. Alan David, an actor with the company from 1969-1973, remembers being eager to audition for Cheeseman for that very reason: 'I wanted to go to Stoke because of the documentaries...they'd been in the news'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, by the end of the decade there was increasing attention on Stoke's theatre-in-the-round. There were several reasons for this: thanks to Cheeseman's growing relationship with Charles Parker and Philip Donnellan, the BBC produced two programmes on the Stoke documentaries;<sup>2</sup> in 1969, the company toured to Italy to present *The Knotty* as part of the Florence Rassegna Internazionale dei Teatri Stabili as an example of one of the most successful regional documentaries; Methuen published *The Knotty* in 1970 accompanied by Cheeseman's notes on the company's working practices, and in 1971 a 'Production Casebook' of *The Staffordshire Rebels* was published in the first issue of *Theatre Quarterly*.<sup>3</sup> By 1970, audience numbers for the documentary were growing with audience attendance for their fifth documentary, *The Burning Mountain* at 78% capacity, the highest for a Vic documentary. News of Stoke's unique style of theatre permeated the London bubble too: as well as the regular reviews in the national papers, the company was invited to open the Cockpit Theatre in 1970 with their production of *The Burning Mountain*, and in the same year they were invited to be a key regional theatre participant in the Royal

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<sup>1</sup> Alan David, *Interview with Alan David* (interviewed by the author, 16 April 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *The Making of the Staffordshire Rebels*, dir. by Christopher Martin (BBC, 1965) and *Review: The Burning Mountain*, dir. Tony Staveacre (BBC, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), and 'A Community Theatre-in-the-Round', *National Theatre Quarterly* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, Jan-Mar 1971).

Court's *Come Together* festival, with a production of Peter Terson's *1861 Whitby Lifeboat Disaster*.

Having produced five documentaries by the early 1970s, Cheeseman had begun to consolidate a set of exacting working practices and a particular style for the Stoke documentary. In this chapter I will explore in detail the process behind the Vic's sixth documentary, *Hands Up - for You the War is Ended!*, drawing heavily on Cheeseman's personal rehearsal notebook, which has never been studied previously. In it, he has recorded his thoughts and concerns surrounding the production, and taken together with archive material of the production itself, the text is a revealing insight into the Stoke documentary process. Whilst the production was a continuation of the company's previous work on local documentaries, *Hands Up!* became deeply significant as it was to clarify for Cheeseman his views on verbatim, and would see him develop specific research approaches. Through this production, Cheeseman began a refinement and clarification of the research process, and further developed his ideas on documentary staging. Further, it was to reinforce the theatre's position within the community, dealing as it did with the stories of contemporary local residents.

### **The Sixth Documentary**

REG BAKER (VOICEOVER): But er the time I'm here to talk about – I was a young lad. The events of the period started when I was seventeen and went through to twenty-four. So I'm speaking on his behalf really – in other words I'm an entirely different person to what I was and anything I say seems to be completely remote, I'm talking about somebody else.<sup>4</sup>

This is an extract from the opening speech of *Hands Up*, the Vic's sixth documentary which centred on the memories of a group of ex-prisoners of war who lived in the

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<sup>4</sup> *Hands Up – For You the War is Ended!* (unpub. ms., Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent), p. 2.

area local to the theatre. Composed of a selection of voiceovers and verbatim delivery, *Hands Up* told the story of the men's capture in North Africa in 1941, their subsequent escape from an Italian prisoner of war camp in 1943, and their eventual break for freedom into Switzerland in 1944. With the Potsdam Agreement less than thirty years old, the Second World War remained a popular subject for films and novels of the 1960s and 70s but the events depicted were rarely a representation of the average soldier's experiences.<sup>5</sup> Films such as *Tobruk* (1967) and *Raid on Rommel* (1971) glorified daring escapes and undercover missions, depicting the conflict in North Africa as all-action desert warfare.<sup>6</sup> Ian Fleming's spy fiction, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, followed heroic undercover spy missions, portraying the glamour and thrills of James Bond's encounters as 'an escape' from post-war concerns.<sup>7</sup> *Hands Up* in contrast, illustrated the soldiers' commonplace routines, the tedium of camp life and the reality for the women left behind. Cheeseman:

We have tried to show one aspect of a huge and complicated conflict from the ranks, and hope that it will, for a change, give a soldier's eye view of the African campaign and of imprisonment as a prisoner of War.<sup>8</sup>

And, as with Cheeseman's previous documentaries, *Hands Up* was concerned with the community's stories, 'those important stories which the community could tell itself', ensuring that the people of North Staffordshire recognised their value and heritage.<sup>9</sup> The initial concept for the Vic's sixth documentary was the result of a firm

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Potsdam Conference (17 July – 2 August 1945) was the last meeting of the 'Big Three' Allied leaders during the Second World War. At Yalta in February 1945, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, American President Franklin D Roosevelt and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin had agreed to meet again following the defeat of Germany, principally to determine the borders of post-war Europe and deal with other outstanding problems'. <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-the-potsdam-conference-shaped-the-future-of-post-war-europe>>, [accessed 23 August 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *The Star-Spangled Screen: American World War II Film* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Hill, 'Introduction to Ian Fleming's *Moon Raker*' (London: Vintage, 2012), p. x

<sup>8</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Hands Up* programme (May, 1971), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Documentary Theatre – A Professional Repertory Theatre Perspective', *Documentary Arts Report*, 2 (1986), p. 10.

friendship between the local newsagent, Frank Bayley and the Vic company since their arrival in Hartshill in 1962. Cheeseman recalled:

[Frank Bayley] once told me that he had crossed the Alps from Italy wearing a pair of dancing slippers tied on with string. On our way back from doing *The Knotty* in Florence in 1969 I was sitting in the train looking out of the window as we got into the first deep valleys on the way from Milan to Domodossola. As I watched the snow blowing off the top of the ridges, in my mind's eye, I saw Frank up there, struggling along (it was at night, in March when they did it) and got interested in hearing more.<sup>10</sup>

Here was another example of Cheeseman's resolve to give a voice to the community.

He explained that

little of the published material...has given me at any rate, any real knowledge of what it was like to be an average soldier...often only the officers' experiences have been published.<sup>11</sup>

*Hands Up*, then, was the Vic's attempt to give a voice to the previously unheard soldiers and prisoners of war who had returned from conflict but had been granted very few opportunities to share their experiences. In using these recorded conversations, the documentary allowed an audience special insight into previously unvoiced experiences, not an ingenious escape or an officer's account of a conflict but ordinary soldiers' shared experiences of surviving extraordinary circumstances.

What became known as the Desert War began early in 1941. Britain had made substantial gains in North Africa with 20,000 Italians killed or wounded, and 130,000 taken prisoner during the three months of the offensive. The British and Australian losses, by comparison, were very small, 500 dead and 1,400 wounded.<sup>12</sup> It was with this optimistic outlook that the men enlisted and found themselves fighting in the African desert. However, with the arrival of Erwin Rommel as leader of the German and Italian troops, British fortunes began to shift. It was during Rommel's offensive

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<sup>10</sup> Cheeseman (May 1971).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2014), p. 157

in January 1942 that Frank Bayley, the first of the interviewees, was captured along with Bill Armitt from Scholar Green, Stoke-on-Trent. In *Hands Up*, the events of the North African conflict unfold in musical form, interspersed with dramatised readings of letters and news articles and actual recordings of the men's accounts of the conditions at Sidi Barrani. Their memories of capture and camp life, along with fellow Potteries' men Reg Baker and Jack Ford, and Jack Attrill from the same regiment, forms the first half of the production. The men's anecdotes are interspersed with developments in the North African conflict taken from the *Evening Sentinel* reports of the period, and combined with the memories of the men's partners at home in Stoke-on-Trent. The second half of the play follows the men's escape from the Italian prisoner of war camp and their various hiding places en route to Switzerland, including a church belfry and the tiny upstairs bedroom of an Italian Communist. The production ends with the reunion of the soldiers with their partners back in Stoke-on-Trent, and an unsettling scene in which the men discuss their constant underlying fear of being 'done in' and the atrocities suffered by Japanese prisoners.

As with previous documentaries, research interviews for the production were undertaken by Cheeseman, Christopher Bond (writer in residence at the Vic in 1971), and the company. A note from Cheeseman implies the level of precision with which these needed to be completed:

We are now going into the major research phase for the documentary and I would like to remind you of the necessity of absolute scrupulousness in dealing with the research tapes...No original research tape must be passed through for transcription. A top quality dubbing must be made for this purpose... Machines – I must personally authorise the use of recording machines.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Cheeseman, note to company, 11 February 1971, held at Victoria Theatre Collection

The note to the company highlights the potential difficulties of a group of actors undertaking oral histories for the first time. It also suggests that Cheeseman had experienced these difficulties previously and was taking every precaution to ensure that problems with recordings could be avoided. Indeed, even with Cheeseman's precautions in place, the company inevitably encountered technical issues during interviews and rehearsals; for example, Cheeseman notes that 'Thurs night tape revealed on Fri a.m. to be hopeless. So session revised for Mon night'.<sup>14</sup>

The note also supports numerous testimonies that Cheeseman, as Albert Cooper later commented, 'had his fingers in everything', and whilst encouraging the whole company to be involved in the research, ultimately maintained a very firm control of their findings.<sup>15</sup> An article written for the *Evening Sentinel* which promised to give an inside view of the latest documentary, makes the rehearsal dynamics clear:

In answer to questions from Cheeseman about their scripts they raise their hands like children before the voice of the master...He [Cheeseman] admits that the documentaries are the most exciting things he does each year. They are almost totally conceived by him, part of him, and he fairly glows during rehearsals. He cajoles, begs, pleads every ounce of feeling out of his company. At this stage they hardly resemble the powerful characters one sees on stage each evening. They are submissive and awaiting instruction. The powerhouse Cheeseman's face lights up when he takes to the floor himself – like a showman – revelling in his own powers of persuasion, his ability to draw out talent.<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to assess then how far the construction of scenes was a collective effort. Certainly, the *Sentinel* article suggests that Cheeseman was firmly at the helm and the actors merely followed. Further corroboration for this can be found in Cheeseman's personal notebook for the 1971 production. He records the first research meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April as 'very disorganised' as he has been 'at meetings in London'. He

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Cheeseman, private rehearsal notebook for *Hands Up*, 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this chapter are taken from this source.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Cooper, *Interview with Albert Cooper* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

<sup>16</sup> 'Inside Peter Cheeseman and the sixth documentary', *Evening Sentinel*, 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

proceeds to document his early thoughts for shaping the material on 10<sup>th</sup> April, in a ‘good session’ in which he ‘began with my exposition of shape situation so far’. The shape Cheeseman proposes certainly bears very close resemblance to the final running order of the show, even down to his suggestion of splitting the piece into two halves with ‘I – Africa, II – Italy’. It is revealing to observe Cheeseman’s thought processes as he ponders how best to shape the material, particularly since the company was still in the midst of undertaking more interviews: ‘It really depends on the other stories, & how they pan out’. He was aware though, even at this early stage, of the importance of material selection:

Need to decide on a number of situations as well, that need a dramatic representation – the hunger is a vital one. Battle almost needs a set piece. Bill Armit’s losing himself near Agedabia is a marvellous solo.

It is interesting to note here Robin Soans’ comment on his verbatim methods in

*Verbatim, Verbatim:*

The underlying structure may not be as obvious as in a farce or a revenge tragedy, but a verbatim play should still be built around a narrative, and it must still set up dramatic conflicts and attempt to resolve them.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst Cheeseman was always keen to maintain that ‘we let the material itself suggest the shape’, his memo implies that the selection of material was, of course, somewhat coloured by thoughts of the dramatic potential of the finished production.<sup>18</sup>

A week on in rehearsals and the company was still focused on ‘shaping chat’ whilst Cheeseman identified their key problem: ‘we need scenes to work on!’ By

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> April, relations were becoming increasingly fraught:

We do final shape session desp’ trying to get scenes for Th/Fri... Seems to me necessary now to try & see what we can get from Oral Sources in way of filling out scenes as base of this work & I want to get Gladys, Edie, Frank, Bill into the theatre. Bond intervenes saying this is Bow windows before foundations. PC gets prickly & jumps on Bond. Atmosphere.

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<sup>17</sup> *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond & Dan Steward. (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Inside Peter Cheeseman’, 1971.

There is a sense of the complex relationship here between director, writer and company, particularly on a project such as the documentary. The writer, following the Stoke documentary procedures, had clear instructions not to write and yet the material needed to be shaped and constructed if a show was to be ready for the opening night. Concurrently, Cheeseman as director had a clear vision of the end result and was anxious to initiate work on the project, aware that ‘the seats are sold and there has to be a show’.<sup>19</sup> In order to alleviate the tension perhaps, the group did split up later in the day and worked in separate groups on songs and the selection of the contextual information from *The Sentinel* archive. Whilst Cheeseman recorded that there was ‘little progress in scenes’, the day’s work did allow the ‘first “rehearsal” session’ to take place on Thursday 22 June. The construction of the piece throughout the rehearsal process, however, was painfully slow. Cheeseman commented that the company still had ‘no standing scripts – just a tape & the 4 transcripts’, and that ‘doing the first (3 minutes I suppose) yesterday took a good hour’. His painstaking methods with the primary source material was in tension with his desperation for progress, and yet there seems to be no suggestion that the process could be completed in any other way despite the lack of time. Indeed, even the following day when Cheeseman remarked that ‘it is a hell of a slow method’, he still insisted on undertaking further recordings when the ex-prisoners of war were present in rehearsal: ‘At end Bill & Frank great on their Bible quarrel so took them to the pub to record it’.

By Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> May, just five days before opening night, Cheeseman records:

Now all scripted and & all plotted except African imprisonment...Friday and Saturday to go with likely a run Sat afternoon. I think it makes us a day ahead of Knotty...could this be another Knotty I pray...?

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Inside Peter Cheeseman’, 1971.



Cheeseman was clearly charting the company's progress through the documentary form and was aware that *The Knotty* (produced for the first time five years previously) was still a clear favourite of audiences, to such an extent that the production had already been revived in 1969. The script was completed just five days before the opening night, and whilst this was an improvement on his previous documentaries, Cheeseman was keen to move the process forward. He noted that there should be 'no more emergencies', resolving that 'organisation must make another step forward, as after REBELS'. Both *The Jolly Potters* and *The Staffordshire Rebels* had just three weeks rehearsal, after Cheeseman had done preliminary research over a number of months. After *The Staffordshire Rebels* (1965), Cheeseman began to streamline the process with Terson for *The Knotty* (1966) and by *Hands Up* (1971), the company had 4 weeks to compile and rehearse the documentary, giving them the same amount of rehearsal time that they had for a Shakespeare play. Consequently, when the company came to work on the next documentary, *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974), the majority of the research would be completed by a committee of three actors who were freed from the theatre's repertoire for two months prior to rehearsals. It seemed that Cheeseman had recognised a problem with his current methods, and was looking to restructure the process.

### **Developing style through research**

The particular style of the Stoke documentaries can be tracked from *The Jolly Potters* through to the company's final documentary in 1993, *Nice Girls*. Each one impacted the next, since Cheeseman was consolidating his own personal style in assembling source material and learning from each experience. It could be argued, however, that *Hands Up* was a crucial turning-point in the process since it was the first of the Stoke

documentaries to be entirely verbatim and every documentary at Stoke subsequently adopted this approach.<sup>20</sup> It was not only the material of the recordings but also the style of the oral histories provided for *Hands Up* that served as inspiration for the company's presentation. One example is recalled vividly by David:

I think one of the most exciting nights we ever had was when Peter had gathered all the old soldiers who'd been in the war, who had stories to tell, he gathered them all in a pub in Stoke and we recorded their conversations. But as the evening wore on, so people got more and more drunk and everything and so did we – because we were having a wonderful time just listening to their stories ... it was only a few days later when we said that was a bit of a disaster because really there were too many people talking at the same time...and we listened and we listened and we picked out various stories, thanks to her [Carrie Nixson] she typed it all out and we pieced together the most exciting stories...and we did it like in the pub, we learnt it with all the actors on stage telling different stories...so we all overlapped each other.<sup>21</sup>

David's account suggests that the development of the Vic's unique style was almost accidental. By recording and transcribing a number of simultaneous conversations, the company was able to lend the material a real authenticity. This style began to permeate more widely too: Bob Eaton, for example, working at the Vic with Chris Bond the following year on *Downright Hooligan*, remembers trying to replicate the same technique in order to give

a real-life group conversation a texture quite distinct from the usual group conversation one would hear on stage.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Derek Paget recognises the impact of the documentary in his 1987 article on verbatim theatre:

David Thacker says he heard of Parker *through* Cheeseman, and Chris Honer, while he saw *Fight for Shelton Bar*, was, he feels, influenced also by ideas made available in the early Production Casebook on Stoke in *Theatre*

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<sup>20</sup> The following documentaries all relied on tape-recorded material as the source of their scripts: *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974), *Plain Jos* (1980), *Miner Dig the Coal* (1981), *The Dirty Hill* (1990) and *Nice Girls* (1993).

<sup>21</sup> David (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Bob Eaton, *Fish and Chips and Rock and Roll: A Life in Popular Theatre* (unpub. ms., 2017), p. 18.

*Quarterly* and, even more significantly, by working with an actor who had worked on the original production of *Hands Up*.<sup>23</sup>

The final script of *Hands Up* suggests some stylistic features that the company had continued to use since *The Knotty*, and some that the company developed specifically for *Hands Up* in order to present the interview material gathered during the research process; each one a pointed reminder of the reality of the stories presented. The play's opening is an apt example of the creative presentation of the interviewee's words:

Music – Harmonica Medley

REG BAKER (VOICEOVER):

Last night we had a gathering of middle-aged men, and if I might be so cruel, being rather ridiculous...I was only looking round at the youngsters, the members of your company thinking that if you can put them in uniform they're the people we're talking about really – that age and those sort of aspirations and their reactions.

ACTOR (SITTING) JOINS REG AND SPEAKS WITH HIM

And not a crowd of middle-aged men, thinning on top and trying to cast their minds back to the minor orgies and the various other things that they went through – so er everything's in retrospect er sort of nothing to do with me, as though I'm talking about something and somebody else.

REG'S VOICE OUT. ACTOR CONTINUES, STANDING UP

I think that er my reactions are a lot duller altogether.<sup>24</sup>

A number of stylistic devices are in evidence here. Backing the dialogue with a harmonica medley automatically lends the material poignancy and begins to locate the events in the specific wartime period. Reg's words draw attention to the similarities between the Vic company and the company of soldiers as he remembers them. Similarly, we are reminded that the events depicted are made up of a series of

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Paget, 'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1987), pp. 317-336 (p. 319).

<sup>24</sup> *Hands Up - for You the War is Ended!* (1971), p. 2.

memories, and Reg feels as if he is ‘talking about something and somebody else’. The recognition too that the men are speaking ‘in retrospect’ allows for some fallibility in the men’s memories, and reminds the audience that the events of the documentary are only one interpretation of those experiences, viewed as they are through the lens of one small group of ex-prisoners and their partners. As the voiceover fades out, Reg’s voice is adopted by the actor. This device allows the company to present the material directly and to further emphasise the use of verbatim. The audience is absolutely clear from the outset that the actors’ script is entirely compiled from interview material. The acting style in the documentary further enabled this presentation. Cheeseman explained in a later interview:

He [the actor] wouldn’t try and imitate Frank he would say what Frank said, he would be himself but he would present Frank kind of objectively and sort of very simply... [he would] just a little indicate Frank’s accent and kind of manner but he would basically be himself telling you what Frank said.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst the actor remained in role as Frank throughout, Cheeseman indicates that the particular style of acting and presentation of the material allowed the interview subjects to be presented objectively, and perhaps further heightened the sense that the veterans were talking about ‘something and somebody else’.<sup>26</sup>

A key difference between *Hands Up* and the earlier documentaries, though, was the allocation of roles to particular actors. Typically, the documentaries had required each actor to play a number of small roles, signifying changes with a new prop or costume. In *Hands Up*, however, since it follows the journey of a small group of key characters, a number of the actors remain as one role throughout. Because of the candid responses given in interviews, we are able to see a definite sense of each of the

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<sup>25</sup> Sara Fielding, ‘An analysis of Twentieth Century Documentary Drama and its major innovators with particular reference to the work of Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.’ (unpublished ungraduated dissertation, 1988), p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> *Hands Up - for You the War is Ended!* (1971), p. 2.

men's characters and the dynamic between them as a group. The men themselves discuss this:

BILL: Well Jock kind of – Jock – being as the man he was – he like kind of we – by looking at Jock he like er gave you that impression he was er like more of a leader than what the remainder

FRANK: we were

BILL: was. Like – I think we put more trust in Jock than what any of the others were.<sup>27</sup>

This conversation between Bill and Frank is taken from halfway through the play where the men are hiding in a church belfry and are forced to share out meticulously the one bucket of food that was sent up each night. The men appointed Jock as 'head disher upper', affirming the dynamic that had already become evident to an audience: that Jock was 'a father as you might say'.<sup>28</sup> This scene is also of particular interest since it was evidently a turning-point for Cheeseman in his thinking about verbatim delivery. In his rehearsal notebook he records the moment:

Frustration of discovering we were short on dialogue – which couldn't be squeezed out of this replaced by inspiration as I saw in middle of belfry scene that dramatised narrative could be an exciting answer ... Big editing job. Frank & Bill overlapping as they told the story convinced me. Reflected also later that this could set a narrative tone for the entire play.

Indeed, this scene does set a 'narrative tone', which adds a conversational pace to the men's memories throughout the piece. In previous documentaries, as much of the source material was written, the finished result – while still based on actuality – was more measured. In *Hands Up*, we see actors delivering lines with all of the original pauses and fillers included. In the extract above, for example, these fillers suggest Bill's difficulty in phrasing and, perhaps, showing his respect for Jock; the fillers, in fact, as Anna Deavere Smith notes much later, provide much of the character.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> Gilbert (2014), p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Anna Deavere Smith: 'We can listen for what is inconsistent. We can listen to what the dominant pattern of speech is, and we can listen for the break from that pattern of speech. This applies to individuals, and this applies to groups. The break from the pattern is where character lives, and where

fact that these lines are interrupted and completed by Frank enhances this still further. Bill breaks the naturalism of the scene in which the men are sharing out the food by delivering these lines directly to the audience. Thus, whilst the audience is constantly reminded of the reality of the event, Bill and Frank's asides allow us a special insight into the tacit implications of a seemingly simple act of dishing up food. Cheeseman's narrative tone was set – a combination of naturalistic acting scenes juxtaposed with audience address.

## Music

As in previous documentaries, music played a central role. Cheeseman observed towards the end of the rehearsal process:

Music vital stimulus to ME & my invention – it's the vital atmosphere in this the documentary lives in. It must be pumped in at the start.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting that Cheeseman cited music as essential not only from a practical perspective for the success of the documentary process but also as a 'stimulus' for him personally. Previously, Cheeseman had selected folk music as the most appropriate genre to evoke particular historical periods. As the company's previous documentaries had dealt with less recent periods, access to music of the time was less readily available and folk music became a practical replacement. Cheeseman found it 'accessible and attractive to more sections of the public than any other kind of music' and it was also a genre of music that appealed to him.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, for *Hands Up*, Cheeseman was constrained by the wartime period as the music was much more

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dialogue, ironically begins, in the uh, in the pause, in the thought as captured for the first time in a moment of speech, rather than in the rehearsed, the proven'. (Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Jan 2015)).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xvi.

widely available and recognised by many of his audience members. Whilst this should have been an advantage, it was in fact an area with which Cheeseman struggled:

Songs heartily monotonous. Nothing inspires me yet. I need inspiration from the music to invent...Depressing stage now esp over music. Must try to crack this today.<sup>32</sup>

Cheeseman was keen to source original songs from the war and even published a notice in *The Guardian* requesting ex-prisoners of war to contact the theatre with their memories of songs:

We are interested in hearing the songs which were sung by soldiers during a drunken night in the NAAFI or in the backs of the lorries. We don't want the 'Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover' type of tune, either.<sup>33</sup>

The authenticity of music had taken on increasing importance since Charles Parker's reaction to the songs of *The Jolly Potters*, many of which he found to be inappropriate musically or historically.<sup>34</sup> For *Hands Up*, Cheeseman was evidently in touch with Parker who sent a response:

[Sorry] that I have not been able to dub off the songs for you. I imagine you probably have enough material by now but if you still want any more I will try and do it first thing next week.<sup>35</sup>

The continued discussions between the two, almost ten years after Parker's first involvement with *The Jolly Potters* in 1962 is suggestive of the pair's mutual respect.

Ewan MacColl too was evidently involved in Cheeseman's desperate attempts to source any original music referenced by the veterans, as seen in a letter to Roberto

Leydi, an Italian ethnomusicologist:

Ewan MacColl has told me that you would be able to help us with a query over some Italian popular songs which we need urgently for a theatre documentary we are preparing here...They spent several months being hidden in Geranova. While there the tenant of the house where they were hiding sang

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<sup>32</sup> Cheeseman (April, 1971).

<sup>33</sup> 'Appeal for bawdy songs', *The Guardian*, 15 April 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>34</sup> 'Documentary Theatre: Some observations prompted by "The Jolly Potters" by the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1964', Charles Parker to Peter Cheeseman, 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 1964.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Charles Parker to Peter Cheeseman, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

a song with the following phrases in it: (This is our spelling of what the Englishman's version sounded like!) 'Vaccine monte, vaccine monte, tra la la la la, tra la la la la! Veni veni veni, qua qua qua, tante bacci creda, tante bacci creda-' I understand this may be a north Italian popular song called 'La Montanara'. Can you confirm this, and if so is there any possibility that you could send me a copy of the words and the tune?<sup>36</sup>

The tenacity of Cheeseman is evident here, going to extraordinary lengths to locate the source of a minor detail. As in their previous documentaries, music was continually weaved through a series of scenes that were used to contextualise the memories of the soldiers and their wives. Almost ten years after the first production of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War*, its influence on *Hands Up* is still very much in evidence. The play is manifestly a soldier's rather than an officer's tale, and the distinction between the ranks is referenced markedly at pivotal moments in the plot:

STAN: Evening Sentinel December 24<sup>th</sup> 1940. General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, in a Christmas message to the troops in Egypt says ... We can well close 1940 in a spirit of confidence for the future and pride for the past and present – pride for the courage and endurance of the people of the United Kingdom in the face of reverses, dangers and handicaps, and pride for the manner in which the whole Empire has responded to the threat against our freedom and institutions... We will serve on together until the final victory.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst the Brechtian influence is evident in Stan's overt reference to the quotation's source, the juxtaposition of Wavell's address with the following song has strong associations with Theatre Workshop's style:

ALL: Seven years in the sand seems a long time somehow –  
Never mind, tosh, you'll soon be dead a hundred years from now.  
The pay is low, the grub is rank, you get jankers now and then,  
You're fed almost entirely on the produce of a hen.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Roberto Leydi, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>37</sup> *Hands Up*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Hands Up*, p. 9.



