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The Royal Court Theatre and the modern stage

The Royal Court Theatre is arguably the major influence on the development of post-war theatre. The English Stage Company at the Court commissioned and performed some of the most influential plays in modern theatre history, including works by Arden, Bond, Churchill, Hare, Storey, Wertebaker and Wesker. The story of the Royal Court is also the history of the contemporary stage. In this absorbing account of the Court's evolution from 1956 to 1998, Philip Roberts draws on previously unused archives in both public and private collections and on a series of interviews with people who were prominent in the life of the Court. The book also includes a foreword by Max Stafford-Clark, to date the longest-serving Artistic Director of the Company. The result is an intimate account of the working of the foremost producing house for new work both in Britain and abroad.

PHILIP ROBERTS is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Leeds. He is the author of a number of studies of modern theatre, including *The Royal Court Theatre, 1965–1972* (1986).

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For Kate, Martha and Chloe

The worlds of pop music, broadcasting, football, the cinema, politics, and love, all have lost domains occupied by the memories of great past performances, which are sought out for solace or to shame the shabbiness of the present – ‘When Churchill was Prime Minister’ ... ‘When we were in the World Cup Final’ ... ‘when we were first married’ ... David Hare calls the curators of these golden worlds the ‘whenwes’. They guard their territory with a dogged devotion. The theatre isn’t immune from the virus – ‘The National Theatre under Laurence Olivier’ ... ‘The Royal Court under George Devine’ and ‘Joan Littlewood at Stratford East’ are particularly robust strains.

(Richard Eyre, *Utopia and other places*)

The Court, of course, has never actually been what it used to be.

(Rob Ritchie, *Plays*, January 1985)

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Foreword

I recall attending an academic conference at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the early eighties which took the history of The Royal Court as its subject. A number of us had been flown in at considerable expense to the heart of bayou country.

After three days of genial bickering and disagreement about almost every aspect of the Royal Court's provenance and history, one of our gracious hosts asked if there was any aspect of the Royal Court we could agree on. It turned out that there wasn't, so the requirement for an objective and comprehensive history of this important theatre is well due.

It is hard to write about such a passionate theatre in a dispassionate and accurate way, but Philip Roberts' rich account, which covers the history of the Royal Court from its inception in 1956 to the end of the millennium, is invaluable to anybody interested in theatre, and is intriguing for those of us who had the pleasure of playing some part in those events.

No other theatre in England attracts more passion to itself than the Royal Court. Several generations of writers and directors have held the mirror up to their society and defined their times on its stage. In 1993, the year I left, it was called both 'Europe's most interesting theatre' by the *New York Times* and 'a dump' by our own *Sunday Times*. I hoped that both statements contained an element of truth.

Many directors, writers and actors feel they have left the best part of themselves at the Court. The youthful idealism and best hopes of several generations are somehow caught up in its walls. In the day-to-day running of the Royal Court it is easy to forget this, but when

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Foreword

you go wrong you are reminded. People you've never met write to tell you how badly you've let them down. It is this measure of passionate identification that makes the Court a great theatre. When it reopens it will no longer be 'a dump' but it may well continue to be 'Europe's most interesting theatre'.

Max Stafford-Clark

Preface

This book chronicles the life of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. The Company is in its fifth decade of work. The years reflect the growth and development of the Court from precarious beginnings in the mid-fifties to the battles with censorship in the sixties, the troughs of the early seventies, the wars of attrition of the eighties and the movement of the Company into the West End in the nineties. In 1964 George Devine could not afford to perform other than cosmetic surgery on his beloved theatre. Thirty years later, Stephen Daldry, armed with a huge subvention from the National Lottery, determined that the theatre in London's Sloane Square should remain essentially Devine's theatre. In the meantime, however, the Court had become central to theatrical life in Britain and many other countries. For many, it had become an institution. Analysing this institution is the purpose of this account, for to define the Court is in many ways to define the modern stage. No other company has had a comparable effect on post-war theatre writing and production. Without the Royal Court, the emergence of what became the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, together with the growth of a myriad smaller theatres, might not have been possible.

The struggle to demonstrate Devine's belief that theatre could equal the seriousness of other artistic forms engendered a tightly knit, fiercely defensive group. The Court family was exclusive and uncompromising. It still is. It provoked external anger and hostility at its stance. It still does. It has survived, often barely, as the most important producer of new writing in the history of the theatre. That is its glory.

Preface

My approach has been to try to tell the story of the Court as it evolved as an institution over the decades via many of its principal figures and, in particular, its Artistic Directors. What determines the stance of a theatre is not preconceived theoretic notions. Rather, it is the ability, practically, to make judgements and to sustain the consequences against the odds. No one at the Court would offer an identical answer to a question about house style, but everyone would know what should not play there, even if eyes were closed to the occasional, and usually failing, pot-boiler.

