



ABTT Seminar: Theatre Then and Now by the SJA Committee

“To carry on or not to carry on..?” by Peter Tate

I am the founder and co-artistic director of The Playground Theatre in West London, an actor, a producer and a businessman.

I know little of Stephen Joseph but from what I've gleaned he was an independent and anti-establishment and a great influencer. I am an independent and from the point of view that 'establishments want conformity' then I am also anti-establishment. One of my inspirations was a great lady called Anna Sokolov, a dancer and choreographer and who again was fiercely independent and anti-establishment. She was an original member of Martha Graham's company but left after a few years to create her own work. She worked with some of the giants of 20th century theatre like Brecht and Tennessee Williams and was the original choreographer on Hair but was fired 1 week before the opening for an artistic difference with Joseph Papp and her deputy took the credit but it was all Anna's work. She was also a founding member of the Actors Studio in New York. She inspired so many including Jerome Robbins, Pina Bausch, Alvin Ailey, Martha Clarke and so many more. I was lucky to work with her at Juilliard where she directed a piece I wrote. She was fierce but it was always about the work. To my mind she was a great unsung genius as many view Stephen Joseph.

The theme of my talk is 'to carry on or not to carry on'.

Theatre's and theatre artists find themselves in a very precarious position waiting for the word of the great white God, Boris, to give us life again. All I can say is that I am determined to carry on. To explain the roots of that determination I have to go way back to the start of my professional life at the age of 18 as a window-cleaner which was a stereotypical job for a working-class boy to fall into-I had followed what I was given without any real questioning. After a couple of years I started my own company, started to make money-this became my pursuit to make more and more money. This was not a cure for the isolation and loneliness and exclusion that I had felt all my life -this partially came from the racism that my Greek Cypriot father experienced coming to this country after the war so I am very interested to see if George Floyd's death will lead to real and substantial change-I certainly hope so

Because of the isolation I was very shy and incapable of holding a conversation without feeling trepidation. Then I received an incredible gift, although it did not seem so at the time. By now I had acquired a beautiful Mercedes coupe. My general shyness was no different when I was attempting to meet young ladies. On one occasion I was in Dulwich and went into a pub and met someone. I wanted to get her outside as soon as possible, so she could see my car -it was as if the car was my personality. She got in and we started driving, aimlessly, towards the West End without a word uttered. After about 30 minutes she said 'where are we going' -I stumbled 'I don't know'. She replied 'People like you are so boring, take me home'. I obliged again without words. When I dropped her off I leant across

for the obligatory goodnight kiss and she slammed the door in my face. The pain I felt was the catalyst for change. I knew that I could not carry on as I was. I needed to find a way to express myself and through that to communicate in a meaningful way with those around me. I looked at the people I knew around me and I could see their lives mapped out in front of them and it was not a road I wanted to travel on so I decided to cut the umbilical cord. I drifted into some evening acting classes searching for something else, found it interesting and then was accepted into Webber Douglas which I hated-I was going from one prison to another, so many games so many manipulations, so I left after 18 months of a 3 year course and went to study directly with Stella Adler in New York which was a breath of fresh air. I then lived and worked in the US for 6.5 years. At the end of this period my wife, Naomi, was engaged by Lindsay Kemp for a 4 month tour of Italy so I came to London to be closer. Not long after I was invited into the National and ended up playing a leading role opposite Alan Bates in the Olivier. Towards the end of my period there I took a very legitimate concern to the powers that be and because I dared to raise my head above the parapet they threw the book at me which, effectively, led to the end of my National career. I saw that even Alan could not say what he wanted to and Alan was a world star so I thought this is not a healthy environment for me. One of the reasons I was excited about being at the National was the NT studio a place of play and experiment but found a real clique there and my face did not fit. The experience at the National really informed my later actions. Another gift.

A while after this, and feeling more excluded than ever, I went into a dark place for about 3 months. Then a voice said to me 'Peter you can stay there in your pit of despair and wait for someone to offer you a hand or you can use your own strength to pull yourself out and get on with what you want. To do what I wanted creatively I had to make money otherwise I would always be dependent on others and I've never had a gift for asking for money. So I picked up some window-cleaning tools again and started to build another business with the express aim of that business supporting my creative life. It took me much longer than I thought but I was determined. In 1998 I acquired Unit 8 in Latimer Rd which was a bus depot when I found it with the aim of providing a space for artists to come and develop work. I would have an open door policy in contrast to my experience at the NT Studio. The whole premise came from the fact that Van Gogh painted very quickly but Balthus, the Swiss artist, could take up to 10 years to finish a work-in other words we all work at different tempos and we can't all be pushed into the same timeframe. I had between 50-60 artists every year from as many disciplines as possible so that every artist could see and perhaps be informed by other disciplines and ways of working. Each year we had up to 4 projects given a full development. We won the Samuel Beckett award for innovative theatre and that project went to the Barbican. We also sent out work developed at the Playground to the Young Vic, the West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Hampstead Theatre and many more. I also brought over international artists, like Henryk Baranowski from Poland, twice winner of Russia's award and Poland's for best director, Saulius Varnas from Lithuania and Hideki Noda from Japan, now head of the National theatre in Japan. We also worked closely with Marcello Magni, co-founder of Complicite and Linda Kerr Scott also from Complicite. Then in 2008/9 the bank crash led to us having to wind down our operation and then again the question of to carry on came to the fore again. I managed to hang on and then about 5 years ago I thought that I would create a theatre as so many of the projects that were developed, and didn't find the light, were left on the cutting floor. If I had a theatre we could develop from scratch and have a public arena in which to show them when and if ready. We opened in November 2017 and by March of this year we had had a wide variety of work from both emerging artists and established artists like Stephen Berkoff and Brian Co. We have

had theatre, dance, multimedia, puppetry, opera had performances in Albanian, in Greek, French and Russian. We are a totally flexible space and have actually done 2 productions in the round.

We are now closed but have been providing in excess of 500 meals a week to the vulnerable in North Kensington whilst maintaining our Well Read programme which originated working with the patients of the St Charles Mental Health unit to provide the possibility of engaging and communicating leading to performances by the patients at the theatre.

Over the last few years I have had many offers to buy the Playground for silly money but I cannot get away from the reason that I first found my way into theatre-it came from the need to express and communicate at a deep level .I also remembered stumbling across works like Scriabin's Poem of Ecstasy as if I were the first person to hear it. This filled me with so much more than money ever could. That is why I will carry on and find a way to do so.