The empty rhetoric of the Commander-in-Chief jars with the reality of the soldiers' daily hardships in the desert described in the song. There is a striking similarity to the opening of Act Two of *Oh What a Lovely War* in which the Pierrots sing 'Oh It's a Lovely War' directly after a news panel informing the audience of the devastating losses suffered by the British at Ypres, 'Germans use poison gas...British loss 59,275 men'.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the programme notes for 'Seven Years in the Sand' acknowledge that it was collected by Ewan MacColl from Herbert Smith of Oldham, and was included on an LP collection 'The Singing Island' released by MacColl in 1960 and referenced by Cheeseman in his rehearsal notebook.

In the 'Ballad of the Disorganised Retreat', Cheeseman reverted to music in order to avoid a potentially lengthy exposition on the series of British setbacks after Rommel's arrival at Tripoli in February 1941, and in its exposition of complex historical detail, the scene is reminiscent of the Pole Dance scene in *The Knotty*.<sup>40</sup> 'Ballad of the Disorganised Retreat' is described in the programme as

a parody of the Ballad of Wadi Maktilla (from Hamish Henderson) made by Graham Watkins and the company using material from the taped interviews.<sup>41</sup>

The song is intercut with taped interview material, *Evening Sentinel* reports from Allied GHQ and The Rommel Papers:

Sing: The confusion was something to see on that day  
Tug: What with this little thing – this is a Utility Ten.  
Sing: Go northwards, go southwards, go eastwards young man  
Officer: Well do your best  
Sing: SO we go round in circles as fast as we can  
Tug: The footbrake's gone sir!  
Sing: What the hell's all the fuss?  
Officer: Well, do your best.  
Sing: Oh wouldn't you, wouldn't you like to be us.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Theatre Workshop, *Oh What a Lovely War* (London: Methuen, revised edition 2000), p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Cheeseman (1986), p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Hands Up* programme, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>42</sup> *Hands Up*, p. 15.

The 'confusion' is emphasised by the actors who 'shout between each line of verse and chorus', whilst the song itself informs the audience of key historical events:

The Fuhrer told Rommel take over the war,  
To do it he gave him the Afrika Korps,  
Stop running you Iti's watch what you're at,  
Don't let the Tommies get past Buerat.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst members of the company were clearly involved with the creation of songs for the production, Cheeseman continued to struggle with the same problem that he had recorded in his introduction to *The Knotty*, that despite the talent of the company he was still 'waiting for a good actor who is also a superb instrumentalist'.<sup>44</sup> By 1971, he was still waiting; indeed, he had lost company members from *The Knotty* on whom the show 'leaned heavily' musically.<sup>45</sup> In his notebook, he records that 'we must get associated with good musicians'.

### **Wives' Stories**

In the early stages of planning, *Hands Up* was predominantly a male narrative with the inclusion of women seen as a necessity in terms of casting the permanent company. Their presence was to be used merely to contextualise the events experienced by the men. As Cheeseman's rehearsal notebook reveals:

Fitting in the girls is a problem. On the train I thought of them surrounded by sandbags. Undoubtedly it seems they could carry the general exposition of the war (from the Sentinel) & there are good cross links in letters, crystal ball, Sgt Ford's book, ads e.g. the Sentinel's a/c of the Rommel advance...the presence of the girls will be an important shape decision. Do the men dream about them?

However, as rehearsals and interviews progressed, the women's stories began to assume significance in their own right. It is unclear how this progression occurred,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Cheeseman (1970), p. xiii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

whether it was a natural part of the rehearsal and research process or a definite decision taken by the company. Regardless, the inclusion of the wives' stories alongside those of the soldiers confirms their importance as part of the history. The stage area is often split, allowing direct comparison between the soldiers abroad and their partners at home:

BEN: Camp life in the main is dull, tending to that state of condition known as 'browned off'.

SUE: The only thing time seemed to drag with having a little one yer know and then of course at night time when the air raids when the sirens went.<sup>46</sup>

There is a suggestion that the women had shared something of the hardships of the men's imprisonment. Whilst they were in the comfort of their own homes, they remained in constant danger during air raids, and struggled to manage a household and children single-handedly in difficult conditions. The intersection of lines emphasises the vast difference in settings but the shared experience of tedium and loneliness. This is further implied by the shared singing at the end of the scene in which the girls sing their own version of 'When this bloody war is over' and the boys complete the chorus.<sup>47</sup>

The wives' stories become particularly important too in locating the documentary firmly in Staffordshire despite the range of international locations through which the soldiers travel. Gladys' dream is an apt example of this:

GLADYS: I had a dream. I was on the doorstep – saw Frank get off the bus in full pack – in full kit – he got to the Vic here, and in between the two roads, there was an island. You know one of these Keep Left things. Frank was that side, and I was this side. And – and – every time we both made to cross the road, a car would come in front of us, we couldn't get together. And yet in the middle of the island – we'd met, and we were clinging to one another. But – I could still see us both one each side of the road and we couldn't get to one another.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Hands Up*, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>48</sup> *Hands Up* (1971), p. 29.

Not only is this a heart-breaking description of Gladys' struggles during Frank's disappearance, it also firmly roots the stories in the local district and even more specifically to the road island outside the theatre in which the audience are seated. The immediacy of this memory therefore is particularly powerful, placed as it is directly amidst the men's shocking revelations of their extreme conditions:

BILL: I've ate grass, I've ate acorns, I've ate cat, I've ate dog...if a bloke had died of natural causes we should have bloody ate him – we'd have bloody ate him ...

REG: We were only young kids. We were bewildered, we were tired and we were hungry...we were shambles.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst these revelations must have been difficult to comprehend for a 1971 audience, the context provided by Gladys' dream allows a more particular empathy for the men's situation. It serves as a constant reminder that despite their extraordinary experiences, these prisoners were ultimately just a group of young men from Hartshill and Scholar Green. Similarly, the use of the wives' accounts allows the company to present the men's return home without sentimentality:

GLADYS: Well, of course I was going to be all spruced up, dressed up. You know. He came overnight – I'd got all – I was cleaning the bedroom, going to get everything clean and there wasn't a thing on the dressing table, and I got me hair in curlers! (LAUGHS) Oh, as I say I was going to be toffed up so nice, you know. But anyway he came overnight and he was waiting at the doorstep when me mother opened the door. To fetch the papers in. He was there standing on the doorstep. Of course he came to – he came upstairs to me, me, with me curlers in, ooh.<sup>50</sup>

The banality of her concerns adds comedy to Gladys' memory but also serves to highlight the emotional impact of the situation that is left unsaid. Her desire to be 'toffed up' hints at the newness of their relationship and her desire to appear attractive on Frank's return. The use of verbatim material allows the events to be experienced

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

more directly by the audience through the frank and unpretentious delivery of Gladys' speech.

**'A public social service': *Hands Up* and the community**

The involvement of the entire company in researching in the locality had a variety of benefits: on one level it was good for publicity and for spreading the word amongst the local community, a good number of whom still dismissed theatre-in-the-round as a pursuit for the educated; on a deeper level it entrenched the theatre firmly in the workings of the community both from the actors' perspective and that of the interviewees. By undertaking interviews in the local community, the company of actors began to take an active interest in the lives of other workers around them. The theatre was edging closer to Cheeseman's ideal of performing 'a public social service'.<sup>51</sup> He alludes to this again in his programme note for *Hands Up*:

We hope, in presenting their experiences to the community which, as artists, we serve, that we have done justice to this privilege, and to the men and women who have granted it.<sup>52</sup>

Cheeseman worked hard to ensure that from the outset, documentary subjects felt involved in the process. Even after the initial interviews, the prisoners of war and their partners remained in close contact with the production and were regularly invited into rehearsals. It is referenced in Cheeseman's rehearsal diary that he 'called on Frank to establish position of PG146 & 59 on map', and needs to 'arrange session with Tug, Bill, SM Ford & Frank Wed or Thurs to get songs'. In the same note, Cheeseman references a verbatim quote from Bill taken from a conversation in the

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Participation', *Cue* (Greenwich Theatre Magazine), October 1972, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Cheeseman (May 1971).

pub, in which Bill recalls that ‘our only thought was ... we wanted to get home’.

Arguably, this sentiment shapes the entire narrative of the piece.

Photographs show the interviewees in rehearsals, guiding actors and talking in detail about how to re-create an authentic representation of their experiences. Whilst this allowed people from outside to feel very much an accepted part of the theatre’s community, Cheeseman also recognised the benefit of these encounters on his actors’ abilities. He recalled:

I can think of a young actor, Simon Coady ... who played the part of the central character in the documentary about Frank Bayley’s life, ‘Hands Up – For You the War is Ended’. He interviewed him about his experiences in the war; became friends with his family; and then had to play the part of Frank, with Frank and his wife sitting in the front row. There they were on the first night, a middle-aged couple, ordinary-looking folk, sitting on the front row of the theatre, holding hands, crying. Now the distance between the actor and the reality of what he’s portraying is normally infinite. But there, five feet away, was Frank in tears. The sense of responsibility that gives the actor is just total. I don’t think any actor who’s been through that experience can ever play Laertes or Hamlet in the same way again. And to me, for that to be part of the texture of the life of an actor is of immeasurable value.<sup>53</sup>

Direct involvement of members of the community therefore ensured not only the authenticity of the events depicted but also built authentic connections between members of his company and the local community, giving his troupe of young actors an element of life experience which would have been impossible had they remained in the bubble of the theatre itself. In an enlightening extract from his notebook,

Cheeseman ponders this complex relationship:

The possibility of a working contact with people like ... Arnold the painter, Peter Ball the good builder, Bill expert raconteur is so exciting. The middle class culture is so empty & spineless in comparison with this ... There’s real lack of contact between the middle class educated man & the artist. Bill & Ben enjoy us & contact with us, & we enjoy them so much more than we do the culture vultures. Could we create the kind of centre that Arnold dreamed of?

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<sup>53</sup> Cheeseman (1986), p. 9.

He affirms the reciprocal enjoyment that the company takes from contact with members of the local working-class community. We witness again Cheeseman's shared vision with Arnold Wesker, and his belief perhaps that Stoke was edging far closer to his ideals than Centre 42 ever did.<sup>54</sup> There remains an air of romanticism about Cheeseman's presentation of the working-class but also an unshakeable enthusiasm in his desire to continue to embed these links and to shirk the 'culture vultures' who, whilst keeping the theatre running financially, in some ways threatened the very atmosphere he was aiming to create. In the documentaries it seems, Cheeseman had found his vocation:

One thing is certain – I'm (despite the miseries) so much at my best when directing, & giving what I can give best to the theatre, I must keep my hand right in & my concentration always on the stage. Somehow it seems possible for the first time ever, & with the frustrations of show & company & the exhaustion of the doc. this is the very time I should be feeling the opposite. So it must be right.

Overall, reviews of the production were positive, with a number such as *The Stage*, celebrating its unexpected humour:

Where there is sadness it is tempered with rough humour; and where it is maudlin it is countered by raw, Jerry-knocking anecdotes and songs.<sup>55</sup>

The reviews highlight the authentic nature of the piece and the effectiveness of the use of verbatim. Neil Bonner in the *Guardian* wrote:

"Hands Up – For You the War is Ended!" is another stunning success for the Vic company who have once again excelled themselves in bringing local flavour into a subject of general interest...the dialogue is raw and earthy.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> A prominent theatrical voice in 1960s Britain, Arnold Wesker campaigned for wider inclusion in the arts. He set up Centre 42 to promote his populist agenda and to encourage a wider cross-section of society to engage in theatre. Many argue that the experiment was a failure as the Centre had closed by 1970. See Chapter Five, pp. 217-219 for further discussion of the relationship between Cheeseman and Wesker.