The story makes use of material from interviews with virtually all the major figures involved in running the Court, together with archival material from a number of important sources. This has not been used before and frequently offers an intimate and inside account of what, publicly, might appear very different, for the Court excelled at closing ranks. Throughout its history, the Court has striven to represent contemporary life and culture, and its current Artistic Director, Ian Rickson, expresses the credo in a way Devine himself would surely have approved:

We're not particularly interested in plays with wigs or plays set in drawing rooms. We want to put real life on stage in all its complexity, and we look for actors who can do that.

(Independent on Sunday, 20 September 1998)

Acknowledgements

I have many people to thank for their help. The principal collections of papers in private hands are those of the Earl of Harewood, Jocelyn Herbert (papers of George Devine) and Greville Poke (who also holds the archive of Neville Blond). These three distinguished contributors to the story of the English Stage Company allowed me to study their archives in Sheffield. I am deeply grateful for their trust. Others were equally generous: Max Stafford-Clark allowed me to consult his diaries; the late J. E. Blacksell gave me his Court papers, as did Stuart Burge; Matthew Evans loaned his papers for study; the Council of the English Stage Company agreed to my consulting company records.

The following gave their time for often extended interviews: Lindsay Anderson; Stuart Burge; Graham Cowley; Stephen Daldry; Matthew Evans; William Gaskill; Margaret Harris; Jocelyn Herbert; Clare Jeffery; Oscar Lewenstein; Greville Poke; Max Stafford-Clark; David Storey; Alan Tagg; Nicholas Wright. The staff of the following institutions were most helpful: Sarah Newman, Arts Council of Great Britain; Judith Leigh, Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society; Diane Arnold, Central Library, Birmingham; Christopher Robinson, The Theatre Collection, University of Bristol; Neil Somerville, BBC Information and Archives, Caversham; Dean Proctor, National Sound Archive, the British Library; Claire Hudson and Andrew Kirk, the British Theatre Museum; Tracey Brett, Condé Nast Publications Ltd; Linda Poole, Partnership Archivist, the John Lewis Partnership; Anna Trussler, Archivist, the Ronald Duncan Papers: the New Collection, University of Plymouth; Neil Cobbett, the Public Record Office; Melissa Miller, Cathy Henderson and Pat Fox, the Harry Ransom

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Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin; David Ward, Chief Librarian, Royal Holloway, University of London; Stella Hawkyard, the John Rylands Library, Manchester; Helen Gardner, the Society of Authors.

Many individuals helped provide information or guidance. I do not value them the less for listing their names alphabetically: Jane Baldwin; Christopher Baugh; Edward Bond; Richard Boon; Emma Bradley; John Bull; Matthew Campbell; Helen Dawson; Keith Dewhurst; Christine Eccles; Jim Emmet; Lindy Fletcher; Angela Fox; John Haffenden; Billy J. Harbin; Vikki Heywood; Donald Howarth; Jacqueline Labbe; Patricia Lawrence; Sandra Lousada; Patricia MacNaughton; Ian MacKillop; David Meyer; John Mortimer; P. H. Newby; Charles Osborne; Anthony Page; Natasha Richardson; Rob Ritchie; Dominic Shellard; Michael Thomas; Sue Vice; Martin White; Oliver Wilkinson.

I am obliged to the British Academy and the University of Sheffield for financial aid. The latter also granted me leave to complete this book.

Victoria Cooper, my editor at Cambridge University Press, and David Bradby, my general editor, were both helpful and patient, as was Margaret Flower, who had the difficult job of deciphering my handwriting.

Abbreviations

(i) People

JEB	James Blacksell
SB	Stuart Burge
ME	Matthew Evans
GH	George, Earl of Harewood
JH	Jocelyn Herbert
OL	Oscar Lewenstein
GP	Greville Poke

(ii) Places

BTM	British Theatre Museum, London
RDA	The Ronald Duncan Archive, University of Plymouth
JLP	The John Lewis Partnership Archive, Stevenage
HRHRC	The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

Note: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court is variously referred to as: ESC; Court; RCT. AD is Artistic Director.

(iii) Books

Doty and Harbin	Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin (eds.), <i>Inside the the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981. Artists talk</i> (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1990)
Findlater	Richard Findlater (ed.), <i>At the Royal Court. 25 years of the English Stage Company</i> (Amber Lane Press, 1981)

List of abbreviations

- Lewenstein Oscar Lewenstein, *Kicking against the pricks: a theatre producer looks back* (Nick Hern Books, 1994)
- Wardle Irving Wardle, *The theatres of George Devine* (Cape, 1978)

(iv) Letters

Ownership of letters and other documents cited in the Notes or listed in the Bibliography is indicated by the following abbreviations within brackets.

- | | |
|-------|---|
| LA | Lindsay Anderson |
| JB | Jane Baldwin |
| JEB | James Blacksell |
| BTM | British Theatre Museum, London |
| SB | Stuart Burge |
| RDA | The Ronald Duncan Archive, Plymouth |
| ME | Matthew Evans |
| WG | William Gaskill |
| GH | Lord Harewood |
| JH | Jocelyn Herbert |
| JLP | The John Lewis Partnership, Stevenage |
| GP | Greville Poke/Neville Blond |
| PR | Philip Roberts |
| MSC | Max Stafford-Clark |
| HRHRC | The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center,
Austin, Texas |

Note: All unattributed quotations are from the joint archive of Greville Poke and Neville Blond, in the possession of the former.

