

Association of British Theatre Technicians – 2021

Stephen Joseph Committee: the ABTT at 60 years!

Beyond the Round:

Stephen Joseph and the challenge to proscenium theatre design in post-war Britain

This abstract is from a paper written for the 2021 Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference, within the Theatre History and Historiography working group, under the heading; working with the past, operating in the present, looking to the future. In the paper I examine why little is known of *Adaptable Theatres* (1962), a report by Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) founder member, Stephen Joseph, on the Association Internationale des Techniciens de Theatre 'Adaptable Theatres' Colloquium, of 1961. I look at how *Adaptable Theatres* provided a platform for architects, designers, and stage specialists to challenge the technical requirements of theatre design, questioning tradition and informing the practice of a new wave in British theatre building. In the centenary year of his birth, I argue that through *Adaptable Theatres*, Stephen Joseph is representative of a paradigm shift in theatre design, one which confronted the old naturalism of the proscenium stage and moved towards [and beyond] new civic spaces. Yet his role and that of the report have been, at best, marginalised as a curiosity in the current academic discourse of post war British theatre history. I go on to explore the reasons behind this – suppression, elitism, establishment apathy - reframing the story of Stephen Joseph, examining his influence on the post war period beyond theatre-in-the-round. Reinterpreting historical documents, I argue for Joseph's centrality in telling the history of a new wave in subsidised regional theatre building, how he provided a narrative for modern forms of technical design - firstly through the ABTT and later in founding the Society of Theatre Consultants. This paper expands upon the current telling of theatre's post war regional story, challenging a move away from London and proscenium centrality, exploring the roles of

geographic, economic and theatrical bias within current historiographical practice.

Concluding, I argue for an alternative approach in telling technical theatres wider influence upon post war British theatre, through a re-appraisal of the professionalisation in labour, the emergence of specialist representation, and the role of those most prominent in this important, but missing, historical narrative in contemporary practice.

Biography:

As a part-time PhD candidate at the Central School of Speech and Drama, my doctoral research examines the professionalisation of technical practice in post-war Britain, particularly during the rise of civic and subsidised theatre building, as an emerging standardisation of specialist labour incorporated new and influential representative bodies. I argue that the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) was central to professionalisation, and that as a result, backstage labour came through increasing forms of regulative governance, with the association substantially influencing the way models of standardisation developed across the sector, particularly in its formative years, 1961 – 1985.

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Staging Professionalism : The role of the ABTT in the development of post-war British technical theatre

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