

Stephen Joseph and the Potteries' Victoria Theatre.

I never had the good fortune to meet Stephen and yet, because through the magic of serendipity, I discovered his amazing contribution to British theatre when I researched my book *The Origins of the Potteries' Victoria Theatre*. Born in Newcastle under Lyme, I left the town in 1959 and, my only contact with Stephen's legacy was when I attended a couple of performances at the Vic Theatre and had my first encounter with theatre-in-the-round. I was familiar with the original Victoria building because I had attended the kiddie's matinees when it was a cinema. But I had no knowledge of how the theatre came into being.

All this changed when I visited the Rylands Library and lost myself in the Stephen Joseph Collection. The major contributions made by Stephen to British theatre in the mid-twentieth century were a revelation and I became familiar with Stephen's legacy. There are the substantial contributions he made to theatre, cinema and television not only directly but through those who came under his influence whether as fellow members of his Studio Theatre Company or as students when he was a Fellow in the Drama Department at the University of Manchester. The Scarborough theatre that bears his name is a physical monument to his life and work as is the Stephen Joseph Room at the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Stephen launched the Studio Theatre Company Ltd with its commitment to bringing theatre-in-the-round to theatre less towns in the North and Midlands of England. He rescued Harold Pinter from his critical humiliation in 1958 when his play *The Birthday Party* had closed after just a week. Pinter accepted Stephen's offer to direct his play for the company and Stephen then brokered its transfer to television.

He instigated the careers of Alan Ayckbourn and Peter Cheeseman and employed and encouraged a number of new playwrights who went on to become established names in theatre and television. He co-founded the Association of British Theatre Technicians and the Society for Theatre Consultants. The list of names of people influenced by Joseph is impressive even before we consider the actors who came under his influence. In addition to Alan Ayckbourn and Peter Cheeseman, Mike Leigh, Alan Plater, and Peter Terson were all influenced by Stephen's views on drama. As for the actors who were affected by his vision, they include Ben Kingsley, Robert Powell, Ken Campbell and many others.

After his first season at Newcastle under Lyme, Stephen seriously explored the idea of a partnership with the Borough Council and his Studio Theatre Company. Together they explored a range of possibilities, including a base in the town's Municipal Hall, built in 1888, which was the location of Stephen's seasonal visits to the town. Later Stephen proposed a permanent site in the town and his colleague, Stephen Garrett even prepared plans. These are included in Stephen's book *Theatre in the Round* (p. 107). Stephen also produced a model of the theatre which, sadly, has been lost. Although the joint venture failed to materialise, Stephen still pursued his ambition to establish a permanent theatre to serve the town and the surrounding area of North Staffordshire. Out of the failure of the project came the creation of the first permanent theatre-in-the-round at Hartshill, Stoke on Trent - the original Victoria Theatre. The story of the project reveals a somewhat tempestuous story. In 1986 it would be replaced by the New Victoria Theatre and the dream of a locally based theatre finally became a reality.

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