<sup>55</sup> *The Stage*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>56</sup> Neil Bonner, 'The Little Man's War', *Newsletter & Guardian*, 21 May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

The production is praised for bringing an authenticity to the topic rather than focusing on ‘all the incredible escapes that were ever daringly carried out’; Bonner suggests it was refreshing to hear the stories of ‘the chaps the film directors often overlook’ and ‘the ordinary blokes who went out to “do their bit”’. Indeed, the *Guardian* highlights the original nature of the piece:

It must be the first time that a theatre has produced an entertainment written, in such a literal sense, by its own audience. And they loved it.<sup>57</sup>

The *Daily Mail* praises the ‘rougner’ aspects of the production:

This tale, told in the quiet, unpretentious accents of the Potteries, exposes the stark inhumanity, the killing, hunger, wounding, maiming, and death with a force beyond the genius of a professional script-writer.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst the *Workers Press* extols the virtues of Cheeseman’s company as an example of community theatre:

This is one of the most exciting revelations of the possibility of a truly people’s theatre...At this moment in time the centre of British theatre is right in the smoky potteries.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, however, the production is criticised in *The Guardian* for its lack of cohesion in the first half:

One of the weaknesses of plays based on war nostalgia ...is their lack of a strong story – the colour supplement bittiness with which they flick through old snapshots from which all the meaning has faded. The first half of “Hands Up” suffers from this impressionism, and I could just as happily have walked in after the interval...It was after the interval that the tale of Frank Bayley ... took over and swept it along.<sup>60</sup>

It is perhaps a justified critique since the company had such a wealth of material to condense into an acceptable length.<sup>61</sup> The first half does run as a series of ‘snapshots’,

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<sup>57</sup> Robin Thornber, ‘Review: Hands Up – For You the War is Ended!’, *The Guardian*, 19 May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick O’Neill, ‘Dad’s real army’, *Daily Mail*, 19 May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Jack Bainbridge, ‘Light in the Smokey [sic] Potteries’, *Workers Press*, 14 June 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>60</sup> Thornber (1971).

<sup>61</sup> The show remained relatively long at a running time including the interval of 2 hours 47 minutes, running time recorded 18 May 1971, held at Victoria Theatre Archive.



jumping from the declaration of war in September 1939 to Wavell's Christmas message to the troops in Egypt in December 1940, for example, in a matter of minutes. Indeed, Cheeseman himself recognised the disparity in the two acts when he commented in his notebook: 'Feel very up & down about the show. 2<sup>nd</sup> part seems interesting now & good. First very patchy'.<sup>62</sup>

Correspondence sent to the theatre and to the local paper, however, suggests that the play was well-received by those who attended, with many comments echoing these from Colonel Hugh Cook of the Staffordshire Regiment:

I would like to congratulate you and your cast on putting on a first class performance. It was realistic, really funny in the right places, and conveyed just the right atmosphere. The choice of songs was jolly good. I think you deserve a distinct pat on the back for producing an ambitious project so successfully and your young actors and actresses for putting it across so well.<sup>63</sup>

Others, such as Miss. Farrar, Head of a local grammar school, regretted the small audience numbers:

I came to see the show and thought it was brilliant, and I thought I'd write to say so because it must be a bit discouraging to have so small an audience.<sup>64</sup>

As did this well-meaning patron who wrote to the *Evening Sentinel* with his comments:

I recently attended a production of 'Hands Up – For You the War is Ended' at the Victoria Theatre, and was privileged to witness a superb performance. The cast were enthusiastically applauded at the close, and I believe that they knew the audience had been thrilled by the play. This must have given them some satisfaction; yet how much more worthwhile it must have been had they been playing to a full house. In fact, the size of the audience was a disgrace for a city whose population exceeds 275,000. ...a theatre having houses which are three-quarters empty cannot expect to retain its present talented actors for long, or to recruit new people. I would guess that Stoke and its environs wish to keep this remarkable institution which many other larger cities would be only too pleased to have. May I therefore make a strong plea to the people of

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<sup>62</sup> Cheeseman (1971).

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Colonel Hugh Cook, Staffordshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales's) to Peter Cheeseman, 19 May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Miss E. Farrar, Head of Clayton Hall Grammar School, to Peter Cheeseman, 4 June 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

North Staffordshire to really support the Victoria Theatre. This can only be done by going there and paying your money.<sup>65</sup>

In his typical forthright style, Cheeseman responded to the letter immediately and his words were published by the paper the following day:

First it is quite wrong to imply that the district does not support the theatre because one particular show does not attract capacity houses. We have just completed expensive theatre extensions inside the theatre in order to meet a demand we were beginning to be unable to satisfy. These days our normal seasonal average audiences total between 65 and 70 percent of capacity which means that a great number of our performances are sold out...But please, let's get right away from the idea that going to the theatre is some kind of good deed, so that it's commendable to the audience when a show goes well and a disgrace to the district when it doesn't. It's very frustrating for all of us working at the Vic when a really good show like *Hands Up* doesn't pack the theatre, but please let's put theatre and music and all the arts where they belong, among the excitement and pleasures of life which they are, and stop treating them as social virtues which they aren't.<sup>66</sup>

A harsh reaction perhaps to a well-meaning letter, but Cheeseman is adamant that Joseph's ideals should be met, and that theatre should be viewed as a 'pleasure' and an 'excitement' not as a duty or social virtue. Nevertheless, Cheeseman does admit in his response that audience figures were disappointing for the run, which indeed they were. In a report to the trustees for the six months to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1971, Vivian Nixon reported that

a reasonable box office for a documentary at the Vic in the summer months would be 50%, but this one only achieved 36% even though we extended its run into the September/October period in the hope that it would catch on in these better months.<sup>67</sup>

This low percentage sounds worse than the 4,108 seats sold; however, it was somewhat short of the predicted 5,659 seats. In a record of the minutes of the Stoke-

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<sup>65</sup> Letter to the Editor from D. J. Gater, Chell, 'Size of audience at theatre was 'a disgrace'', *Evening Sentinel*, 8 June 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman, 'Mr Cheeseman on Vic support, *Evening Sentinel*, 10 June 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>67</sup> Vivian Nixon, *Report to the Trustees for the Six months to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1971*, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

on-Trent and North Staffordshire Theatre Trust Limited in September 1971,

Cheeseman expressed his disappointment:

In reply to a question from Mr. Greenslade, Mr. Cheeseman said that the disappointing audiences for *HANDS UP – FOR YOU THE WAR IS ENDED!* were even more of a mystery. He felt that possibly the title had deterred some people but, of course, we could never be certain of this. The fear that many of our normally young audience would not come to a play about the Second World War had not been realised. In fact, a fair number of young people had attended, but the response had been disappointing among middle-aged people who had been expected to be interested in the subject.<sup>68</sup>

The difficulty of programming is in evidence here, particularly when the theatre was aiming to appeal to a fairly wide cross-section of society.

Whilst the show may not have been a financial success then, it does seem to have had a lasting impact on those who did attend or who were involved in its production.

Frank and Gladys Bayley, for example, became even more closely connected with the theatre, even starring in the *Vic Road Show* in 1974 as news presenters ‘presenting a short spot of local news and events’.<sup>69</sup> Cheeseman contacted all of the interview subjects personally after the production, expressing his sadness that

with all these shows ... we make new friends who become for us very close friends indeed while we are working on them, and have not enough excuse to lure them back down to the theatre again.<sup>70</sup>

As with previous documentaries, *Hands Up* served to further embed the theatre in the community of Hartshill, particularly since Frank Bayley’s newsagent was central to the Hartshill locality. It had a lasting legacy in the community and was revived at the New Vic in 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

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<sup>68</sup> *Minutes of Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Theatre Trust Limited*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>69</sup> *Evening Sentinel*, 15 May 1974, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Jack Attrill, 16 November 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

## Verbatim

*Hands Up* had been the company's first attempt at a fully verbatim documentary. As Cheeseman's confidence and understanding of the form grew, he had become increasingly wedded to the concept of actuality, gradually removing improvised scenes and songs without a definitive association to the subject matter and time period. Since previous documentaries had been largely based on earlier Potteries' histories, exclusive use of verbatim had been impossible. *Hands Up* provided the perfect opportunity to explore the verbatim style – though Cheeseman never used this term himself – in its most complete form. It was Derek Paget who first coined the phrase 'verbatim' in an article for *New Theatre Quarterly* and in the same article attributed the first example of the form to Cheeseman at the Vic.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, the company's philosophy varied radically from current definitions of verbatim theatre.

Robin Soans, for example, in his essay in *Verbatim Verbatim* argues that

the audience for a verbatim play will expect the play to be political ... to declare that, because subjects are real, they have to be portrayed in a way that fictional characters are not, is to undermine the power of the verbatim playwright. It prevents the tailoring of the material to make it political, emotional or even theatrical.<sup>72</sup>

For Cheeseman, this could not have been further from his motivation behind using actuality. His was a constant striving to form 'a totally honest and candid basic relationship with the audience', and the use of recorded material was merely one more way of facilitating this.<sup>73</sup> Further, his use of this material was unbending:

Nothing must be made up, nothing must be invented. No words must be put together by a person who has not got the authority of either having witnessed or participated in those actual events.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Paget (1987).

<sup>72</sup> *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond & Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p. 19 and p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. xvii.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'Documentary Theatre – A Professional Repertory Theatre Perspective', *Documentary Arts Report* (No. 2, 1986), p. 7.

There was no suggestion that the material would be tailored in any way, politically or otherwise. In his essay on verbatim theatre, David Watt argues that Cheeseman's work

is not verbatim theatre concerned to give a middle class audience a brief glimpse into "another world", but theatre artists collaborating with community activists on a political task and, particularly significantly, the making of a theatre as a means by which a community may consolidate itself and clarify its own understandings of the world.<sup>75</sup>

This universal appeal is a quality of verbatim productions that Watt addresses in his 2009 essay. Indeed, he argues that it is a feature that has become increasingly problematic as the style has developed:

In a paradox of globalisation, verbatim plays – often rendered "authentic" by their "localism" – have become "universal" in their appeal to cosmopolitan theatregoers, reducing "authenticity" to the status of yet another global commodity.<sup>76</sup>

He suggests that as contemporary verbatim practices have drifted away from the original localised practices of Cheeseman, there is more potential for a harmful use of the form in which local communities are enjoyed by 'cosmopolitan theatre-goers' precisely because they are presented as other. Julie Salverson agrees, noting in her discussion of Canadian verbatim work, there is a danger that modern audiences of this type of work become 'comfortable in the knowledge that "we" are not "them"'.<sup>77</sup>

Cheeseman had been given these warnings early in his documentary work, after Parker provided candid feedback to the company's 1964 *Jolly Potters* production:

A theatre director trained in the "Arts", and insulated from real life, stands in relation to documentary theatre in the same danger as his fellow radio director stands in relation to documentary radio – that the one is apt to produce radio programmes which do little more than express wide-eyed astonishment that the common people can speak at all coherently – equally the theatre director is

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<sup>75</sup> David Watt, 'Local Knowledges, Memories, and Community: From Oral History to Performance', *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz and E.J. Westlake (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), pp. 189-212 (p. 202).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

in danger of producing documentary theatre which is one long expression of astonishment that history exists.<sup>78</sup>

Parker evidently sees a clear comparison between himself and Cheeseman and the potential risk of approaching the documentary from an educated, middle-class male perspective, without any attempt to accurately depict working-class life and culture. Parker suggests that in Stoke's first documentary there is a danger that the industrial revolution is handled 'in terms of melodrama', with 'good oppressed working people' battling 'vicious tyrannical masters'.<sup>79</sup> The danger of this, he claims, is that

it immediately distances the action and makes it really unrelated to our own experience of human beings. The horror is surely much more significant and manifest if we really do come to realise that the masters who were the pillars of society, though they were good men, really thought that this was Christian behaviour... The problem is to really assert the reality of the experience, the human and eternal human validity of history.<sup>80</sup>

In order to assert this 'reality', Parker advocates the use of actuality since he claims that the inherently contradictory nature of people's experiences

can only be understood by application to the source – the spoken source – to what men say about this contradiction in their lives; the terms they use, the way they express their feelings; to the way they contradict themselves. When a man talks about hating every minute of his work and then in the next breath talks with pride about what he can achieve in it.<sup>81</sup>

By using 'their language, in the whole subtle complex of rhythms, intonation, terminology',<sup>82</sup> Parker suggests that there is a

quality of authority which an audience stops questioning when they hear it. They know that this is the voice of experience that is being given to them.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> 'Documentary Theatre: Some observations prompted by *The Jolly Potters* by the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1964', Charles Parker to Peter Cheeseman (4 August 1964), held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

For Cheeseman, building on the guidance of Parker and Donnellan, it became essential that the company's documentary work was entirely composed of verbatim material, and also that documentary subjects were directly involved in the rehearsal process in order to ensure absolute authenticity. In *Hands Up*, the company's involvement with the prisoners of war and their families is clearly in evidence throughout the rehearsal process, the performance and afterwards. Indeed, after Frank Bayley's untimely death in 1975, many of the *Hands Up* company wrote letters of condolences and contributed to his headstone, with the inscription: 'Remembered with love by old friends at the Vic'.<sup>84</sup> Whilst it remains difficult to quantify the direct impact of each production, from the press response, the audience correspondence and the recollections of company members, there is a sense that each documentary cemented the theatre a little more firmly in the region's psyche. The longer the theatre remained open in Hartshill, and the longer they continued their efforts to discover the genuine stories of the locality, the more they were viewed as a trusted institution. Whilst attendance had been disappointing for *Hands Up* itself, overall audience figures were steadily increasing year on year with the company's ninth season in 1970-71 running at 60% audience capacity of the 343-seat auditorium, compared with 27% audience capacity for their first season in 1962-3. The documentary played an invaluable role in the theatre's repertoire, and although it was by no means the only form of theatre that the company used, it was central to Cheeseman's work. The first ten years of Cheeseman running the Vic were a demonstration of his lifelong philosophies: a dedication to telling stories of and for the district, and a commitment to engaging new audiences in theatre-going.

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<sup>84</sup> Cheeseman (March 1976).

