Introduction: abortive schemes, 1951–1954

I have lucid moments when the background of the past and the great possibilities of the future stir me, and the old pulse begins to beat with thoughts and ideas . . . But until I feel the future near at hand, *the* future that is, I cannot think these ideas will develop . . . What shall I do, dear Michel? Will I be wrong in my fears, or must I decide to take up some administrative work in the theatre and leave the stage to others? I beg you to write to me, as I have never done before, because I really do need to hear from you.

(Devine, Letters to Saint-Denis, October 1943 and June 1945)

When George Devine wrote the letters from which these extracts are taken, he was on active service in India and Burma during the Second World War. The letters are to his mentor and friend, Michel Saint-Denis, who had already formulated draft plans in London for what was to become the Old Vic Theatre Centre. On returning home in November 1945, Devine became effectively responsible for the development of the Centre. Saint-Denis, Devine and Glen Byam Shaw – the 'three boys' as they were known – set out to create a post-war version of the London Theatre Studio, which, directed by Saint-Denis and Devine, had closed after four years with the outbreak of the Second World War, despite Devine's efforts to save it.[1]

The Old Vic Theatre Centre eventually came under immense pressure from those powerful figures whose overarching objective was the creation of a National Theatre, with the Old Vic at its heart. Principal among these was the Chairman of the Governors, Lord Esher, who succeeded Lord Hambledon in March 1948. Esher, in a spectacular display of the kind of ignorance commonly found in chairs of theatre boards, refused to renew the contracts of Olivier, Richardson and Burrell, the three directors of the Old Vic Company, and made his views known as to the unstable situation of the Vic

Centre. A steady attrition ensued of the most important post-war theatre experiment at that time and, with the hostility evinced by Esher and Hugh Hunt, brought in as a fourth director by the Governors, to Saint-Denis, both in terms of his theories and his foreignness, it was only a matter of time before the scheme collapsed. Early in 1951, the Governors decided that only three directors could be afforded, though Hunt's contract was extended to June 1955. In May, the three boys offered their resignations, which Esher accepted. The following month saw the arrival of Tyrone Guthrie as General Manager. Guthrie promptly acted to recommend the closure of both the School and the Young Vic. By 1952, no trace of the structure remained.[2] Despite a huge outcry in the press, the resignations of fifteen of the Vic Centre's teachers, a unanimous resolution condemning the Governors by the British Drama League, a letter to *The Times* of 25 May 1951, signed by ninety Vic students, a call by Equity for an independent enquiry, a joint letter by such as Cecil Day Lewis, E. M. Forster, Dingle Foot, David Garnett, Rupert Hart Davis, Geoffrey Keynes, Siegfried Sassoon and other distinguished figures (*The Times*, 1 June 1951), the Governors remained adamant. The affair reached the House of Commons on 17 July with questions from Anthony Wedgwood Benn and Philip Noel-Baker to the Financial Secretary of the Treasury. Noel-Baker powerfully indicted the Governors who, he maintained, 'have lost money, lost the best directors and producers, lost the best artists, closed the Young Vic and now have closed the School' (*The Times*, 18 July 1952).

The disaster was keenly felt and stayed for a long time in the memories of those involved. Peggy Ashcroft's view was that 'If it were not so tragic, it would be ludicrous ... I have never been so shocked and disillusioned by anything in my twenty-five years in the theatre.'[3] For many theatre people, the villains of the piece were Esher, Hunt and Guthrie. Ashcroft's distrust of Guthrie is now a matter of record.[4] Jocelyn Herbert's view is that the three boys were gradually squeezed from the Centre until their voices became ineffectual:

> up until then the three boys, or one of them, had always gone to the meetings and talked things through ... There was always

> this terrible jealousy that these three brilliant directors were tied up in the School and wouldn't work in the West End or anything. And the powers that be kept voicing the idea that Michel wanted to become the head of the National Theatre and there was this conspiracy that he shouldn't. A lot of people didn't like the teaching, the improvisation, the movement, the sound, all that. So they weren't allowed to go to meetings any more. They had to write letters. They never got any answers. They discovered that their letters weren't being read in the Governors' meetings. Finally they said things can't go on like this and they resigned. I can remember terribly well our saying, for God's sake explain to the papers and for some reason they wouldn't. They thought that they [the Governors] wouldn't close the School, we mustn't antagonise them, it will all blow over. They thought Tony Guthrie would speak up for them and he didn't. He didn't back them. He agreed with the Governors and it was a terrible betrayal because he had supported the London Theatre Studio. It never occurred to them that he wouldn't support them . . . Esher was the big monster . . . It was such a wonderful School. The shows were amazing.[5]

