

**Peter Thomson**

**Stephen Joseph at Manchester**

I don't remember why, on that particular evening, Stephen was driving me, in his unspectacular Morris Oxford, along a dimly lit flank of Manchester; but I do remember that he stopped the car for no immediately apparent reason. After a longish silence, 'Isn't that wonderful', he said. He was looking across some open ground towards the lights and sounds of a fair, and his face had the rapt expression of a child in a cave of glow-worms. Not many people in their forties retain that childlike capacity to be totally absorbed. Actors might compare it to 'being in the moment'. I think of Picasso labouring through a lifetime in order to paint with the eye of a child.

And here's a slightly earlier memory of Stephen. He'd driven me to Stoke to give me a first taste of theatre-in-the-round: *As You Like It*, featuring Ron Daniels and Fiona Walker, with the unknown Ben Kingsley playing a singing extra as Amiens in the Forest of Arden. The production had charmed me, but I noticed, on the way back to Manchester, that Stephen was oddly testy. There was always a part of him that interrogated the move to Manchester, and a fear that he'd shied away from his real life in the theatre was sharpened by any visit to the Victoria Theatre. The building was his baby, and what had upset him that night was a malfunction in one of the wall-lights the spectators passed on the way from their seats to P-B's cakes and back again. I hadn't noticed it but, as Stephen argued, we should be 'sensitive to the manners and imagination of the community' it served. That's something he felt in his bones. Ironically in view of what lay ahead, it's something Peter Cheeseman felt, too.

I never asked Stephen what went through his mind when Hugh Hunt invited him to join the fledgling Drama Department. He could, after all, have committed himself to the artistic directorship of the Vic, but that's not to say that his commitment to Manchester was half-hearted. He'd enjoyed his part-time teaching post at the Central School of Speech and Drama from 1949 to 1951, and his year on leave of absence at the University of Iowa had further fuelled his fervently alternative approach to teaching. The Manchester Diploma course which he's set up was a blueprint: and a blueprint is a plan intended as a guide for making something else. A life-enhancing working theatre, for example: one in which the creative provocation that was Stephen's *modus operandi* would flourish.

One model of a theatre – not Stephen's – has an inspirational figure (the director) coaxing a willing collective (the actors) towards the realisation of the director's predetermined vision. One model of a university department has a small group of people (the academic staff) who know a lot, endeavouring to transport a tolerable proportion of their knowledge into the heads of a larger group (the students), and testing the efficacy of the transport system through a series of terminal examinations. Stephen opposed this model utterly. It's not knowing things that matters (I can hear him saying it), it's knowing how to find out. And it's not the teacher's job to cook the food, but to stimulate the appetite. Curiosity is the gateway to learning. Are your students curious? Do they *want* to find out? If not, there's an odds-on chance that the fault is yours.

The things we least notice, as Bertolt Brecht was at pains to point out, are those we take for granted. It needed theatre-in-the-round to make the proscenium arch remarkable. My generation had grown up with it, noticed it no more than the kitchen sink or the antimacassars on the front-room chairs. Did we, I wonder, really notice the way in which undergraduates were classified at the end of their final year? We went through the normal processes, certainly, on the unspoken assumption that they were the necessary processes. All that setting of exams, revision for exams, sitting of exams, marking of exams. Why don't we post the results at the beginning of the exam term, Stephen asked, and invite only those students who disagree with their classification to prove us wrong by sitting the exams. You could have heard the proverbial pin dropping at the staff meeting in which he proposed this. The system was familiar to all of us, but it needed Stephen to light up its strangeness. It's interesting that I haven't a clue what he thought of Bertolt Brecht, since he was a living and breathing *Verfremdungseffekt*, making the familiar strange while stalking the corridors of academic power in motor-bike leathers. I still remember the startled look on the faces of coffee-sipping academics when, early in my first term at Manchester, Stephen strode in to the staff-room, with me invisible behind him. I can compare it to the entry of the Green Knight to King Arthur's court at Camelot: a force of nature crashing into inherited convention.

The way Stephen carried himself persuaded many people that he was supremely confident. He wasn't. It's true that he never underrated the merit of overstating a good case, but, in retrospect, I'd rather say that he was uncommonly true to himself and, as a result, put himself in the firing line more often than most of us do. A few adversaries thought he was arrogant, but they were wildly wrong. Like all the great enquirers of history, he approached the world with humility, and right to the end, he kept on discovering new things about it. When he was dying in Scarborough, someone gave him two goldfish in a bowl, and he sent me out to buy text-books on how best to keep and feed them. It was a huge thing for me, a young assistant lecturer in his first job, to have Stephen as a model of the symbiosis of learning and teaching. He worked to create in the Drama Department 'a learning situation'. I hadn't heard the phrase before he used it. And it was a phrase filled with challenge when he used it. Living with Stephen was rarely restful; but he came out to meet you with such generosity that it was easier to respond than you thought it would be. He could speak out, certainly, but he knew how to listen, and that's a precious gift in an educator. If he'd been given the opportunity to say farewell to his Manchester students, he might very well have said in summary in 1967: "Thank you for letting me teach".

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