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# Book review: *British theatre companies: from fringe to mainstream*, edited by Graham Saunders and John Bull

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***British theatre companies: 1965–1979. CAST, The People Show, Portable Theatre, Pip Simmons Theatre Group, Welfare State International, 7:84 Theatre Companies*, edited by John Bull. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016; ISBN: 9781408175439 (£21.99)**

***British theatre companies: 1980–1994. Joint Stock, Gay Sweatshop, Complicite, Forced Entertainment, Women's Theatre Group, Talawa*, edited by Graham Saunders. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016; ISBN: 9781408175484 (£21.99)**

***British theatre companies: 1995–2014. Mind the Gap, Kneehigh Theatre, Suspect Culture, Stan's Cafe, Blast Theory, Punchdrunk*, edited by Liz Tomlin. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016; ISBN: 9781408177273 (£21.99)**

This monumental trilogy, running to more than 950 pages, offers significant new insights into the history of alternative and fringe theatre in the UK from 1965 to 2014. The volumes' individual editors, John Bull, Graham Saunders and Liz Tomlin, have achieved this not through the well-established process of focusing on plays and players, but by delving instead into the minutiae of specific companies, using previously underexplored archival material to build a picture of the people who make art and perhaps most unusually, those who fund them.

The recent cataloguing of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) archives, currently held at the Victoria and Albert

Museum in London, provides access to a remarkable trove of documentation, including 'information about funding decisions, touring schedules, future production plans, minutes of company meetings, manifestos, correspondence and internal memos, accounts of internal General Council, Drama Panel and associated committee meetings... [and] Show Reports' (v1, p.xii). Names have now been appended to previously anonymous internal papers such as Show Reports and even scribbled marginalia, with the likes of Jude Kelly and Ian Brown popping up as assessors early in their careers. Simultaneously, letters, manifestos and programme notes from luminaries such as Simon McBurney give an insight into the formative years of a swathe of leading companies.

Much of this quoted correspondence rails against what is seen as faceless bureaucracy, asserting (or perhaps establishing) the hackneyed narrative of visionary artists impeded in their quest to make great art by penny-pinching philistines clinging to John Maynard Keynes's coattails. But these volumes make clear the immense reserves of knowledge, passion and desire to support challenging theatre that have always been present within the nation's cultural funders, as well as spotlighting the frequency with which poachers turn gamekeepers.

John Bull notes in his scene-setting essay in volume 1 that 'Archival resources may appear to record a historical past with "cool objectivity" but in fact they offer an indexical and always partial representation of that past, thereby setting terms for the analytic scrutiny of that representation and the potential "links" connecting past and present' (v1, p.137). There is perhaps less 'cool objectivity' presented here, and more fire and fury. Nonetheless, the wise decision to open up the case studies within each volume to a range of drama scholars does indeed foreground the 'partial representation' of theatre history, emphasising at every turn that these

histories were and are contested by everyone involved, from administrators to artists, from researchers to reviewers. UK theatre between 1965 and 2014 is rightly presented as fissiparous, in keeping with the enormous cultural shifts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Each text opens with a brief historical and cultural background of the period, focusing on large-scale social movements and events. A brief history of the earliest days of the Arts Council, from 1940s Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, via Keynes's chairmanship and the Festival of Britain, might have been useful for some readers. In particular, the role of Keynes as spiritual sculptor of the organisation seems key to understanding the attitudes of what could be termed 'Keynes's children' in the early 1960s. For example, Claire Cochrane has highlighted the legacy of his BBC Home Service talk of 1945, noting that 'Keynes' vision of the artist "individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented", walking "where the breath of the spirit blows him" is unashamedly romantic, apparently brushing aside the economic engine of the free spirit' (2011, p.149). It may be provocative to corral artists as varied as Pip Simmons, John McGrath and Roland Muldoon into a category as simplistic as 'Keynes's children', but the tensions inherent in all three volumes seem to emerge at least in part from the 'economic engine' / 'free spirit' dichotomy. The 1960s were about revolution on the stage as well as the streets, a point adroitly sketched by Bull in his linking of the May 1968 *Événements* to theatrical experimentation. Who better then to rebel against than the Right Honourable The Lord Keynes, dead for 20 years but haunting the Arts Council still? Obsessed with theatre as bricks and mortar, famously partial in his funding decisions (Sadler's Wells and the Royal Opera House received enormous subsidy previously directed towards touring companies) and London-centric to a fault, Keynes was 'notoriously unwilling to devolve responsibility... and, with the desire for prestige increasingly becoming his focus,

London came ever more to be seen as the natural focus of endeavour' (Rebellato, 1999, p.46). As such, the many Marxist collectives touring to far-flung rural communities in clapped-out vans must seem in direct opposition to the patrician excesses of the 1940s and 50s.