Margaret 'Percy' Harris of Motley, who taught at the School, is equally clear about the causes of the collapse:

> I think the Governors thought this is going to become the National Theatre and we cannot have it run by a Frenchman. That was their basic reason for engineering Michel's resignation and when he did the whole thing collapsed. Everybody else resigned and the students said they wouldn't go on without these people. Michel was the first to decide to go and then the other two of course immediately went. Then the whole staff of the Vic School left. And then Hugh [Hunt] tried to establish a company and couldn't do it because nobody wanted to know. That's my assessment, but they never talked about it very much, silly boys, because I think they felt they must not destroy the Vic Scheme . . . Hugh was very difficult because he used to talk about himself in relation to the Vic Scheme and he

> never mentioned the others at all. He never spoke about them. I felt he'd been extremely disloyal by trying to take the honours of the plan on himself. It was nothing to do with him.[6]

In October 1965, George Devine began compiling an autobiography for Faber. From page one, the memory of the Vic Scheme disaster is apparent. He refers to 'the unfortunate incident at the Old Vic when the three of us were intrigued out by an unscrupulous co-director, in the face of an impercipient chairman, Lord Esher, and a weak and cowardly intervention by Sir Tyrone Guthrie. The Arts Council, floundering about under its chairman, Sir Ernest Pooley, allowed six years of serious work to be torpedoed in so many months.'[7] However, with the pragmatism and tenacity which characterised his artistic life, Devine drew from the *débâcle* certain lessons. If they appear to be tinged with cynicism, they also appear to be accurate. Referring to the time immediately after his resignation in 1951, he dissects the implications:

> I was still smarting under the humiliation of those incidents. Certain of them were to serve me in the future. I had learned, for example, that to carry out one's job seriously and with dedication, producing the results was not enough in subsidised ventures in England. A more generous application of soft soap, a few lunches and dinners with the right people would have safeguarded our interests. I had learnt that even in artistic enterprises a certain kind of snob success was still essential. I had learnt that the theatrical profession was essentially conservative and not to be trusted to take collective action until it was too late. All this experience was to fortify my cunning for the future.[8]

As the outcry subsided, the three boys split up. Byam Shaw joined Anthony Quayle at the Stratford Memorial Theatre. Saint-Denis went to Strasbourg as Director of the Centre Nationale Dramatique de l'Est. Devine went freelance. Over the next few years, he directed, amongst other productions, five operas at Sadler's Wells and five plays at Stratford.

There was no shortage of work, but little of the kind Devine wanted. He graciously declined an offer from Laurence Olivier to both himself and Byam Shaw in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Vic Scheme to manage Laurence Olivier Productions because 'I am bound to bend every effort next year to get something else going before the frighteningly imminent dissolution of our partnership, which is naturally more fused than ever by the fire of our recent experience. It is not only a question of loyalty to Michel. It is even more an attachment to certain precise ideas which we have evolved together.'[9]

On holiday in the south of France in September 1951 Devine visited Edward Gordon Craig and told him the story of the Vic Scheme and his determination to continue:

> The word 'unhealthy', as used by Lord Esher, made him roar with laughter, and suddenly go black with rage. The story of the resignation of the staff delighted him most. He said he knew it all – and that things did not change. That those wealthy socialites who ran the Arts must be run out of it by the scruff of their necks . . . All individuals and groups should get together and drive out these parasites who had got a grip on the purse strings and thought that entitled them to interfere in the theatre.[10]

Despite Devine's efforts to perpetuate the ideas of the Vic Scheme, as expressed in his letter to Olivier, by the middle of 1952 he was no further forward. According to Jocelyn Herbert, 'He kept himself going financially but he was planning all the time.'[11] The planning then took an extraordinary turn when Devine met Tony Richardson, a young BBC producer:

> I had a telephone call from the BBC to say would I appear in a television play? I said, 'Oh no, I can't be bothered, the thing bores me to hell, forget it', and put down the phone. Half an hour later, the phone rang. 'This is Mr Tony Richardson's secretary speaking. He's very disappointed that you don't want to do the play, as you haven't even seen the script.' I said I was

