

## **Richard Pilbrow on Stephen Joseph**

Since my first days on the Stage Management course at Central School of Speech and Drama in 1953, I was aware of Stephen Joseph's influence. He was a surprise; a tall, inspiring, firebrand of a man; a charismatic, volatile, and unpredictable character. He was a genuine and infectious revolutionary.

The stage management course at Central was then housed in the upper reaches of the Royal Albert Hall. The founder of the course, and an occasional teacher, was Stephen Joseph. In those far-off days, the SM course was not very good; sweeping the stage after the actors had rehearsed seemed our principle duty. But with actors like Judi Dench and Vanessa Redgrave, maybe life was not so bad?

Stephen had a passionate enthusiasm for theatre, in particular for arena staging, which he had experienced while studying in the States. He was fascinated by the purity and simplicity that he saw there, as the essence of theatre: actor and audience together, without the distraction of scenery.

In 1955, he was attempting to start his own theatre-in-the-round company, and in order to gain critical acceptance in London, began to present Sunday night performances at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall in Euston. I began to stage manage them and light some of his shows . . . always on a very short shoe-string.

One day, he invited me to direct a show! I was amazed, scared and thrilled. I selected *Masses and Man* by Ernst Toller. Perhaps rebelling against the purity of Stephen's arena vision, I chose to present the play on a diamond-shaped stage surrounded by audience, but at one side, behind the audience seating, were screens depicting the horror of the Holocaust, symbolic of man's inhumanity to man. At the play's climax, stage and audience were surrounded by searchlights and tommy-gun-toting police.

I won't say that the small audience on a rainy Sunday night was overwhelmed, but, personally, it was a memorable experience. The intimacy of central staging worked, but, for me, an arena enriched by an outer world, one surrounding the audience with powerful imagery. It was a very early experience that remained in the memory.

Recently, two Central School alumni, Bryan 'Kipper' Kendall, and Shosh (Margaret) Copley (née Tabor) reminded me that Stephen offered me the SM job for his first season in Scarborough. I declined, taking an ASM job at Her Majesty's Theatre in the West End. Shosh took the job in my stead.

Stephen attended the first ever meeting of the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT), that was held in my office in Goodwin's Court in 1961. He became a pioneer member.

Somewhat amazingly, five months later, we organised an international conference at the Royal Festival Hall, entitled *Adaptable Theatres*. Stephen edited the published transcript.

He was always impatient with the ridiculous mistakes in the design of new theatres made at the time, and in 1963 proposed the formation of the Society (recently renamed the Institute) of Theatre Consultants, that continues to this day to advocate for higher standards in the consulting profession.

After battling with the establishment for many years, Stephen did establish his own arena stage in Scarborough, Yorkshire. It eventually became a success, leading to custom designed new construction in a renovated cinema. Stephen influenced other developments in arena staging, such as the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, and the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. Stephen was also a passionate supporter of new playwriting, and enabled a number of new playwrights to emerge, including Harold Pinter, David Campton and Alan Ayckbourn.

In the early sixties, Stephen served on the faculty of the Drama Department at Manchester University. He was an advisor on the design of the University Theatre there, and acted as consultant on other projects, such as Lancaster University. Stephen also authored several important books on theatre architecture and design.

By a strange coincidence, in 1969, the 69 Theatre Company began life in the same Manchester University Theatre. Later the company went on to create the Royal Exchange Theatre, the first arena stage in Britain to be surrounded, 'courtyard-style,' by three balconies. I have been asked whether Stephen's influence was part of the company's thinking. I believe the answer is no. The Royal Exchange unique design was borne out of ten years thought, experiment, and development, by designer Richard Negri, director Michael Elliott, this writer, and the group that had worked together since the 59 Theatre Company Season, at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith. Tragically, Stephen was to die at the early age of 46, but his legacy has continued, particularly under the direction of Sir Alan Ayckbourn, the incredibly prolific dramatist and director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre for so many years. At Stephen's funeral service, director Hugh Hunt gave an address. He said: "Life was for Stephen an adventure, a challenge, a question, and an endless wonder. He met it with the eyes of a child and the mind of a man. For him, there was no such thing as a menial task – the skill of the stagehand was equal to the skill of the playwright. Workmanship was the basis of all art. He saw in Theatre in the Round, the simplest form of performance, springing from the earliest days of man's history, when poet, actor, and artist were united as craftsmen."

More widespread recognition of Stephen is long overdue. After 60 years in stage lighting, production and theatre design consulting, my personal debt to him is considerable: how to think "outside the box." The company I founded, Theatre Projects has now been involved as consultants on some 1,500 projects in over 80 countries.

Last September in Scarborough, it was a real privilege to visit the 'original' Stephen Joseph conceived arena stage, and hear Sir Alan's moving remarks upon his mentor, Stephen Joseph.

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*Richard is an internationally renowned lighting designer, producer and theatre design consultant. He was instrumental in promoting better and more sophisticated lighting and sound equipment. He worked extensively with Laurence Olivier at the National Theatre and Old Vic and was the first British designer to light a Broadway musical with Zorba.*

*He was appointed theatre consultant to the new National Theatre in London and with Iain Mackintosh, was responsible for the design of the Cottesloe Theatre.*

*Richard was a joint founder of the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) with associates that included Stephen Joseph; the Society of Theatre Consultants; The Society of British Theatre Designers, and the Association of Lighting Designers.*

*His book Stage Lighting Design: The Art, The Craft, The Life is still a standard textbook and his autobiographical account "A Theatre Project – A Backstage Story" is a fascinating journey through the last 50 years of theatre technological advances.*

*Source: Wikipedia and others. Photo courtesy Theatre Projects*

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