

Stephen Joseph Maverick Theatre Genius - a personal view

Perhaps in his own way, Stephen Joseph has done as much as Peter Brook, Peter Hall and Tyrone Guthrie and other more acknowledged influential theatre practitioners to shape the theatre of the last half of the 20th century and his influence is still being felt today. It is just that very few theatre professionals even know who Stephen Joseph was or what his influence has been.

Let me take you back in time to 1961 and to a Civic building in a small provincial Midlands town - Newcastle-under-Lyme. A young man, accompanying his mother, comes down the rather grand marble staircase after the performance of a play in the municipal hall, transformed for the week to a *Theatre in the Round*. The young man almost stumbles onto a tall man standing at the foot of the staircase, who is announcing in a loud round avuncular voice: "Mrs. Pemberton-Billing is serving Tea, Coffee and Cakes in the library".

I was the young man and I had seen the tall man in several guises in the previous two hours. He seemed to be a sort of jack of all theatre trades: selling tickets, working the lights, moving props on the open space that served for a stage and now, as a kind of superior master of ceremonies wishing his audience good evening: "I do so hope you have enjoyed the play". Closer inspection revealed rimless glasses perching precariously at the end of a large aquiline nose, a clean white shirt and black bow tie, surmounted by a crumpled dinner jacket. Most surprising however, was that he was wearing jeans and given that memory plays tricks, could it really have been moccasins and without socks?

My mother and I sampled PB's excellent cakes and we were introduced to several of the cast, including Alan Ayckbourn and the rotund playwright David Campton. I don't remember the play but I do recall being enthralled by the staging and actors with paper bags on their heads!

Stephen suggested I apply to Manchester University for a place on the new Drama Course, without telling me that he was to be the first Fellow in Drama there. I stage-managed several productions for him including his wonderful production of John Whiting's *The Devils*, at the Opera House in Parma where, with minimum scenery or props he made full use of the depth of the stage and very effective lighting. In 1962 I helped him to mount the *Actor and Architect* exhibition which supported the theme of the drama department's *Theatre Week* that year, the proceedings of which were later published in a seminal book edited by Stephen.

Recognising that I was not a very academically inclined, Stephen encouraged me to leave Manchester and to pursue my interests in design and directing. He encouraged me to think: "out of the box", particularly in terms of staging and, to make the audience look at the actor (and themselves) from a different angle.

His pioneering work included support and opportunities for as yet unknown playwrights, raising technical standards and promoting proper consultation on theatre buildings as well as creating the space from which could permit the myriad forms of theatre and open staging that are current today, to develop. At the heart of his practice was the close and fundamental relationship between performer and audience. He profoundly influenced my approach to theatre and I am deeply indebted to him - perhaps we all do?.