1 A peculiar history: life, love and theatre

Joan Littlewood's autobiography *Joan's Book*, published in 1994, draws attention to many of the problems of trying to map a life, even when conducted by the person who lived it. Defiantly long, rambling and picaresque in its recollection of events, Littlewood's typically idiosyncratic decision to present her life through anecdote and 'recorded' conversation highlights the impossibility of autobiography to be anything other than a narrativised account of the bits that the author deems important. Documenting conversations that occurred decades before, and some before Littlewood was born, *Joan's Book* is testament to the failings and creativity of autobiography. In fact, Littlewood playfully acknowledges this partial quality in her subtitle, 'Joan Littlewood's peculiar history as she tells it'. In Littlewood's case, she marshals *Joan's Book* to do several things. It is a reconstitution of her life as a theatrical plot with lines attributed to goodies, baddies, main parts and bit parts according to her memory or her unerring sense of the theatrical in terms of the cut and thrust of human interaction. She uses it as a platform to slate her enemies and to extol the virtues of others, and at times it reads like an extended love letter to her artistic collaborator and partner Gerry Raffles whose role Littlewood embellishes wherever feasible. There is both a delightful and frustrating disregard for detail or accuracy, but this does not suggest that *Joan's Book* is not truthful or authentic. It is true to the moment of writing and the person writing it; in a sense this is all that writing can ever be.

This introduction does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of Littlewood's life, but instead it draws attention to some of the key events, influences, relationships and approaches to theatre that

galvanised her and contributed to the body of work focused on in the rest of the book. It draws on many documents – early notebooks, interviews, biographies, articles and testimonies from collaborators and friends – to piece together a collage of opinion and conjecture about Littlewood and how her theatre moved and shifted in relation to changing times.

But first it is important to get a sense of the woman who became one of the pre-eminent international theatre figures of the mid-twentieth century, a woman who shook up the theatrical establishment and made a lasting impression on how theatre was made and what it represented. Walking through Stratford in east London, where Littlewood was artistic director of the Theatre Royal for many years, her impact and that of her company, Theatre Workshop, is embedded in the local cultural and street scene. Inside the Theatre Royal photographs of Littlewood and her productions adorn the walls, and the room where she worked and slept for many years houses the theatre's archive, including her small writing desk and the eclectic library of books on everything from economics to world literature that she amassed over the years. The street outside the Theatre Royal has been renamed Gerry Raffles Square and Littlewood's image is prominent in a millennium plaque on Great Eastern Road. There are also plans to commission a statue of Littlewood that will be situated outside the Theatre Royal.

It is somewhat ironic that Littlewood should be so associated with a particular locality because she demonstrated a marked geographical restlessness during her life. After being brought up in Stockwell in south London, she spent a summer in Paris with her art teacher, moved to Manchester, went back to London with plans to move to Moscow and then, albeit with intermittent temporary relocations to the Lake District and Middlesbrough, she returned to Manchester, a city where she instinctively felt at home. In 1952, Theatre Workshop, the company she co-founded with Ewan MacColl, made the decision to lease the Theatre Royal in Stratford, within the London Borough of Newham where she based herself until the untimely death of Raffles in 1974, after which she moved to France. She also embarked on long periods of work and travel in Germany, Tunisia, Senegal and Nigeria, and toured work to France, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Russia and the United States.

Admiring the twinkle in her eye and her ability to appeal to the senses with 'language that bypassed logic, making only emotional sense', Kenneth Tynan reflected that a few centuries ago 'such a woman might easily have been burned as a witch'.[1] As a person, Littlewood provoked both intense loyalty and fierce animosity. She was bright, funny, well read and charmingly irreverent, but could be brutal and obscene, and referred to her infamous tongue-lashings as a 'good murder'.[2] Provocative and temperamentally inclined to take an anti-establishment stance, she was full of contradictions: a fierce supporter of collective working and autocratic; gentle in approach and abrasive in manner; socially responsible and anarchic; impressively well read and distrustful of academia. She was aware of her abilities and deeply resented the lack of support and recognition she received from the British arts establishment. In a letter sent to Ewan MacColl in the 1980s she lamented, 'for all you hear of us, any of us – we might never have existed', yet she could be wilfully self-effacing and blocked many attempts to investigate her work while she was alive.[3] As *Joan's Book* indicates, she had a fondness for self-mythologising, hyperbole and theatrics and this could be both entertaining and infuriating for those who knew her, as truth eroded in the murky waters of a good anecdote or pithy phrase.