## **Conclusion**

The principal aim of this thesis has been to establish the Victoria Theatre's reputation as a centre for innovative theatre practice in the 1960s and 70s, and to address its relative absence in British theatre historiography. The ground-breaking nature of the work being produced at the Victoria Theatre during this period has been evidenced throughout the thesis, not least as the first permanent theatre-in-the-round in the United Kingdom. The work of Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman in ensuring the success of this venture has been largely forgotten, and their achievement has had a lasting impact on the region of North Staffordshire, as the New Vic Theatre remains one of the country's most successful producing theatres, engaging 180,000 people annually. More widely, Joseph and Cheeseman have impacted on British theatre at a national level, with Joseph having direct architectural influence on a swathe of new theatres built in the regions during this period, and Cheeseman influencing a range of theatre practitioners who have cited their experience in the Vic company as instrumental in their subsequent careers. Considering the pioneering work taking place at the Victoria Theatre during this period, it is extraordinary that there has been so little research conducted on it. Despite the numerous influences that have been acknowledged by writers, actors and directors who worked with Peter Cheeseman during the period, this study is the first in-depth analysis of the company's work, and its far-reaching impact on British theatre. Working in-the-round set the Victoria Theatre apart from many other regional theatres at the time, since its style and approach to presenting theatre was so unique. It allowed the company to develop a style of presentation that emphasised storytelling, quickly engaging the audience in an intimate relationship with the actor on stage. This was aided by minimal set and intricate sound design, allowing the audience to fully immerse themselves in the



represented action. Further, the presence of audience on all sides of the stage was representative of Joseph and Cheeseman's philosophy: that the action on stage was at the centre of the community, and needed to be useful to it. The theatre has been seen as forerunner in a wave of theatre that was concerned with its immediate community and championed the idea of theatre-going as a useful, social activity. It was for this reason, amongst others, that Cheeseman developed his documentary style, and if the Victoria Theatre has been recognised at all, it is recognised as innovator in this field. Whilst Cheeseman has been acknowledged for his ground-breaking work in documentary theatre, this thesis seeks to deepen understanding of the methods used to create the documentaries, with a particular focus on the company's first fully verbatim production, *Hands Up – For You the War is Ended!*, and to re-emphasise Cheeseman's importance as the first to present verbatim theatre in this way, which can all too often be wrongly attributed to other practitioners. The analysis of Cheeseman's personal notebook, which has never been examined previously, gives a fresh insight into the documentary process, and reveals why the verbatim style became so advantageous for the company, as well as exploring the international influence of the Stoke style.

The thesis has also emphasised the wide range of other innovative work taking place under Cheeseman's direction. Whilst the documentaries have been more widely critiqued in studies of verbatim practice and political theatre, it is important that the Vic's work on these productions is viewed in the context of the company's work as a whole. The documentary was never intended to be the flagship work of the company and was certainly never undertaken in order to be on trend. The scope of work demonstrated in the thesis emphasises the extent to which the documentaries made up just one part of the theatre's repertoire, all of which was conceived with the

community in mind. Children's theatre at the Vic, for example, paved the way for high quality drama, using the original company to perform for an audience of children in the main theatre, ensuring that it was treated with respect by both audiences and actors alike. The research shows the impact the theatre had on the area with the improved quality of the work for children, heavily influenced by the innovative work of Brian Way and Theatre Centre. Whilst Cheeseman was unsuccessful in establishing a separate children's theatre, his ongoing commitment to this work is another illustration of a theatre philosophy that was embedded in every strand of the company's work. Again, the thesis highlights the importance of children's theatre at Stoke-on-Trent which has never been previously studied in the analyses of Cheeseman's work.

Further, the inclusion of new writing in the Vic's repertoire is rarely mentioned, nor is their work to encourage and support new writers in the industry. This, of course, is a wider problem in British theatre history – that narratives spring only from London theatres, and so new writing in the 1960s seems only to have taken place at the Royal Court and Stratford East. Whilst the importance of new writing in London cannot be denied, there is a danger that much of the critical writing on this period centres on the work of George Devine and Joan Littlewood, to the detriment of new writers and directors who were working in theatres throughout the United Kingdom. Stephen Lacey, for example, identifies the Scottish writers producing working-class realist theatre in the late forties and fifties, and Claire Cochrane notes the developing 'pattern' of regional theatre being a 'combination of classical texts and intellectually authorised new drama'.<sup>1</sup> Playwrights mentioned in correspondence in the early period

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in Its Context 1956-1965* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), p. and Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre, Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 166.

show the scale of the new writing talent, including Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Plater, Peter Terson, Tony Perrin, C. G. Bond, Ken Campbell, Shane Connaughton, and many others. Cheeseman also pioneered the role of the resident writer: a writer, funded by the Arts Council, to live in and understand the community for whom he or she was writing. In both his own correspondence and in the interview carried out for this study, Terson presents his individual and intimate relationship with the theatre, and gives real insight into the working life of a new writer in the late 1960s. This account demonstrates that important work was being done to engage writers outside of London, and that the Royal Court was not the only centre of excellence that championed new writing during the period.

The third and final aim of the thesis was to examine the importance of the Victoria Theatre as a pioneering company outside of London. The decision to locate the permanent base in North Staffordshire, particularly when following Stephen Joseph's philosophies of theatre-in-the-round, made the Victoria Theatre particularly unique in early 1960s Britain. As the first permanent theatre-in-the-round in the UK, the company's work deserves further scrutiny, and this study builds on the important work done by Paul Elsam in his study of Joseph and Studio Theatre Company.<sup>2</sup>

Working in-the-round was more than just a formal innovation, however; it became central to the company's ethos of connecting with the locality. The space allowed the company to engage closely with the four rows of audience, exploiting the intimacy in their role as storytellers. Working in-the-round chimed with the philosophies of Joseph and Cheeseman, encouraging actors to be viewed by the audience as simple raconteurs. These stories ranged from the classics to local documentaries, from new writing to plays for children. From the outset, Cheeseman had demonstrated complete

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

commitment to Stoke-on-Trent, despite the bad press the area had received culturally, and numerous personal opportunities for him to venture outside of the region.<sup>3</sup> His thirty-six year tenure is confirmation of his complete dedication to the cause, and his unwavering ambition to develop a special relationship with the North Staffordshire district, in order to create high-quality and relevant theatre for the region. His drive ensured that the Vic company became embedded in the industrial region of North Staffordshire, and that actors who joined the company recognised that the role of an actor at the Vic should be that of a worker committed to his or her community, rather than as an aspiring celebrity on the way to West End success. This shared ambition to bring high-quality drama to North Staffordshire resulted in him bringing together a committed collective of like-minded actors. Cheeseman was certainly not the only director to work with a permanent company, indeed Anthony Jackson marks the period as ‘a veritable renaissance in the history of the repertory movement’.<sup>4</sup> In Britain in the 1960s and 70s, the permanent company was often held as an ideal of the movement, however, many directors found the practicalities too difficult. Regional theatre directors struggled to maintain a company of actors which was interested in relocating, and to find a variety of plays suitable for a fixed company of actors. The few who did maintain a permanent company, such as Liverpool’s Everyman or Manchester’s Library theatres, were often smaller and endeavouring to fulfil a specific role within their communities. Cheeseman is named by Jackson in his summary of the repertory movement during this period as a director who ‘has done more than most to sustain the ideal’ of the permanent company in practice.<sup>5</sup> He was

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<sup>3</sup> For example, after the dispute with Stephen Joseph in 1967, Cheeseman was offered an RSC production by Peter Hall, and a post in the drama directing team at ABC television by Lloyd Shirley. Both of which he declined in order to continue his role at the Vic.

<sup>4</sup> George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Rowell and Jackson (1984), p. 119.

undoubtedly committed to the ideals of collective working, with long-term contracts and requirements for actors to relocate to Stoke-on-Trent. Building on Jackson's study, the original interview material endorses the theory that the company operated as a close familial unit, with Cheeseman as the undisputed figurehead. Since the Vic company shunned the idea of using well-known actors to attract audiences, many of those interviewed for this study have never been questioned previously on their experience of working as a permanent company under Cheeseman. The opportunity of recording many company members has been already missed because they have passed away; it seems pertinent that these specific details and personal memories are documented to ensure our understanding of the company's organisation, and provide a unique contribution to our perception of regional repertory theatre during the period.

### **The Forgotten Pioneers**

Why, then, has the Vic been overlooked in British theatre history? Elsam makes a strong case in his introduction to Joseph's work:

The established narrative within British fringe theatre history broadly dismisses experimental activity in the 1940s and early 1950s, and almost always locates London's Royal Court Theatre as pivotal within Britain's post-1955, post-*Look Back in Anger* theatre revolution. Selective memorializing was taking place almost as quickly as experimentation was occurring. In 1959 Stephen Joseph was goaded into a direct challenge to *Daily Telegraph* critic W. A. Darlington's labelling of the Court as 'the only nursery of national importance'; Darlington's statement ignored Joseph's own radical five-seasons-long touring of in-the-round productions of new plays to the capital.<sup>6</sup>

It should not be assumed, however, that the Victoria Theatre remained in the shadows during this period. On the contrary, the theatre steadily grew in recognition both in the immediate district and at a more national level. The theatre had at least one critic from a national newspaper at the opening night of most performances, and was championed

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<sup>6</sup> Elsam (2014), p. 6.

by Leonard White, producer of Armchair Theatre, leading to several television productions of the theatre's plays, as well as a number of BBC documentaries on the theatre's work. According to Baz Kershaw, Cheeseman finds himself on the edge of two camps: 'the fringe of alternative theatre' and 'the margins of the mainstream', and yet, I would argue, this marginalisation has occurred only in subsequent theatre histories.<sup>7</sup> This study demonstrates the contemporary view of the Victoria Theatre as a centre of excellence during the 1960s and 70s, and its recognition by theatre practitioners of the pioneering work that was being undertaken there.

In the area of documentary, Cheeseman's work has not been forgotten. Derek Paget's research has revealed just how influential Cheeseman has been in this field, naming him as the originator of verbatim practice. It is interesting, however, that in both Paget and David Watt's study, there is a suggestion that his work at the Vic can be easily overlooked in the history of verbatim. Paget:

What is significant is that work such as Charles Parker's and even Cheeseman's is now often being received by younger practitioners through the *tradition* it established, rather than from direct experience of the work itself.<sup>8</sup>

Watt develops the argument, emphasising that not only is the work not being experienced directly by practitioners, it is being erased entirely:

The "tradition" has become somewhat attenuated by now, as indicated by recent claims about where it all came from, for example, on the website of Recorded Delivery, the company founded by Alecky Blythe following the success of her verbatim play, *Come Out Eli*, in 2003, one finds the claim that it was "Anna Deavere Smith who first combined the journalistic technique of interviewing subjects from all walks of life with the art of recreating their exact words in performance" ("Recorded Delivery"), and this is a not an uncommon view in the USA in particular.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Baz Kershaw, 'Theatre and Community: Alternative and Community Theatre in Britain, 1960-1985; An investigation into cultural history and performance efficacy. (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter, 1991), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Paget, 'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1987), pp. 317-336 (p. 319).

<sup>9</sup> David Watt, 'Local Knowledges, Memories, and Community: From Oral History to Performance', *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz and E. J. Westlake (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), pp. 189-212 (p. 197).

This misunderstanding may have arisen, as Watt claims, due to the fact that recent verbatim theatre has 'largely been produced in ignorance of its antecedents' or that Cheeseman's work took documentary theatre 'in another direction entirely'.<sup>10</sup> From the outset, Cheeseman refused to hold a definitively political stance and yet, Watt argues that his work had 'a political bite of a different kind'.<sup>11</sup> By collaborating closely with community groups, the theatre was able to present often unheard voices, and to address issues that were significant for them both historically and in the present. As Graham Woodruff comments in a more recent article on the Vic's 1991 documentary, *Nice Girls*:

Cheeseman believes that it is through the story that the politics will emerge. The theatre acts as the advocate of the people who live the events, and it is up to the audience to discover the truth behind the tale.<sup>12</sup>

Cheeseman's focus on this community aspect, however, has often meant that the theatre has been ignored in histories with a focus on alternative or political theatre. The theatre has a notable section in Kershaw's dissertation, for example, in which he describes Cheeseman's work on *Fight for Shelton Bar*. However, it is described as being very much on the periphery of other political work that was taking place in the early 1970s:

So to find a show by a company resident in a single community that we can usefully contrast with *The Cheviot*.., we have to move to the fringe of alternative theatre, or, more accurately perhaps, the margins of the mainstream. There we can cite Peter Cheeseman's Victoria Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent as an honorary member of the oppositional movement, even though, strictly speaking, it was operationally part of the repertory theatre system.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Graham Woodruff, 'Nice Girls': the Vic Gives a Voice to Women of the Working Class', *New Theatre Quarterly* 11.42 (1995), pp. 109-127 (p. 119).

<sup>13</sup> Kershaw (1991), p. 212.

