

Roland Joffe on theatre as an agent for social change.

I have very fond memories of Stephen Joseph. It was because of him that I joined the Drama Department. I was enrolled in another course at Manchester, but attended (by chance) an introductory session to Drama, led by Stephen, and decided to switch courses.

Being in the Drama Department was a seminal experience, not just for exploring the concept of 'theatre in the round', but for being alerted to the dynamic role that drama played, and plays still, in the social fabric of Western Europe, and that theatre plays in the social and political life of human beings as a whole. Realising that it isn't for nothing that we refer to 'theatres of war' and 'operating theatres'.

From my point of view, Stephen's key idea was his sense that theatre's potential, both as an agent of social change and as an agent of conservative reinforcement, was crucially linked - embodied even - in the physical architecture of the venue. This recognition that the physical fabric of a theatre could constrain or liberate an audience, could determine them as passive spectators or active participants, was an intensely creative one, with powerful social implications. The old German church - in Victoria Park with its decaying remnants of victory, Victoria and Empire - which was the Department's early home, was also a wonderful metaphor through which Stephen could materialise his delightfully 'playful' and anarchic view of both his role as a 'teacher' and the wider social role of the theatre to which he was dedicated.

To a callow young man trying to find his feet in a, to him, largely incomprehensible world, Stephen offered a methodology: a way of measuring society in terms of the degree to which it perpetuated or dismembered hierarchical structures. In other words, how much, and in what way, a society allowed its constituent members to participate in its creation and growth. This idea of connecting theatre as part of society with society as theatre, of connecting the physical architecture of a theatrical venue with the mental and physical architecture of society at large, was constructive, illuminating and delicious - not least because Stephen required that it be physically, riskily, enacted, not only hypothesised.

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Roland Joffé is a director and producer of international prominence. He was the youngest director ever engaged by Britain's National Theatre in 1973 shortly before his 28th birthday and is best known for his films - The Mission (1986) and The Killing Fields (1984), for which the actor Haing S. Ngor won an Oscar.

Roland is a board member of Operation USA, a non profit humanitarian organisation dedicated to helping communities alleviate the effects of disaster, disease, and endemic poverty throughout the world by providing privately-funded relief, reconstruction, humanitarian aid and development aid.

Of his own work Roland has said: "I think it's a very dangerous thing for anyone to decide if there was a point when one was good, or that one may be good now. Each movie is a chance to do something different and interesting.

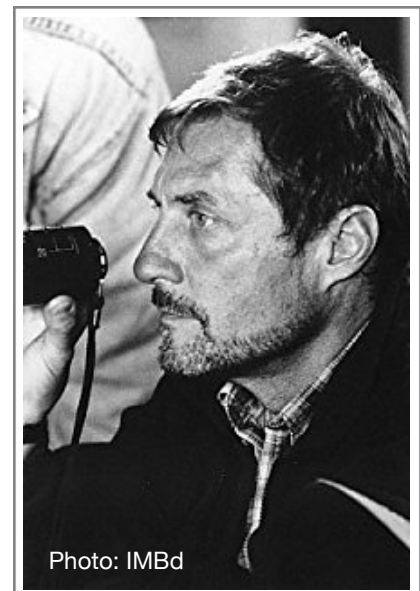


Photo: IMBd

That's what I mean by not having a career. I've not tried to be a 'something'. I've just tried to live."
Source: IMBd

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