> not interested. Would I meet Mr Richardson for a drink? I said, 'All right'. This was how I met this extraordinary young man who, of course, persuaded me to do this short TV play. At the end of it he rang me after we had shot the thing and said, 'Can I come and see you? I want you to criticise my work.' Well, I blenched at this because nobody ever asks you to criticise their work these days . . . Anyway, from that there grew a great friendship.[12]

This alliance mystified Devine's friends, but with it came the work which was eventually to provide the foundation of the modern British stage. Devine appears in a short time to have moved to a large extent away from some of the priorities of Saint-Denis and very much towards the idea of new theatre work. He was not by this stage seeking to continue the central focus of the three boys: 'No, not at all. It was a complete break. His only interest was to have a theatre to encourage new writers. That was the basis of it . . . It was a break. It was his thing.'[13]

Richardson imported all the enthusiasm of a younger generation and a wealthy patroness. She was Elaine Brunner.

> We went to see Mrs Brunner in Addison Road and she appeared in a Japanese kimono and we had brandies and all that and finally Tony said, 'This is the man who is going to run the theatre.' She said to me, 'What can I do?' and I said, 'I want to have a contemporary theatre. I have been all my life in the classical theatre. I want to try to make the theatre have a different position and have something to say and be part of the intellectual life of the community.' To which she said, 'I quite agree' and then disappeared off the scene.[14]

Richardson himself cannot explain the partnership: 'I don't know whether some subconscious calculation – to ally myself with the mainstream of the British theatre to which I was a complete outsider – underlay the decision. Whatever, it was one of the best – no *the* best – I ever made.'[15] The combination of Devine's theatrical pedigree and Richardson's unfettered energy was potent. They agreed about their

objective and began to look for a theatre. There was, of course, no money forthcoming at this stage.

Just as Devine and Richardson were looking for a new theatre, an old one was surfacing. *The Times* of 16 January 1952 reported the acquisition of the Royal Court, Sloane Square, by Alfred Esdaile: 'It will begin its new lease of life in about two months' time as a theatre club . . . Work in making good the war damage is now in full swing.'[16] The Court was associated with legendary figures and events, of which perhaps the most celebrated were the four seasons of 1904–8 run by Granville Barker and his business manager, J. E. Vedrenne. The seasons both established Shaw and also produced contemporary British and European plays.[17] According to Jocelyn Herbert, for Devine 'it was the theatre of Shaw . . . He tried to get it for years before he did. He never wanted to leave it.'[18]

Esdaile, for First Investa Securities Ltd, signed the lease of the Court on 23 May 1952 by agreement with Cadogan Settled Estates for the term of forty and a half years, running from 29 September 1951. On 15 January 1953, Esdaile concluded another agreement with the British Transport Commission for the lease of land between the Court and Sloane Square underground station, for the same term. The plan was to open the theatre as a club with a limited membership of 3,000 at a subscription of five guineas per head per annum. Use of the club rooms and restaurant was included. Members of the general public could, on payment of five shillings per annum, see the productions without joining the club. On re-opening, the theatre seated 450 people and was, according to *The Times* of 22 March 1952, 'being redecorated in the red and gold of its Edwardian period'.

The Council of the club, which was to be responsible for overall artistic policy, included Giles Playfair as Artistic Director, Dame Sybil Thorndike, Sir Lewis Casson, Joyce Grenfell and Ellen Pollock. A play called *The Bride of Denmark Hill*, about John Ruskin, opened at the Court in the first week of July 1952. The theatre, in *The Times* review of 3 July, is described as 'elegantly intimate in crimson and gold'. By 7 August, the Court was in crisis, as the entire Council resigned. In a statement, the Council, which had advisory powers only, argued that such a position 'is not a practical method of guiding

the policy of the theatre'. Playfair's successor as Artistic Director of the club was Oscar Lewenstein. After *The Bride of Denmark Hill*, which transferred to the West End, Frank Baker's play, *Miss Hargreaves*, opened. Lewenstein arranged to import a production of *The Comedy of Errors*, which opened on 27 August 1952.[19] The last show in this sequence was *A Kiss for Adèle*, which opened on 20 November 1952, after which the Court closed for work to be done to gain a licence for public performance.