For this reason, perhaps, the content on Cheeseman is notably absent from Kershaw's publication, *The Politics of Performance*, based on his thesis. This position may also account for a lack of coverage of the Vic's documentaries, with Cheeseman's work often cited as an adjunct to political movements at the time. For example, he is featured in the introduction to Catherine Itzin's *Stages of the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*:

There were certain developments in British theatre in the seventies, important and 'political' in their own distinctive ways, but only peripherally related to the 'mainstream' political theatre movement. Peter Cheeseman, for example...was motivated by a desire to create a truly local 'community' theatre.<sup>14</sup>

There is recognition of the importance of the work but it is overlooked in terms of extensive discussion, since it does not fit the remit of Itzin's study. Similarly, Cheeseman is referenced in Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty's recent work on community theatre:

Graham Woodruff at Birmingham was a very influential figure, and it is notable that Gerri Moriarty, Steve Trow, Stephen Lacey, Chrissie Poulter, and Cathy Mackerras all studied under Woodruff and all went on to set up community arts companies. Mackerras remembers Woodruff urging his students to look at the work of Albert Hunt and Ed Berman and telling them, 'Never mind what's going on at Stratford – the most interesting theatre in the country is happening up in Stoke'.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite this recognition of Cheeseman's influence, there is no further exploration of his work at Stoke. The Vic is largely absented from studies such as this on community theatre perhaps because it is working in a traditional repertory model, which often seems at odds with grass-roots movements that were

positioned against the hierarchies of the international arts world and its criteria for success founded upon quality, skill, virtuosity etc.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> Alison Jeffers, *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British Community Arts Movement* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso: London and New York, 2012), p. 177.



It falls between two camps and is not therefore covered extensively in any recent publication.

Equally, it could be argued that the Vic is only one of a number of regional theatres whose important work has remained undocumented until fairly recently. In

Cochrane's study, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire*, she argues convincingly:

Until comparatively recently writers of British theatre history have displayed what Benedict Anderson, writing more broadly about nationalism, termed 'an unselfconscious provincialism'. Anderson was targeting European scholars 'accustomed to the conceit that everything important in the modern world originated in Europe'. I would argue that a similar unexamined prejudice has driven much British theatre history to skew the records towards the assumption that everything important in British theatre happened in London.<sup>17</sup>

Strangely, Cochrane includes no mention of Stoke-on-Trent in her wide-ranging study. Understandably, in a study such as this, it is impossible to include every theatre and movement, particularly as Cochrane has endeavoured to include work from the whole of the United Kingdom. It remains surprising, however, that there is not even a brief mention of Cheeseman's work, given his significance and longevity in regional theatre. This study has demonstrated the need to include Stoke in regional theatre historiography in order to give a full picture of the important work that was taking place in a variety of locations outside London.

### **Working-class audience**

A critical aspect of the pioneering was Cheeseman's search for a working-class audience, and here the company had mixed success. Contemporary accounts attest to

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<sup>17</sup> Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre, Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 2.

the theatre's authenticity and often highlight the Vic as a theatre in which policies were truly being acted upon rather than merely discussed in theory:

London always seems to be full of high-minded chaps in trendy clothes forever gassing about the need to provide the people in industrial towns with worthwhile theatre. Well, here, in the Hartshill-road, Peter Cheeseman actually does it for 50 weeks in the year. He not only offers the classics but new plays and documentaries which are a direct reflection of life as the Potteries live it. He has made it their theatre in a very special sense - and they know it.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst there are countless testimonies of this kind, however, it remains difficult to quantify how successful Cheeseman was in achieving his aim of making the Vic accessible to everyone. As David Bradby and John McCormick state in *People's Theatre*:

Even where theatres are established in working-class areas, or in places formerly deprived of theatre, there are formidable political, social and psychological barriers still to be overcome before the theatre is genuinely accessible at all. As Berman pointed out, 'a theatre is not a community theatre just by virtue of being situated in a community'.<sup>19</sup>

Cheeseman was aware of the challenges he faced in Stoke-on-Trent from the outset and arguably, he was spurred on by them. He recognised the difficulty in making the theatre welcoming for all, particularly in an industrial community in which many shared steelworker Albert Cooper's view that

I'd heard a lot about the Vic and how good it was but I sort of thought of it a bit like medicine – good for you but not particularly palatable.<sup>20</sup>

Cheeseman was committed to providing a high standard of productions at Stoke:

At no time has he gone in for what might be termed 'popular rep'. 'I think the idea that you can present crap to audiences and then wean them on to something you call cultural theatre is the biggest and oldest theatrical fallacy in existence. I can hardly believe it is in existence. If you put on crap, then crap-loving audiences will come. You must start as you mean to go on and then build your creative merits. Don't imagine they'll come and see an Agatha Christie one week and then turn up to *Waiting for Godot* a few weeks later – they won't. We who work in the subsidized theatre carry a heavy

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Coady, *Daily Mirror*, May 1971, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>19</sup> David Bradby and John McCormick's *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Cooper, *Interview with Albert Cooper* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

responsibility because we use public money. If we put on rubbish, then we're rapping on that responsibility. Of course, people will come and see that rubbish if it is put on prettily, especially if they have no choice.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, Cheeseman was acutely aware that

above all, our programme must be accessible to the broadly based audience we seek. We have learned, as a company, a great deal about the peculiar character of the Stoke audience, particularly about its sense of humour.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst making the theatre as accessible as possible, then, Cheeseman was also keen to provide a high standard of entertainment that pushed the boundaries for conventional repertory theatre audiences. Perhaps because of this, the audience at the Vic was unusually young, with over 60% being under 25.<sup>23</sup> In terms of class, it is difficult to gather a sense of how far Cheeseman was successful in attracting working-class local residents to the theatre:

Socially our audiences are very hard to place, particularly in the Potteries where social distinction is less practised in rituals of dress than many other areas.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, in an article on the theatre in 1971, Jim Lagden claimed that 'the truth is that audiences remain drawn from very clearly defined classes' and that 'all these classes are clearly defined as middle-class'.<sup>25</sup> Alan Plater, however, placed the Vic in a different league when it came to attracting a variety of audience members:

There are splendid exceptions to this rule – the Stoke Victoria, Liverpool Everyman, Hull Arts Centre and others – but the brooding observer of West End theatres and the posher regional spots can be forgiven if he decides that many people come for the intervals rather than the spaces in between. The workers – and we have to use the word sooner or later – stay away, because they know intuitively that theatre is a middle-class institution in the social sense and – for the most part – in terms of what is presented on the stage.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Cook, *Directors' Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Cheeseman, *Victoria Theatre Report on first season 9 October 1962 to 3 August 1963*, held at the Victoria Theatre Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Cheeseman, 'A Community Theatre-in-the-Round', *National Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (1971), p. 80

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Jim Lagden, 'Professionals, Amateurs and Students', *Theatre Quarterly* 1.1 (1971), p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Plater, 'The Playwright and His People', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1.2 (1971), p. 67.

When questioned in interviews, members of the Vic theatre company found it difficult to assess the class distribution of their audiences. Alan David, for example, claimed that whilst it was undoubtedly the aim of Cheeseman to attract ‘people who’d never been to the theatre’, he believed that ‘we failed because ... an audience fixedly stays at middle-class I think’.<sup>27</sup> Peter Terson, on the contrary, suggests that Cheeseman was successful in his ambition because of his commitment to the district:

He would always be delighted that Mrs. Muggins was in you know or Mr. Walton so in that the people around him, the people near him were very, very close and had never been to the theatre before probably and he did get to know people.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst it remains generally difficult to find evidence to support the make-up of audiences in any theatre, it is undeniable that the documentaries at the Vic succeeded in drawing in a different sort of audience, often one which had a particular interest in the topic of the production. The ongoing relationships forged during *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* are testament to the involvement of the local community in Cheeseman’s work. Similarly, *Fight for Shelton Bar* saw steelworkers and union members both involved in rehearsals and being members of the audience. During the run of *The Burning Mountain* too, which told the story of Hugh Bourne and primitive Methodism in Staffordshire, Cheeseman recalled that

entire congregations came from Manchester, as well as from the local Methodist circuit. That seems right and proper. We would prefer people to come for the plays themselves rather than some kind of ‘cultural’ experience.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, it remains very difficult to quantify how far local residents attended the theatre after this initial involvement during a documentary; however, for Cheeseman, every individual who had not attended the theatre previously but enjoyed a visit to the

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<sup>27</sup> Alan David, *Interview with Alan David* (interviewed by the author, 16 April 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Peter Terson, *Interview with Peter Terson* (interviewed by the author, 6 November 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Cheeseman (1971), p. 80.

Vic, remained a success story. The quality of the company's productions certainly seemed to impact on overall audience figures during this period, with the yearly attendance rising from 27% in 1962-3 to 66% by 1969-70. Almost regardless of the outcome, Cheeseman was entirely committed to making the theatre work in the region of North Staffordshire, and his long tenure was testament to his unending dedication to pursuing Joseph's initial ambitions.

### **Afterword**

This study covers only the first nine years of the Victoria Theatre's history, however, the ethos of the company that was formalised in these initial years remained consistent throughout Cheeseman's thirty-six year tenure. The company maintained their growing success in the 1970s and early 1980s, with audience figures continuing to increase. Supported by Jennie Lee as first Minister of the Arts and Arts Council funding, they were able to expand their work within the community, offering services such as playschemes for local children, actor visits to Mother and Baby groups and touring the Vic Roadshow to local pubs and working-men's clubs, in order to fully establish the theatre as a service to the surrounding district. This effort ensured that there were enough willing participants to support the company when Cheeseman was finally successful in locating a base for a larger, purpose-built theatre-in-the-round. Between 1968 and 1978, Cheeseman had been offered around fifty sites for a new theatre but these were either withdrawn or were not suitable. Finally, in 1982, over twenty years after Stephen Joseph's initial plans for a theatre-in-the-round in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Cheeseman 'peered through the hawthorn branches of an overgrown garden at Stoneyfields, Newcastle and decided this was the ideal site to

build the New Vic'.<sup>30</sup> The £3.2 million project was aided by the Vic Appeal – a scheme set up by the theatre to fundraise for the new site. Albert Cooper, who became Treasurer of the Appeal Committee, recalls a variety of activities, such as jumble sales and sponsored marathons, as well as charity nights held at the Vic with familiar faces from the theatre's past. As Cooper remarked: 'all regional theatres talk about community activities but that really was one, wasn't it? ... We built the bloody place!'<sup>31</sup> The theatre was to house an extra 219 seats, as well as luxurious front-of-house and backstage facilities. Cheeseman, though, was keen to demonstrate that despite the more glamorous surroundings, the theatre had lost none of its original spirit. Rather than opening the theatre with a lavish spectacular, Cheeseman selected *St George of Scotia Road* written by local playwright, Arthur Berry whose work had first been performed at the Vic in 1976. The first season at the New Vic, in fact, followed much the same pattern as any season at the Vic in Hartshill: new writing from Berry, Chris Martin and Tony Perrin; classics such as *King Lear*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *Private Lives*; an Alan Ayckbourn production; modern classics such as Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* and Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*; an adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and a Christmas children's show, *Alice in Wonderland*. However, rather than audiences clamouring for a seat in the new building, audience figures were disappointing with the average figure for the first season at just 41%. Undeterred, Cheeseman set about rebuilding his audience base from Hartshill but found the early years in the new building increasingly difficult. With more seats to fill, pressure was mounting from the Arts Council to see how Cheeseman would manage this larger, more extravagant project. The mid-1980s was not a good time to

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<sup>30</sup> 'The New Vic – a delight delayed', *New Vic News*, (July 1986), p. 2

<sup>31</sup> Albert Cooper, *Interview with Albert Cooper* (interviewed by the author, 22 January 2018).

be starting such a venture, however. Anthony Jackson notes that the 1980s was a difficult period for regional reps in general, in which ‘the crisis in arts funding was hitting building-based companies especially severely’, and ‘funding levels in real terms fell’.<sup>32</sup> Faced with funding cuts and falling audience figures, Cheeseman was forced to reduce the company’s work in education and outreach, in order to continue to produce the required standard of productions in the new space.

The funding crises continued throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s, but by 1989, Cheeseman had employed two key figures who acted as tremendous support for him during the remainder of his tenure: Bob Eaton and Rob Swain. Rob Swain, who became Cheeseman’s right-hand man formed a close relationship with Cheeseman, understanding his working methods and taking a key role in research for the new documentaries, such as *Nice Girls* (1993). Eaton developed the rock and roll musicals that became the New Vic’s trump card. *Good Golly Miss Molly* was written and directed by Eaton in 1989, and built on Cheeseman’s documentary style. The production told the story of the Hawes Street Residents Action Committee in Tunstall, who were campaigning against Stoke-on-Trent City Council’s Urban Renewal Scheme which was set to implement a six year period of demolition, destroying the homes of over three hundred people. Eaton combined the interviews and stories of these residents with well-known rock and roll music, played by a live band, which culminated with the audience being invited onto the stage to dance. News and positive reviews spread quickly, and the production was so successful that it was revived three times before Cheeseman retired.

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<sup>32</sup> Anthony Jackson, ‘From “Rep” to “Regional” – some reflections on the state of regional theatre in the 1980s’, *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 16.

After such a lengthy tenure, retirement was never going to be an easy option for Cheeseman, and he described the end of his time at the New Vic as being given the ‘golden boot’. An interview with the local newspaper six years later, records his frustration:

He criticises those responsible for such decision making for not understanding the need for continuity in theatres, accusing them of being obsessed with the word ‘innovation’ in their mission statements. He says: “I felt bitter, angry, sad, and resigned to the fact that there was nothing I could do about it”.<sup>33</sup>

Having poured his whole life’s energies into building the theatre, being made to leave for the sake of encouraging ‘innovation’, or because as he saw it ‘Local authorities and regional arts boards and arts councils do not believe that anybody should carry on working over 65’, seems an unhappy end to a career full of dedication to the district.<sup>34</sup> In the 1998 New Year’s Honour’s List, he was appointed CBE for his services to drama.

