



ABTT Seminar: Theatre Then and Now by the SJA Committee

“Theatre that is always at a beginning” by Barbara Day

MANCHESTER

Back in 1962 I was one of Stephen Joseph’s students, and when he directed Euripides’ *Bacchae* I was one of the chorus. In his production of the Greek tragedy, Stephen kept us on the move the whole time, turning and circling barefoot on the polished floor of the University Great Hall.

Thus the beginning of our study of theatre at Manchester University reflected the beginning of theatre itself – the performers in a central space surrounded by the audience. Stephen Joseph taught us that: “theatre in the round is structured like life, and consequently movement organises itself as it does in real life. In the circle everybody is equal and everybody has equal access to each other.”

But he was not an “in the round” fanatic; he loved all forms of theatre and wanted as many of them as possible – he wrote a whole book on *The Story of the Playhouse in England*, and in the introduction to *Actor and Architect* a wonderful description of the Renaissance *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza. However, he did know how powerful theatre could be when the actor and audience share the same space and respond to each other – when the audience become participants in the drama, not physically, but through their emotions and intellect. So – you could say the space is the message – it’s central and it’s shared.

PRAGUE

When the time came for us to leave Manchester, an opportunity opened for me to spend a year in Prague – Stephen told me to go – “Interesting things are happening there,” he said. I went, and he was right. I found myself in a country where theatre was at the centre of cultural, social, and even political life. Prague was (and still is) a city where everyone (more or less) goes to the theatre.

There are historical reasons for this: in the 19th century, theatre played a major role in the Czech struggle for autonomy in a German-speaking empire; then, between the wars, it flourished in the new, democratic, multicultural republic; theatre supported Czech morale under Nazi occupation, and it survived Socialist Realism.

The mid-60s (when I arrived) was the beginning of a new era in which the plays of Vaclav Havel played a major role – I saw the original productions, and I sensed how the audience understood every reference, and reacted to every allusion. I realised that the Czech theatre spoke for and to everyone, that it was relevant to their daily lives.

STOKE

When I got back to England, I spent 3 years at the theatre Stephen Joseph founded, the Victoria Theatre, Stoke on Trent, working with Peter Cheeseman on the local documentaries.

This was a theatre where the audience literally brought their material to us, and it was the relevance of this material combined with its presentation in the round that confirmed a sense of community among the public.

BRNO

Meanwhile, back in Czechoslovakia, in its second city, Brno, a company called Theatre on a String was performing in an empty art gallery with virtually no resources. It didn't worry them that they had no permanent lighting rig, no backstage facilities – In fact, no “backstage” at all, actors, technicians and audience all used the single entrance into the gallery. The company's structure was non-hierarchical and every production was differently staged (defined by lighting, rostra and by audience seating).

By the 1980s Theatre on a String had built up a repertoire of works based on folk tales, classic novels, nonsense poetry, and other genres not usually associated with the theatre. I have time to mention only one – a dramatization of The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart by the 17th century Bohemian exile Comenius.

LABYRINTH

The Labyrinth of the World was in the round – that is, the acting space was a rectangle with seating on every side and a long table or platform down the centre of the acting space.

when we (the audience) arrived, the seating was covered by sheets and we had to wait in the centre, in the acting space. As the space filled up, people became more and more uncomfortable and annoyed, especially those who had arrived first, hoping to have a choice of seats.

Just before the performance started the covers came off, and it was every man for himself as people fought over the seats they wanted, elbowing others out of their way. Then, as we settled down to watch the performance, we began to have an uneasy feeling that the 17th century Labyrinth of the World was OUR world, that it held a mirror up to our own behaviour, how a short time ago we had been behaving like the people onstage, struggling and fighting to get the best deal for ourselves.

In different ways, every show by this company asked the audience to question their own prejudices and priorities.

VELVET REVOLUTION

It was no accident this company became close to Vaclav Havel and created a network of theatrical opposition, of like-minded companies engaged with their audiences, a network that was critical to the success of the democratic revolution.

In the turmoil of November 1989, it was the theatre people who provided the facilities for the huge outdoor demonstrations – the dramaturgy, the sound systems, the platforms and the stewarding of the crowds.

The news media were still in the hands of the Communists, so the actors travelled the country, leaving Prague by car with up-to-date briefings and driving non-stop to the provincial theatres which were trusted as the only reliable source of information.

BACK TO STEPHEN

Stephen Joseph would have loved Theatre on a String if he had lived to see them – they possessed (and possesses) all the elements Stephen Joseph looked for in theatre – simplicity and spectacle ritual and comedy; action and stillness; and above all, the close relationship of the actor and the audience. He and they knew that the beginning of theatre is simplicity, and that is where it is at its most powerful.

Thank you for your attention.