The editors admit that 'with hindsight, the first two volumes could perhaps have been retitled *English Theatre Companies*... [as] the archive resembles more of a Domesday Book on English theatre' (v1, p.x). Although 7:84 (in both its English and Scottish incarnations) and Suspect Culture are the only non-English companies examined in detail, many companies are placed squarely in their European or international contexts, often as prophets without honour in their own country. For example, Kate Dorney shows how Pip Simmons Theatre Group's residency at Toneelraad embedded their desire to 'destabilize the audience's complacency' (v1, p.209), in particular in the seminal *An Die Musik*. Similarly, Michael Fry points out that 'although many of the actors were European, many of the early plays [by Complicite] were principally about the obsessions of the British' (v2, p.165). Britishness is repeatedly contrasted with European identities, with Peter Brook figured as an exemplar of the Channel-hopper. Given current circumstances, it is fascinating to consider the relative ease with which artists in the 60s and 70s decamped to the continent when funding decisions went against them.

In a series stuffed with gems, the fairest approach may be selecting a highlight from each volume. In the first, the standout chapter is David Pattie's delightful history of the two 7:84 companies (one in England, one in Scotland, but tethered together via the mighty John McGrath). As Pattie provocatively queries, 'How could theatre act as a rehearsal for and analysis of change if the theatrical environment produced and promoted stasis?' (v1, p.253). Indeed, this could be the central question of the entire volume, if not the

trilogy. For McGrath, this meant abandoning the 'conservative, commercial' London scene in favour of audiences 'at the sharp end of political and cultural struggle' (v1, p.253), or more comically, 'a bad night in Bootle' (v1, p.272). Pattie deftly unpicks a tangled skein of scripts, funding bids and committee minutes to accentuate the legacies of the two 7:84 companies: in his view, 'a particular way of creating theatre... new touring circuits... [and] a particularly Scottish form of engaged theatre' (v1, p.273). It is fascinating to note the shift from the first tour of *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* in 1973, which toured to tiny venues like Kyleakin Village Hall on Skye, to the 2015/16 revival by Dundee Rep, which only toured to large venues in the five cities of Dundee, Edinburgh, Inverness, Aberdeen and Glasgow. 7:84's greatest work now sits on Scotland's grandest stages, but whether this is because they changed the country's theatrical landscape or because the establishment embraced them (or both) remains an open question.

Sara Freeman provides the highlight of volume 2 with her revisionist take on Gay Sweatshop. She takes issue with Catherine Itzin, Helen Freshwater and Stephen Greer, as she claims their 'treatment of Sweatshop obsessively returns to the story of the company's origin' (v2, p.142). By contrast, Freeman rejects the memorialising of earlier scholars, placing the group in a fresh context as a set of practitioners, where its 'artistry and attempts at institutionalization matter as much to the gay movement as its agitation and political formulations' (v2, p.144). In this light, the much-discussed cuts in funding in 1981 and again in 1991 (the second usually ascribed to the impact of Section 28) can be seen as part of a wider flux in the ecology of alternative theatre; in particular, Freeman's examination of the company's administrative structure makes clear that the internal responses to loss of funding were arguably of greater importance than the cuts themselves. As with many companies appearing in these pages, quasi-Marxist

collectivism gave way to 'artistic directors, a board of directors, official job descriptions and new office space' (v2, p.155)—all the bells and whistles required by an Arts Council that sought to remake theatrical structures in its own hierarchical image.

In the third volume, a true embarrassment of riches, it is harder still to choose a single highlight. For example, Duška Radosavljević's chapter on Kneehigh combines keen critical analysis of key productions with a thoroughly convincing case for the company's (and especially Emma Rice's) 'democratization of the cultural capital' (v3, p.175). Similarly, Maria Chatzichristodoulou brilliantly explains the appeal of Blast Theory by situating them as ludic and inventive virtuosos whose 'engagement with popular culture is key to [their] success' (v3, p.252). But the standout chapter for Scottish readers must be Clare Wallace's contribution on Suspect Culture, which not only builds on Dan Rebellato and Graham Eatough's superb *The Suspect Culture Book* (2013), but also offers a more nuanced reading of the company's work than many commentators have achieved. It is unquestionable that David Greig, as the major playwright within the group, has received the majority of critical scrutiny to date, and his contributions to Suspect Culture and Scottish theatre more widely seem to justify this imbalance. For Wallace, however, it is Eatough and Rebellato, along with later collaborators such as Simon Bent and Graeae's Jenny Sealey, who deserve reappraisal. She skilfully exposes issues of process and attribution which illuminate the company's history once again.

There are a few minor issues with each volume. John Bull's spirited contribution suffers from sloppy copy-editing, such as misquoting Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, getting the date of Ted Heath's departure as Conservative leader wrong by a decade, and repeatedly referring to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe as the 'Fringe Festival'. Graham

Saunders makes fewer errors, but nonetheless mangles the names of many key figures, including 'Ian McKellan', 'Liz Lochead' and the extremely unfortunate 'Marcello Evaristo'—a mistake made all the more egregious by its placement in his section on women's theatre. However, these are small quibbles when placed alongside the trilogy's many successes.

Particularly when read alongside Anna Rosser Upchurch's *The Origins of the Arts Council Movement: Philanthropy and Policy* (2016), these texts provide an unparalleled insight into the development of the Arts Council of Great Britain and its successors. As the Arts Council archives open up, it is to be hoped that new volumes might fill in the remaining gaps (most notably the relationship between England's Arts Council and its largest recipients of funding for theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre). Nonetheless, as series editors, Bull and Saunders have already produced a remarkable achievement: an accessible, lively, informative and illuminating study spanning half a century of British theatre.

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