This study builds on the work of Ros Merkin, Claire Cochrane et al. in re-addressing the often forgotten but influential work in theatre that was taking place throughout the regions of Great Britain. As it covers only the first nine years of the Victoria Theatre’s history, however, I hope it will be a starting-point rather than a final word on the work of this innovative theatre company. The archive is currently in the process of being catalogued, and is applying for funding to digitise certain parts of the collection. This should enable a wider audience to access the archive, and to begin research into other important work that was taking place at the Vic throughout the 1970s-1990s, including the Vic Roadshows and ‘Quality of Life’ outreach projects, the theatre’s survival during the arts funding crises of the 1980s, and the fundraising for and development of the first purpose-built theatre-in-the-round in the UK in 1986.

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<sup>33</sup> ‘A leading role played behind the scenes’, *Sentinel on Sunday*, (8 February 2004), p. 13

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

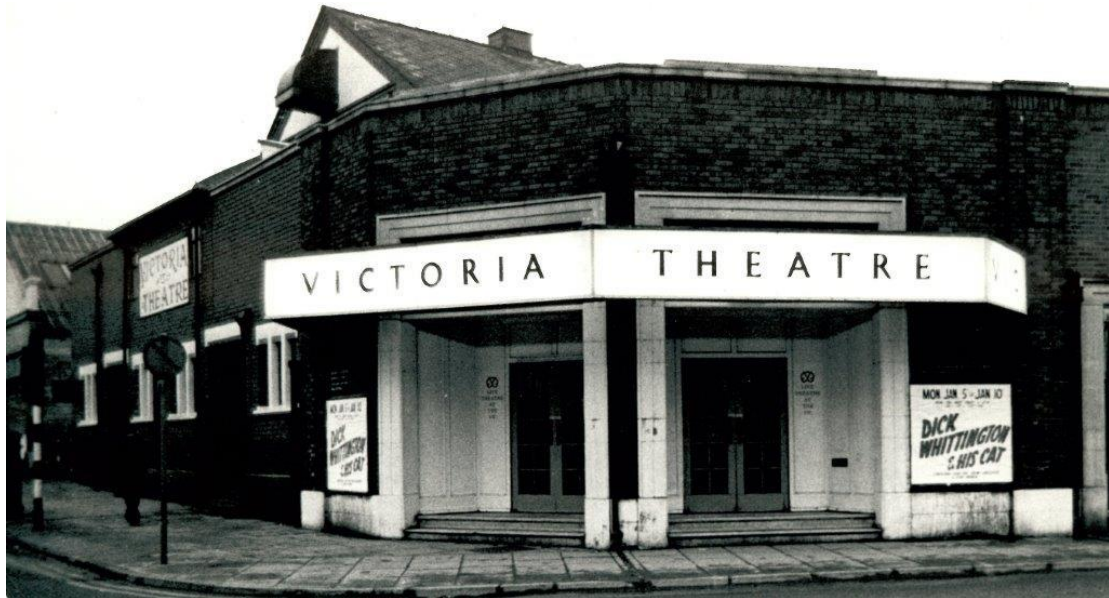


This study too has added to the resources for future scholars, particularly in the completion of a range of interviews which have brought previously unheard voices into the history of the company.

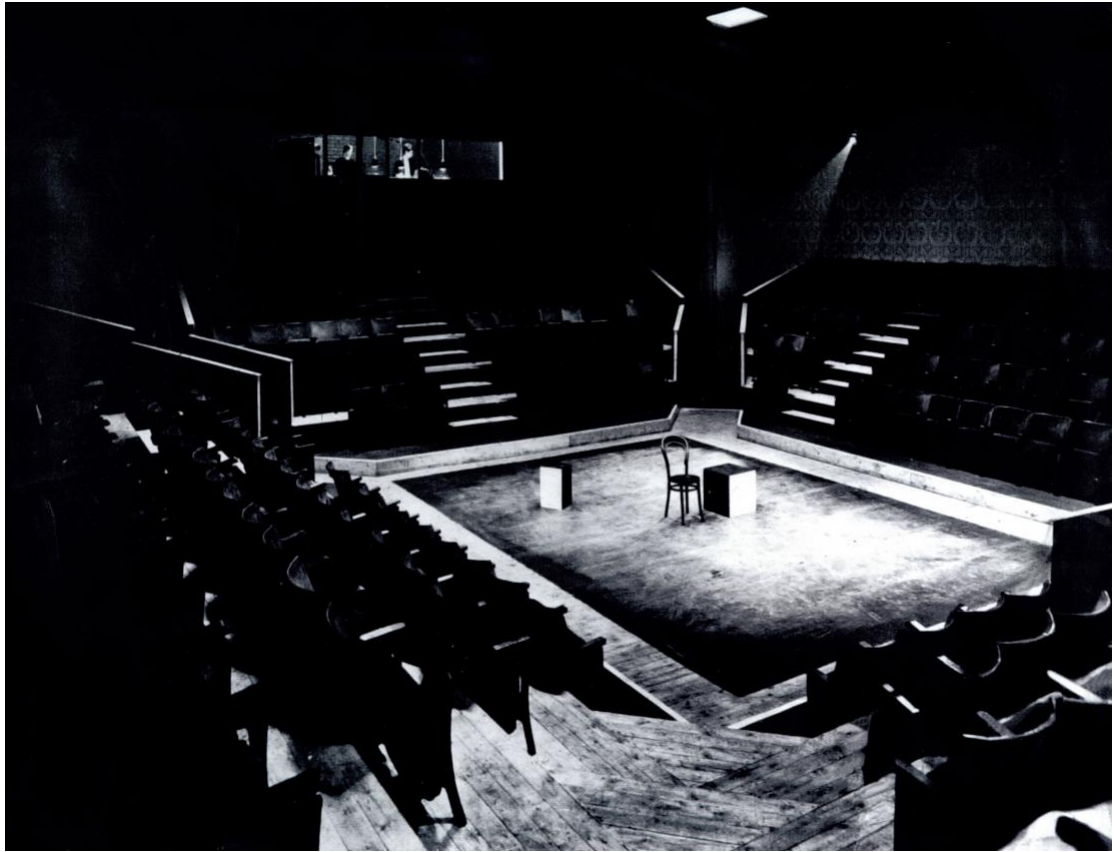
Whilst the work of Peter Cheeseman and the Victoria Theatre Company has not been entirely absent from theatre historiography, this thesis provides strong evidence to suggest that the artistic range and pioneering nature of that work has not been fully recognised, and deserves to be examined more widely. Under Cheeseman's direction the Victoria Theatre was established as a vibrant regional theatre for North Staffordshire, which had a lasting impact on its community, and on the development of British theatre more generally. It was a ground-breaking theatre, and its work deserves to be celebrated and remembered, in and for itself, and as part of a fuller and more detailed history of regional theatrical practice across the UK in the post-war period.

## Illustrations

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University of Staffordshire*



**Exterior of the Victoria Theatre, Hartshill Road (1970)**



**Interior of the Victoria Theatre (1962)**



**Peter Cheeseman and Peter Terson standing on the stage-cloth of *The Knotty*, (1966), photographer Ian Stone**



**Research for *Hands Up - For You the War is Ended!* (1971), from l to r: Jeff Parton, musical director, Bill Armitt, Frank Bayley (ex-POWs), Peter Cheeseman, photographer Richard Smiles**

## List of Interviews

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Date Interviewed</b>
Brown, Gillian	Company Member - actor, musician, director (1965-1971)	12 April 2018
Cheeseman (nee Saunders), Romy	Company Member (1971-1974), later wife of Peter Cheeseman, currently Honorary Archivist of the Victoria Theatre Collection	22 November 2018
Cooper, Albert	Member of Action Committee leading to <i>Fight for Shelton Bar</i> (1970s), later Treasurer of the Vic Appeal (1984-1994)	22 January 2018
Daniels, Ron	Company Member - actor, director (1964-1967)	6 November 2017
David, Alan	Company Member - actor, director (1968-1973)	16 April 2018
Day (nee Gartside), Barbara	ASM and production secretary (1968-1971)	13 November 2017
Granville, Steven	Company Member – actor (1974-1998)	22 January 2018
Griffiths (nee Weaver), Hilary	Wardrobe mistress (1977-1981)	16 October 2017
Jay, Caroline	Company Member – actor (1978-1981)	27 November 2017
Martin, Chris	Company Member – actor, director, playwright (1964-1970)	10 April 2017
Mason, George and Mona	Local shopkeepers (1971)	26 September 2003
Nixson, Viv and Carolyn (nee Black)	Business manager and production secretary	5 January 2018
Plant, Keith	Vic volunteer (1970), later Trustee and member of the Vic Appeal Committee	16 October 2017
Terson, Peter	Resident playwright (1966-67), ongoing connection with the theatre during Cheeseman's tenure	6 November 2018
Turner, Michael	Vic volunteer (1965-1974)	13 September 2017
Warwick, Jasmine	Secretary to Peter Cheeseman (1971-1973)	9 October 2017

**List of Productions at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent (1962-1972)**

(\* denotes the first production of a new play; \*\* denotes first stage production of a television play)

FIRST SEASON 1962/63 ( 42 WEEKS)							
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 27%)							
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director	
1962	9-Oct	*	The Birds and the Wellwishers	William	Norfolk	Peter	Cheeseman
	15-Oct		The Man of Destiny <i>and</i>	George Bernard	Shaw	Peter	Cheeseman
			O' Flaherty V.C.	George Bernard	Shaw	Peter	Cheeseman
	22-Oct		The Caretaker	Harold	Pinter	Alan	Ayckbourn
	5-Nov		Usher	Edgar Allen	Poe	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>Adapted by</i> David	Campton	<i>and</i> David	Campton
	3-Dec		The Rainmaker	N.Richard	Nash	Arnold	Beck
26-Dec	*	Christmas V Mastermind	Alan	Ayckbourn	Peter	Cheeseman	
1963	21-Jan	**	The Referees <i>and</i>	Alan	Plater	Alan	Ayckbourn
			The Mating Season	Alan	Plater	Alan	Ayckbourn
	11-Feb		The Rehearsal	Jean	Anouilh	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>translated by</i> Hansford	Johnson		
				<i>and</i> Kitty	Black		
	4-Mar		Waiting for Godot	Samuel	Becket	Arnold	Beck
	25-Mar	*	An Awkward Number	William	Norfolk	Peter	Cheeseman
	15-Apr		Standing Room Only	Alan	Ayckbourn	Alan	Ayckbourn
							<i>costumes by</i>
	13-May		A Man For All Seasons	Robert	Bolt	Peter	Cheeseman
	10-Jun		Miss Julie <i>and</i>	August	Strindberg	Alan	Ayckbourn
				<i>translated by</i> Michael	Meyer		
		**	The Rainbow Machine	Alan	Plater	Alan	Ayckbourn
					<i>assisted by</i>		
					Caroline	Smith	
1-Jul		Two for the Seesaw	William	Gibson	Caroline	Smith	

*The Birds and the Wellwishers' and 'Usher' were first presented by the Company at Scarborough in Summer 1962.*



SECOND SEASON 1963/64 ( 50 WEEKS)							
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 38%)							
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director	
1963	20-Aug		Billy Liar	Keith	Waterhouse	Peter	Cheeseman
				and Willis	Hall		
	10-Sep		The Dumb Waiter <i>and</i>	Harold	Pinter	Peter	Cheeseman
			The Collection	Harold	Pinter	Peter	Cheeseman
	17-Sep		The Fourposter	Jan	de hartog	Caroline	Smith
	8-Oct	*	Ted's Cathedral	Alan	Plater	Peter	Cheeseman
	22-Oct		Gaslight	Patrick	Hamilton	Bernard	Gallagher
	12-Nov	*	Mr Whatnot	Alan	Ayckbourn	Alan	Ayckbourn
	3-Dec		The Prisoner	Bridget	Boland	Heather	Stoney
	26-Dec		Pinocchio	Brian	Way	Peter	Cheeseman
				and Warren	Jenkins		
1964	21-Jan		The Private Ear <i>and</i>	Peter	Shaffer	Carolne	Smith
			The Public Eye	Peter	Shaffer	David	Spencer
	11-Feb		The Glass Menagerie	Tennessee	Williams	Alan	Ayckbourn
	10-Mar		The Jew of Malta	Christopher	Marlowe	Peter	Cheeseman
	30-Mar		Rattle of a Simple Man	Charles	Dyer	Bernard	Gallagher
	21-Apr		Candida	George Bernard	Shaw	Peter	Cheeseman
	18-May		The Dock Brief <i>and</i>	John	Mortimer	Danny	Schiller
			I Spy	John	Mortimer	David	Spencer
	23-Jun	*	A Night to Make the Angels Weep	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
	14-Jul	*	<b>The Jolly Potters</b>	<b>1st Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	Peter	Cheeseman