As a woman, she cuts an interesting figure. Unmarried for most of her life, childless, domestically inept, chain-smoking and with a conversational style peppered with expletives – flat-footed actors were referred to as 'turds on blankets' – Littlewood failed to conform to the dominant roles assigned to women in the mid-twentieth century. She had no interest in her physical appearance beyond a penchant for hiding her high forehead with a trademark woolly hat or cap. She never wore make-up and her limited wardrobe defied any overt representation of femininity. With a curious antipathy towards material possessions, from an early age she was a free spirit who relished her autonomy and ability to live, work and travel as an independent woman.

After meeting, falling in love with and moving in with Ewan MacColl, she came under increasing pressure to marry. She refused several of MacColl's proposals and aborted their baby, describing the event as a 'brutalised, sordid business but not as bad as being trapped in

Coburg Street', before she finally relented and married MacColl at Pendleton Town Hall on 15 September 1935.[4] It was a low-key affair designed to appease MacColl's mother and to avoid bringing the Communist Party into disrepute.[5] But their 'fertile creative and intellectual partnership soon outgrew the constraints of bourgeois monogamy'.[6] MacColl was a notorious seducer of women and Littlewood fell in love with Raffles, nine years her junior. Littlewood abhorred the loss of independence for women signalled by marriage and particularly disliked the implications of giving up her surname. In fact, she refused to use her married name and was incandescent when, after she had separated from MacColl, she had to use her married name to secure a passport to tour to Sweden. Whilst in Sweden she wrote indignantly about the treatment of women there, recording that 'men treat the women like servants'.[7]

Yet it would be inaccurate to refer to Littlewood as a feminist. When asked if her life had been 'harder, better, worse, or different for [her] being a woman director in the theatre', Littlewood replied, 'I don't believe in that stuff ... I'm not a feminist.'[8] She was not interested in the collective position of women in society, neither did she seek out female friendship and, despite some evidence to the contrary, claimed, 'You'd have to leave our theatre if you'd had a baby'; of her own childlessness, she explained, 'I couldn't. I couldn't have managed.'[9] Littlewood's work was paramount, although she pursued familial-style relationships, often framing her role as a matriarchal figure whereby 'my actors were my children'.[10]

Keen to deflect attention away from her status as a woman working in a hostile patriarchal environment, she did acknowledge that 'it was difficult as a working-class person'.[11] Her background and early experiences ignited an intuitive alignment to a staunch politics of the left. When asked if she still considered herself a 'left-wing idealist' in an interview conducted in the final year of her life, she replied indignantly, 'I'm not a left-wing idealist! ... I've always been a communist.'[12] Yet, typically, Littlewood had a tempestuous relationship with the Communist Party as a political institution. She hated dogmatism and was often frustrated by the Communist Party's inflexibility on the relationship between art and activism and, like many on the

political left, the revelations around Stalin's regime rocked her to the core. Nonetheless, Littlewood's politics were a driving force behind her theatrical endeavours and cultural activism and grew from her experience growing up and making theatre in the tumultuous years between the 1920s and the 1970s.

Born 6 October 1914 in the shadow of the outbreak of the First World War to a young unmarried mother, Littlewood was raised in her grandparents' house in Stockwell in south London, where a warm, loving environment made up for her bad-tempered mother. Choosing to supplement their income by taking in lodgers, her grandparents' house was full of people, intricate relationships and the usual family antagonisms. Academically and creatively gifted, Littlewood grew up an outsider in the environments she inhabited: the illegitimate child of the family, a non-believing scholarship girl at a Catholic convent school and a working-class scholarship girl at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) amongst the affluent British debutantes and Americans who dominated the place. She found RADA utterly devoid of purpose, intellectual stimulation and engagement with her background or the experiences of many during this period.

Whilst many people prospered from rising standards of living and the growth of affluent suburbia in Britain of the 1920s and 1930s, many others suffered a period of extreme physical, social and economic deprivation. Unemployment rose rapidly when a worldwide economic recession took hold. To survive, people faced the indignity of the means test and, as the widespread housing crisis deepened, poor living conditions and malnutrition ensured the spread of tuberculosis and the rise of rickets and anaemia, causing many premature deaths. One of the slogans of the day, 'poverty in the midst of plenty', captured the contradictions of the era and the anger felt against the moral bankruptcy of capitalism that allowed for the prosperity of some at the expense of many.