While Esdaile modernised and improved his theatre, Devine was mapping out his ideas for his theatre and trying to find the money to launch it. The years of 1953 and 1954 saw immense activity and immense frustration. Devine wrote to his friend Mary Hutchinson on 15 March 1953:

> Some months ago you urged me to try and take the Court. I am now working hard on a scheme to do so. My introduction to the idea came about in a very strange way which I will tell you when we meet. Meanwhile, I enclose for your interest, a first draft of our scheme ... I need all the help I can get to raise the necessary capital. I have more or less a promise from the Arts Council for some, but nothing like enough.[20]

'The Royal Court Theatre Scheme' runs through four drafts. The first is dated 16 March 1953; the fourth 13 August 1953. In between, there is a version prepared for The John Lewis Partnership, of 12 April, and another of 10 August titled 'The Mark Turner plan'. The Scheme announces its central beliefs in all versions, although the phrasing is softened on occasions and the opening paragraph of the first version was subsequently left out. It reads: 'The policy of the Royal Court will be to encourage the living drama by providing a theatre where contemporary playwrights may express themselves more freely and frequently than is possible under commercial conditions.' Devine, after all, needed financial backers. The fourth puts it thus:

> Although the major classics are now well catered for by the Old Vic, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Sir John Gielgud's productions, etc, there is no theatre in England which

> consistently presents the whole range of contemporary drama. Modern movements in music, sculpture, painting, literature, cinema and ballet all have reasonable circulation, but the comparable body of work in the theatre has no outlet . . .
>
> For dramatic development, the urgent need of our time is to discover a truly contemporary style wherein dramatic action, dialogue, acting and method of presentation are all combined to make a modern theatre spectacle, as definite in style as it has been in all the great periods of theatre . . .
>
> Of all the theatres in central London, the Royal Court is by far the best suited to such a purpose. The work of Harley Granville Barker, his revolutionary productions of the classics and his presentation of a new school of dramatists give the Royal Court a fine and appropriate tradition.[21]

Devine proposed a three-year period of operation, with Richardson as his assistant. The repertoire would contain as many original plays as possible; a club would be established; training schemes developed; and connections made with comparable enterprises in the other arts.

The scheme both reflects some of the priorities of Michel Saint-Denis and departs from others, especially in its insistence on the primacy of new work. Devine's movement into the area of living contemporary theatre did not suddenly occur. In a British Council lecture in Bristol of October 1948, Devine defined the present as 'a period of transition and reaction – war brought theatre into focus as a popular art – a slow and tardy change of ballet, cinema, radio and television'. The role of the producer as 'the conductor of interpretation [is] to find the heart of the play, to represent the author, to relate the play to the audience so that the impact is real and not theatrical'. Above all, coterie theatre should be banished. Productions 'must be up to date – methods must change. The producer must know his time and be in touch with it – a *popular* art – not for a few special intellectuals.'[22] The significance of these statements of 1948 is that Devine was beginning to develop his own, quite distinctive voice, a voice ironically liberated by the demise of the Vic Scheme and the accident whereby he did acquire the Court.

Throughout 1953, Devine and Richardson looked for funding from any likely source. Richardson wrote to Arnold Goodman for suggestions. Devine contacted Selfridges, Duncan Openheimer, Jean Rowntree, the Hulton Press, T. R. Grieve, and the Peter Jones Theatre Group.[23] The most promising source appeared to be The John Lewis Partnership, owners of Peter Jones, the store opposite the Court in Sloane Square. During the course of a series of letters between Devine and O. B. Miller, Deputy Chairman of the Partnership, a prime example of Devine's pragmatic approach became apparent. Miller, in his letter of 5 May, worried away at the diet of plays proposed in the scheme:

> The first thing that strikes me about it is that most of the plays which I recognise seem to be what I might call rather gloomy in type and my general impression of contemporary drama is that it runs very much to tragedies of the introspective and obsessional types, and to maintain satisfactory audiences year in and year out you would need to have a sufficient admixture of lighter plays as well as other presentations of various kinds.

To which Devine, a day later, replied with all the aplomb of a seasoned handler of potential sponsors:

> I was grateful for and interested in your remarks about the repertoire. I think that this is a justifiable criticism which applies more to the memorandum and the way a repertoire is presented than to our intentions. We are very aware of this danger in the modern 'Art Theatre' and are most anxious to counteract this tendency. We are amending our Memoranda accordingly to include some of the light fare, comedies, farces and musical dramas that we have on our lists.[24]

No such emendations were made, but the reply illustrates the absolute determination of Devine to get his theatre. Anthony Lousada, husband of Jocelyn Herbert, worked tirelessly on Devine's behalf to sort out the legalities of any and all arrangements.[25] However that avenue closed when it became apparent that the Partnership, though keen in principle to help, lost a great deal of money in