Biographical notes

The principal figures involved in this study are:

LINDSAY ANDERSON. Film and stage director. Assistant Director at the Royal Court from 1957. Artistic Director 1969–72. Left the Court in 1975. Directed many of David Storey's plays and the films *If* and *O Lucky Man*. d. 1994.

NEVILLE BLOND. First Chairman of the English Stage Company 1955–70. OBE 1945. CMG 1950. Married 1944 Elaine Marks, daughter of the founder of Marks and Spencer. d. 1970.

STUART BURGE. Artistic Director 1977–80, thereafter a member of the Court's Council. Artistic Director of the Queen's, Hornchurch, 1951–53 and of Nottingham Playhouse, 1963–74. CBE 1974. Important television director.

STEPHEN DALDRY. Artistic Director 1993–98. Formerly Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre, 1989–92. Celebrated for his direction of Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (opened National Theatre 1992).

GEORGE DEVINE. Founder of the ESC and first Artistic Director 1956–65. Manager and resident producer, London Theatre Studio, 1936–39. Director of Young Vic Company and co-director with Glen Byam Shaw of the Old Vic School. CBE, 1957. The father of modern British theatre. d. 1966.

JOHN DEXTER. Joined ESC 1957. Noted for his direction at the Court of Wesker's trilogy. Associate Director, National Theatre, 1963–66. Director of Production, New York Metropolitan Opera for seven years. d. 1990.

RONALD DUNCAN. Writer, librettist and founder with Oscar

Biographical notes

Lewenstein of the company which became the English Stage Company. Worked with Britten and for Beaverbrook. Founded the Taw and Torridge (later the Devon) Festival 1953. Resigned from ESC Council 1966. d. 1992.

ALFRED ESDAILE. Businessman. Leased Royal Court to ESC 1955. Vice-Chairman of the Company. d. 1975.

MATTHEW EVANS. Chairman ESC 1984–90. Managing Director of Faber and Faber, 1972–93. Chairman of Faber's 1981– .

ROBIN FOX. Impresario and theatrical agent. Brought in by Blond as General Manager, 1957. Council and Artistic Committee member 1957–70. Co-Chairman with Lewenstein, 1970–71. d. 1971.

WILLIAM GASKILL. Artistic Director who succeeded Devine, 1965–69; thereafter one of the trilogy of Artistic Directors with Anderson and Page, 1969–72. Joined ESC 1957. Associate Director 1959. Associate Director, National Theatre, 1963–65. Devine's chosen son. Resigned 1987.

GEORGE, EARL OF HAREWOOD. Son of HRH the Princess Mary. A director of the Royal Opera House, 1969–72. Artistic Director, Edinburgh Festival, 1961–65. President of the English Football Association 1963–72. Original member of ESC Council from 1955; Chairman Artistic Committee 1955–72. President of the ESC 1972–76.

JOCELYN HERBERT. Internationally renowned Stage Designer. Trained in theatre design at the Slade. Joined London Theatre Studio 1936. Worked with Michel Saint-Denis, Devine and Motley. Joined the ESC 1956. Associated particularly with Beckett and Storey.

ROBERT KIDD. Joint Artistic Director with Nicholas Wright 1975–77. Assistant Director 1967. d. 1980.

OSCAR LEWENSTEIN. Impresario. Established with Duncan the company that became the ESC. General Manager of the Court for Esdaile, 1953–54. Suggested Devine's name for Artistic Director's post. Member of Artistic Committee and Council. Chairman 1971–73. Artistic Director 1973–75. Resigned 1977. d. 1997.

Biographical notes

JOHN MORTIMER. Chairman ESC 1990– . Novelist, playwright. QC 1966. CBE 1986. Knighted 1998.

HOWARD NEWBY. Chairman ESC 1978–84. Managing Director BBC Radio 1975–78. First Booker prize winner 1969.

ANTHONY PAGE. Artistic Director 1964–65. One of the trilogy of Artistic Directors with Anderson and Gaskill, 1969–72.

GREVILLE POKE. Hon Sec ESC 1955–73. Chairman 1973–78. Currently President, appointed by Mortimer. The longest-serving member of the ESC.

TONY RICHARDSON. First Associate Director and founder member of the ESC with Devine. Principally a film director. d. 1991.

IAN RICKSON. Artistic Director 1998– .

MAX STAFFORD-CLARK. Longest serving Artistic Director, 1979–93. Artistic Director, Traverse Theatre Company, 1968–70. AD, Traverse Workshop Company, 1970–74. Co-founder with Gaskill of Joint Stock Theatre Company, 1974. Currently AD of Out of Joint Theatre Company, 1993– .

NICHOLAS WRIGHT. Joint Artistic Director 1975–77. Assistant Director 1968. First Director of the Theatre Upstairs 1969.