THIRD SEASON 1964/65 (50 WEEKS)						
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 50%)						
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director
1964	25-Aug		Look Back in Anger	John	Osborne	Tom Spencer
	22-Sep		A Resounding Tinkle <i>and</i>	N.F.	Simpson	Danny Schiller
			The Lover	Harold	Pinter	Danny Schiller
	28-Sep	*	The Mighty Reservooy	Peter	Terson	Peter Cheeseman
	27-Oct		King Lear	William	Shakespeare	Peter Cheeseman
						<i>Costumes by</i>
	17-Nov		Fairy Tales of New York	J.P.	Donleavy	Bernard Gallagher
15-Dec	*	Sleeping Beauty	Brian	Way	Peter Cheeseman	
1965	19-Jan		Above and Below ( <i>triple bill with...</i> )	David	Campton	Peter Cheeseman
			Mutatis Mutandis ( <i>then...</i> )	David	Campton	Peter Cheeseman
			Little Brother, Little Sister.	David	Campton	Peter Cheeseman
	9-Feb		An Inspector Calls	J.B.	Priestley	Peter Cheeseman
	2-Mar		Five to a Flat	Valentin	Kataev	Bernard Gallagher
				<i>adapted by Basil</i>	Ashmore	
	23-Mar		As You Like It	William	Shakespeare	Peter Cheeseman
	19-Apr	*	The Three Musketeers	Alexandre	Dumas	Peter Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Brian</i>	Way	
	17-May	**	A Smashing Day	Alan	Plater	Peter Cheeseman
	1-Jun		The Master Builder	Henrik	Ibsen	Jonathan Dudley
				<i>translated by Michael</i>	Meyer	
	22-Jun	*	The Rat Run	Peter	Terson	Derek Snook
		*	The Three Lodgers	Norman	Smithson	Derek Snook
<b>13-Jul</b>	*	The Day Dumbfounded got his Pylon	Henry	Living	Derek Snook	
	*	<b>The Staffordshire Rebels</b>	<b>2nd Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter Cheeseman</b>	

FOURTH SEASON 1965/66 (50 WEEKS)							
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 56%)							
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director	
1965	24-Aug		Pygmalion	George Bernard	Shaw	Jonathan	Dudley
	14-Sep	*	Eskimo Trance	Maurice	Rowdon	Peter	Cheeseman
	12-Oct		Henry IV part I	William	Shakespeare	Jonathan	Dudley
	2-Nov		Tartuffe	Jean Baptist	Moliere	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>translated by</i> Richard	Wilbur		
	23-Nov	*	Mata Hari	Michael	Stott	Peter	Cheeseman
						Jonathan	Dudley
	14-Dec	*	A Christmas Carol	Charles	Dickens	Peter	Cheeseman
			<i>adapted by</i> Brian	Way			
1966	18-Jan		The Birthday Party	Harold	Pinter	Jonathan	Dudley
	31-Jan	*	Sing an Arful Story	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>semi</i>	<i>documentary</i>		
	8-Feb	*	All Honour Mr Todd	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
	8-Mar		Macbeth	William	Shakespeare	Peter	Cheeseman
	4-Apr		Wuthering Heights	Emily	Bronte	Jonathan	Dudley
				<i>adapted by</i> Norman	Smithson		
	26-Apr		Uncle Vanya	Anton	Chekhov	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>translated by</i> Elisaveta	Fen		
	24-Apr		The Ticket of Leave Man	Tom	Taylor	Peter	Cheeseman
	14-Jun	*	Fallen Angels	Noel	Coward	Jonathan	Dudley
12-Jul	*	The Knotty	3rd Vic	Documentary	Peter	Cheeseman	

FIFTH SEASON 1966/67 ( 45 WEEKS ONLY - DUE TO THEATRE DISPUTE)								
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 59%)								
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director		
1966	23-Aug		Arms and The Man	George Bernard	Shaw	Jonathan	Dudley	
	13-Sep	*	I'm in Charge of These Ruins	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman	
	4-Oct		Twelfth Night	William	Shakespeare	Peter	Cheeseman	
	1-Nov		Electra <i>and</i>		Sophocles	Ron	Daniels	
			The Pot of Gold		Plautus	Ron	Daniels	
				<i>translated by E.F.</i>	Watling			
	22-Nov	*	Jock on the Go	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman	
13-Dec	*	Puss in Boots	Brian	Way	Peter	Cheeseman		
1967	17-Jan	*	Get out in the Green Fields	Tony	Perrin	Peter	Cheeseman	
	7-Feb		She Stoops to Conquer	Oliver	Goldsmith	Ron	Daniels	
	7-Mar		Julius Caesar	William	Shakespeare	Iain	Cuthbertson	
			<b><i>THEATRE MANAGEMENT DISPUTE - During the period of the dispute Studio Theatre Ltd brought in an interim company to present a summer season of four productions.</i></b>					
	4-Apr		<i>Big Soft Nelly</i>	<i>Henry</i>	<i>Living</i> s	Terry Lane		
	25-Apr		<i>The Birdwatcher</i>	<i>Georges</i>	<i>Feydeau</i>	Terry Lane		
	16-May		<i>Victoria Palace of Varieties</i>	<i>Roger</i>	<i>Timms</i>	Terry Lane		
				<i>&amp; Terry</i>	<i>Lane</i>	musical director	Bert Waller	
	6-Jun		<i>Brand</i>	<i>Henrik</i>	<i>Ibsen</i>	Raymond Ross		

SIXTH SEASON 1967/68 ( 46 WEEKS ONLY - shorter season DUE TO THEATRE DISPUTE)							
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 57%)							
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director	
1967	5-Sep	*	The Ballad of the Artificial Mash	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
	12-Sep		<b>The Knotty</b> ( <i>2nd Production</i> )	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter</b>	<b>Cheeseman</b>
	3-Oct		Roots	Arnold	Wesker	Christopher	Martin
	31-Oct		King Henry V	William	Shakespeare	Peter	Cheeseman
	21-Nov	*	Clayhanger	Arnold	Bennett	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Joyce</i>	Cheeseman		
				<i>and Peter</i>	Terson		
	12-Dec	*	Old King Cole	Ken	Campbell	Peter	Cheeseman
					& Ken	Campbell	
1968	16-Jan		The Playboy of the Western World	J.M.	Synge	Chris	Martin
	6-Feb	*	The Ragman's trumpet	Tony	Perrin	Peter	Cheeseman
	5-Mar		Romeo and Juliet	William	Shakespeare	Peter	Cheeseman
	2-Apr		Jock on the Go ( <i>2nd production</i> )	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
	9-Apr		Toad of Toad hall	Kenneth	Graham	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by A.A.</i>	Milne		
	30-Apr		Heartbreak House	George Bernard	Shaw	Christopher	Martin
	21-May		The Only Way ( <i>A Tale of two Cities</i> )	Charles	Dickens	Peter	Cheeseman
				adapted by Sir John	Martin-Harvey		
	18-Jun	*	Just Go Will You Harry <i>and</i>	Ken	Campbell	Ken	Campbell
		*	Christopher Pea	Ken	Campbell	Ken	Campbell
	16-Jul	*	<b>Six into One</b>	<b>4th Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter</b>	<b>Cheeseman</b>

SEVENTH SEASON 1968/69 (50 WEEKS)						
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 49%)						
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director
1968	27-Aug		Rookery Nook	Ben	Travers	Christopher Martin
						<i>costumes by</i>
	17-Sep		The Promise	Aleksei	Arbuzov	Ken Campbell
				<i>translated by</i>	Nicolaeff	
	15-Oct		Othello	William	Shakespeare	Peter Cheeseman
	12-Nov	*	Hard Times	Charles	Dickens	Christopher Martin
				<i>adapted by Tony</i>	Perrin	
	3-Dec		Circus Adventure	James Ambrose	Brown	Ronald Chenery
31-Dec		Jack Sheppard	Ken	Campbell	Ken Campbell	
1969	28-Jan		<i>Antigone and</i>		Sophocles	Peter Cheeseman
			Pseudolus the Diddler		Plautus	Peter Cheeseman
	18Feb	*	Little Malcolm and his Struggle against the Eunuchs	David	Halliwell	Gillian Brown
	18-Mar		The Adventurs of Gervase Becket or			
			The Man who Changed Places	Peter	Terson	Peter Cheeseman
	<b>8-Apr</b>		<b>The Knotty (3rd production)</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter Cheeseman</b>
	15-Apr		Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?	Edward	Albee	Ron Daniels
	6-May	*	The Man and the Arrow (Stoke Arts Festival)	Gertrude	Arthan	Ken Campbell
		*	Biddy and Perry (Stoke Arts Festival)	Paul	Gater	Ken Campbell
		*	The Traveller (Stoke Arts Festival)	Clifford	Hall	Ken Campbell
		*	Murder or Suicide (Stoke Arts Festival)	Andrew	Young	Ken Campbell
	27-May		Fighting Man	Tony	Perrin	Ron Daniels
	<b>1-Jul</b>	*	The Escape	Brian	Way	Christopher Martin
<b>28-Jul</b>		<b>Potters and Rebels</b>		<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Ron Daniels</b>	

EIGHTH SEASON 1969/70 (50 WEEKS)							
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 343 (ATTENDANCE = 66%)							
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director	
1969	12-Aug	*	Anna of the Five Towns	Arnold	Bennett	Peter	Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Joyce</i>	Cheeseman		
	2-Sep		Drums in the Night	Bertolt	Brecht	Ron	Daniels
				<i>translated by Richard</i>	Beckley		
	30-Sep		Coriolanus	William	Shakespeare	Ron	Daniels
						<i>and Molly</i>	Kenny
	4-Nov		A Day in the Death of Joe Egg	Peter	Nichols	Stanley	Page
9-Dec	*	Dick Whittington	Tony	Perrin	Christopher	Martin	
1970	13-Jan	*	<b>The Burning Mountain</b>	<b>5th Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter</b>	<b>Cheeseman</b>
	10-Feb		Death of a Salesman	Arthur	Miller	Stanley	Page
	10-Mar		Man of Destiny <i>and</i>	George Bernard	Shaw	Peter	Cheeseman
			Androcles and the Lion	George Bernard	Shaw	Peter	Cheeseman
	7-Apr	*	Sweeney Todd	C.G.	Bond	Ron	Daniels
	5-May	*	1861 Whitby Lifeboat Disaster	Peter	Terson	Peter	Cheeseman
	26-May		Ghosts	Henrik	Ibsen	Ron	Daniels
				<i>translated by Peter</i>	Watts		
	30-Jun	*	Mutiny	C.G.	Bond	Stanley	Page

NINTH SEASON 1970/71 (50 WEEKS)						
AUDIENCE CAPACITY INCREASED TO 389 (ATTENDANCE = 60%)						
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director
1970	11-Aug		The Recruiting Officer	George	Farquhar	Ron Daniels
	1-Sep		The Daughter-in-law	D.H.	Lawrence	Christopher Bond
	29-Sep		Eh?	Henry	Living	Gillian Brown
	27-Oct		Hamlet	William	Shakespeare	Ron Daniels
	24-Nov	*	The Affair at Bennet's Hill (Worcs)	Peter	Terson	Peter Cheeseman
	8-Dec		Pinocchio (2nd production)	Brian	Way	Ronald Chenery
				<i>and</i> Warren	Jenkins	
1971	9-Feb	*	Tess of the D'Urbervilles	Thomas	Hardy	Peter Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by</i> Bill	Morrison	
	9-Mar		Major Barbara	George Bernard	Shaw	Ron Daniels
	6-Apr	*	Conan Doyle Investigates	Roger	Woddis	Peter Cheeseman
	19-Apr	*	The Samaritan	Peter	Terson	Ron Daniels
	<b>18-May</b>	*	<b>Hands Up For You The War is Ended!</b>	<b>6th Vic</b>	<b>Documentary</b>	<b>Peter Cheeseman</b>
	29-Jun	*	The Time Travellers	Bill	Morrison	Ron Daniels



TENTH SEASON 1971/72 (50 WEEKS)						
AUDIENCE CAPACITY 389 (ATTENDANCE = 63%)						
Year	First Perf		Title of Production	Author		Director
1971	10-Aug	*	The Old Wives Tale (Part I)	Arnold	Bennet	Peter Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Joyce</i>	Cheeseman	
	17-Aug	*	The Old Wives Tale (Part II)	Arnold	Bennet	Peter Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Joyce</i>	Cheeseman	
	21-Sep		Saved	Edward	Bond	Alan David
	2-Nov		Measure for Measure	William	Shakespeare	Peter Cheeseman
	7-Dec	*	Aladdin and his Magic Lamp	Bill	Morrison	Bill Morrison
1972	25-Jan	*	But Fred, Freud is Dead	Peter	Terson	Peter Cheeseman
	15-Feb		Hedda Gabler	Henrik	Ibsen	Alan David
				<i>translated by Michael</i>	Meyer	
	14-Mar		Under Milk Wood	Dylan	Thomas	Peter Cheeseman
	18-Apr	*	The Fire Raisers	Max	Frisch	Bob Eaton
			and The Rent Man	Henry	Living	Bob Eaton
	16-May	*	It's All for the Best (Candide)		Voltaire	Peter Cheeseman
				<i>adapted by Steve</i>	Gooch	
	4-Jul	*	The Mexicans	Bob	Eaton	Bob Eaton
				<i>and Peter</i>	Walsh	
			<i>and Graham</i>	Watkins		

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