The extreme circumstances of this period prompted many people to register their voice and opposition to the times in which they lived. Many people, from different backgrounds and professions, became aware of the class divisions prevalent in Britain and decided to align themselves with the working class to fight for the causes of socialism and social justice. Many people showed their discontent by withdrawing their

labour in the 1926 General Strike or through participation in large-scale demonstrations such as the Hunger Marches that took place across Britain organised by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. These events, coupled with a growing awareness of her relatively deprived circumstances, sharply defined Littlewood's loyalties.

Despondent about the vacuous work she encountered at RADA and excited by the potential of a socially committed art, Littlewood left. A self-possessed, nomadic figure, after ditching RADA she travelled to Paris for the second time. She initially went with her school art teacher who was keen to foster her potential as an artist. Her second visit secured an enduring relationship with the city. Returning from Paris, Littlewood set off for the working-class, industrial heartland of Manchester, targeted so she could contact Archie Harding, a BBC producer who awarded her first prize in a verse-speaking competition at RADA. Through Harding, she secured irregular radio work reading poetry, acting and presenting pioneering regional radio documentaries.

Working with the producer D. G. Bridson, who was part of a growing movement dedicated to representing 'ordinary' working people on the radio, she produced several programmes on the north's major industries that spliced narrative, soundscape, song and 'actuality' recordings of workers and machinery, including *Cotton*, set in Oldham, and *Coal*, based on their time as embedded researchers in a mining village in County Durham. She followed this collaboration up with her own *Classic Soil*, broadcast in the North Region on 6 July 1939. This feature read present-day Manchester through Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844). It cut contemporary working-class voices with extracts from Engels's text to highlight the poignancy of Engels's revolutionary thinking for the contemporary moment.[13] However, during this period, people faced intense scrutiny and persecution for communist sympathies and Littlewood was temporarily blacklisted by the BBC and placed under surveillance by the security services.

Theatre of Action and Theatre Union

Littlewood's life was turned upside down when Harding introduced her to MacColl. He described the intense impact of their meeting: 'we were drunk with ideas, lightheaded with talk . . . each of us jubilant at having

discovered an ally'.[14] Together they devoted their energies to 'create a theatre which would be more dynamic, truthful and adventurous than anything the bourgeois theatre could produce'.[15] MacColl was already heavily involved in the international Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), which had been growing in international reach and prominence since 1926. He formed Theatre of Action in 1934 following work with groups such as the Clarion Players and the Red Megaphones in Manchester and made connections with other radical theatre groups in the United States, the Soviet Union and Germany as a way of sharing scripts and ideas and forging a sense of an international community harnessing theatre on behalf of the revolutionary cause.

Alongside her radio work, Littlewood secured employment as an assistant stage manager at the Manchester Repertory Theatre in Rusholme, where its drab middlebrow comedies quickly earned Littlewood's dismissal of it as a 'lousy piss kitchen'[16] – although she stayed long enough to work with one of her heroes, the exiled German expressionist playwright Ernst Toller, on a production of his *Draw the Fires* in 1935.[17] She joined Theatre of Action during rehearsals for a variety show that included *Newsboy* (1934), songs by Brecht and Hanns Eisler, an antiwar sketch and a recitation of *The Fire Sermon*, a poem by Sol Funaroff. Littlewood, by now in a relationship with MacColl, joined him to run Theatre of Action as 'a benevolent dictatorship with the benevolence omitted wherever artistically necessary'.[18] Their experimental creative impulse aligned with an ideological commitment to service the working class and their political struggle, to advocate peace in the face of war and to serve the promotion of communism. In a lecture outlining their position, Littlewood explained:

> Our work has been created by the class struggle – and in times like these we are called on more than ever before to reflect the life of the people – to give voice to their tragedy – to teach them too and help them to understand the things going on around them. We must never let this work flag. As the circumstances become more difficult our work must become more intense and our understanding must deepen – both our political understanding and our understanding of theatre.[19]

The political climate evidently became much more complicated following the rise of fascism across Europe, when a class-versus-class reading of the world needed to be supplemented with a broad alliance of 'popular front' politics. MacColl and Littlewood agreed that the changing political climate required a more sophisticated, discursive analysis than the short, sharp shock of agitprop that had dominated the WTM; they determined to place themselves at the vanguard by excavating major political works of the past by Aristophanes and Lope de Vega and by forging a vibrant theatre aesthetic combining international developments emanating from practitioners such as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator and the films of Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin that could capture and speak to these changing times.

Derek Paget has written persuasively about the influence of Léon Moussinac's seminal book *The New Movement in the Theatre* (1931) on Littlewood and MacColl. Neither of them could be accused of small-island parochialism; and just as their interests embraced international politics, they were keen to be conversant with and to learn from the best theatre developments from across the globe. Unashamedly championing modernity and a new aesthetic imagination ushered in by cinema and radio, through vivid descriptions and extensive illustrations, Moussinac's book captures the dynamism of the new theatrical age by documenting the experimental European theatre aesthetic pioneered by directors such as Piscator, Meyerhold, Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig in the beginning of the twentieth century. He documents work that combined a revolutionary agenda with an assured theatricality, multiple performance strategies, different approaches to the actor as performer and a confident embrace of all the possibilities opened up by new technologies.

From studying and admiring these revolutionary practitioners, Littlewood and MacColl appreciated how the construction of a theatre event, the placing of materials and information, elemental sets, multilevel staging and the clever compression of time and space could influence both its theatrical and political impact. So from their earliest work they employed styles and techniques such as expressionism, constructivism and montage, which placed them firmly in opposition to the dominant literary naturalism that dominated the British stage.

As such, Paget argues that Littlewood and MacColl's theatre companies provided the 'Trojan Horse' through which these practices began to infiltrate postwar British theatre.[20]

In 1936 they formed a new interdisciplinary company called Theatre Union, a loose alliance of actors, designers and technicians who participated in their production of *The Miracle at Verdun*. As a company, they worked hard and played hard. Wild parties, walking on the moors and sexual intrigue accompanied a rigorous programme of reading, conversations about art and politics, and rehearsals. Ever confident of their ability to create significant theatre, Littlewood and MacColl issued an ambitious manifesto:

> The Theatre must face up to the problems of its time: it cannot ignore the poverty and human suffering which increases every day. It cannot, with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time. Means Test suicides, wars, fascism and the million sordid accidents reported in the daily press. If the theatre of to-day would reach the heights achieved four thousand years ago in Greece and four hundred years ago in Elizabethan England it must face up to such problems. To those who say that such affairs are not the concern of the theatre or that the theatre should confine itself to treading in the paths of 'beauty' and 'dignity', we would say "Read Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Calderon, Moliere, Lope de Vega, Schiller and the rest." The Theatre Union says that in facing up to the problems of our time and by intensifying our efforts to get at the essence of reality, we are also attempting to solve our own theatrical problems both technical and ideological. By doing this we are ensuring the future of the theatre, a future which will not be born in the genteel atmosphere of retirement and seclusion, but rather in the clash and turmoil of the battles between the oppressors and the oppressed.[21]

True to their manifesto, Theatre Union's productions tackled the problems of the day head-on, but without sacrificing aesthetic experimentation, beauty or theatrical pleasure. It announced its arrival with a production of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* (1612–14) framed to

support the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War; this was followed by MacColl's adaptation of the satirical antiwar play *The Good Soldier Schweik* in May 1939 and *Last Edition*, an extensively researched, large-scale antiwar living newspaper project, appeared in March 1940. Each production brought a new integration and layering of space, narrative, image, sound, stylised movement, song and choreography.

Regarded as a political irritant, Theatre Union faced state intervention in their activities when the police targeted their young recruits, warning them and their parents that association with Littlewood and MacColl was potentially damaging to their futures. These difficulties culminated during a second run of *Last Edition*, when the police arrested and prosecuted Littlewood and MacColl for contravening the 1843 Theatre Act by giving an unlicensed performance. These events, coupled with the sapping of Theatre Union's personnel for the war effort, curtailed Theatre Union's public activities, but not before a strong nucleus formed to take their work further after the war.

Theatre Workshop: origins and relationships

Despite living in war-torn cities full of bombed-out buildings and the realities of rationing, the immediate postwar period was a time of hope as people moved beyond a constant state of fear and deprivation. The collective cultural consensus moved to the left during the war and there was a widespread feeling that there should be no return to the social misery and political unrest of the 1930s. Littlewood hoped to capitalise on this widespread political realignment that saw Labour achieve a landslide victory in the 1945 general election and prompted various attempts to tackle social problems through the introduction of the welfare state. Promoting the benefits of a rich cultural life for effective civic life, she dreamed of a 'people's theatre' that would revolutionise British theatre and bridge 'the gulf between creative art and the lives of ordinary people'.[22] As such, she stressed the importance of reaching a wide audience and determined to tour 'to places where the people have been starved of good theatre'.[23]

In the immediate postwar period, Littlewood's optimism had solid foundations. The wartime thirst for experiences of music, art,