

The Royal Court Theatre and the modern stage

Philip Roberts



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1 Coincidences, 1954–1956

Ronnie was at Cambridge with Eric Bessborough, as indeed I was . . . Eric and I had adjacent rooms in 16 Jesus Lane so we got to know each other and then Ronnie suggested I come into the English Stage Society, as it was then . . . a few days later I bumped into Eric and he said, 'Oh, I hear we're going to join up company with the English Stage Society'. 'Oh', I said, 'Have you been asked on it too?' He said, 'Yes'. So I said, 'What fun'.

(Interview with Greville Poke, March 1994)

The emergence of the English Stage Company came about by a combination of unpredictable and bizarre circumstances. As Devine regrouped, one strand of the combination was forming in Devon. *The Times* for 22 April 1953 reported the creation of the Taw and Torridge Festival of the Arts. The prime mover in this was Ronald Duncan, a playwright and librettist, together with Lord Harewood and Edward Blacksell, a Barnstaple schoolmaster, both Duncan's friends. The Festival offered in July E. Martin Browne's production of Duncan's *Don Juan*, Britten's *Let's Make an Opera* and his version of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, together with Eliot reading his own work and a 'Soirée Musicale' with Peter Pears and Britten himself. The Minutes of the first meeting of the Festival Council, held on 5 December 1953, saw Harewood appointed Chairman, Duncan and Blacksell Council members and a galaxy of prominent figures becoming Vice-Presidents, including Britten, T. S. Eliot, Jacob Epstein, Robert Helpmann, Henry Moore, Ezra Pound, Jeremy Thorpe and Henry Williamson.

The 1954 Festival saw productions of *The Cocktail Party* and Duncan's *The Death of Satan*. These were created by a local group as opposed to the works performed by the English Opera Group. It was the inability of the Festival to attract to Devon professional theatre companies that created in Duncan the desire to establish a theatre

company analogous to the English Opera Group. Such a company would concentrate in part on plays having difficulty in finding a production with commercial companies. This included work by Ronald Duncan himself, thought by some to be a major talent. Blacksell wrote to Harewood on 4 January 1954 to say that 'I think it is most important to put on a play by Ronnie if at all possible. I believe his work is a major contribution to our time so that the Festival performs an important function in giving him an audience . . . since it is difficult to see how he can out-Rattigan Rattigan in the West End.'¹ Blacksell further tells Harewood that the Festival was trying to promote Duncan's *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* by writing to Donald Wolfit, the celebrated actor-manager, and by arranging a series of performances at other theatres and festivals. It is clearly the case that the promotion of Duncan's plays formed the main impetus towards establishing a company. It is equally clear that what evolved was in no one's mind at this point. Thus, while it is true that Duncan began a process which eventually turned into the ESC, it is not true that he founded the ESC.

Duncan began at this stage, April 1954, a lengthy correspondence with Oscar Lewenstein, now Alfred Esdaile's General Manager at the Royal Court. Attempts had been made to secure a production of the two Duncan plays either at the Embassy Theatre or in the West End. Lewenstein felt that the plays should be strongly cast and had asked Alan Badel and Claire Bloom.² This intriguing letter also demonstrates that the primary backer of the venture was Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox, who was taking advice from Hugh Hunt. Kennedy-Cox, Chairman of the Salisbury Arts Theatre, had put up £2,000, with a proviso which was to cause difficulty in the early years of the Court, that a young protégé of his, George Selway, play a major part. In speaking of this years later, Devine described Kennedy-Cox as a 'weird man . . . who was friendly with Ronnie and he was a sort of rather a rich, old queer, and he said he would support the thing because it was going to give encouragement to new, young talent. I said to Tony, "I know what that means." And of course, sure enough, three days later there came a letter saying he was very interested in this young actor called X.'³ Also evident here is Lewenstein, the budding impresario. It

was an aspect of his work which caused some uneasiness later at the Court. Here he advised Duncan that they should

First get Sir Reginald's money tied up. Second see if we can cast either or both plays in such a way as to justify a West End production . . . Thirdly, if we cannot get West End names, then arrange a production at the Embassy and, if we are still in time, also combine this with a production at the Festival.⁴

By 29 April, the position was that Bloom, Badel and Michael Redgrave had turned the offer down. Paul Scofield was next and Trevor Howard after that. Hugh Hunt, still very much on the scene, gave the plays to Donald Sinden, who was apparently keen. This was, however, not for an Embassy production; the initial drive was to the West End and not any form of fringe or experimental theatre.⁵ By now, Lewenstein was moving towards presenting the work himself at the Embassy. He also, importantly, proposed that a company be formed. The question of a name for the company arose. Lewenstein suggested the 'English Theatre Group' but Hugh Hunt felt the name was too close to the 'English Opera Group' to be accepted. Lewenstein offered 'Contemporary Theatre' or 'Modern Theatre' and described a seven-strong directorate of himself, Duncan, Harewood, Duncannon, Britten, and possibly their legal advisor, Isador Caplan.⁶ A seventh figure was to be found. Four of these names appeared on the list of members of the Court's first Council.

On 2 June 1954, Lewenstein reported to Duncan that there already was a company called the 'English Theatre Guild', which meant that anything with 'English Theatre' in it was not allowable by the Registrar of Companies.⁷ In the same letter, the original notion of Duncan's plays being presented is expanded to include *The Three-penny Opera* (a favourite of Lord Harewood's) and *Cock-a-Doodle- Dandy*. Esdaile is to be put on the board and will allow the new company to use the Royal Court as an office. Thirteen days later, *The Crucible* was added to the list.

The negotiations for a theatre and for a star continued. Lewenstein lunched with Hugh Hunt on 13 July to find that Scofield was still deliberating, but that Thane Parker of the London Mask Theatre

would be prepared to lease the Westminster for £150 per week. At the same time, Brecht's representative told Lewenstein that the rights for *The Threepenny Opera* were available 'but since the play's success in Paris and New York, Brecht has set a higher value on it!'⁸

By 16 July 1954, the company had become 'The English Stage Society Ltd' and by 21 July the seven directors were Lord Harewood, Duncannon (now Earl of Bessborough), Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox, Alfred Esdaile, Ronald Duncan, Oscar Lewenstein and Greville Poke.⁹ This in fact comprises, with one name to be added, the Council of the English Stage Company later. Duncan set about building his list of Vice-Presidents, including Christopher Fry who replied saying, 'I should be delighted to be included as a vice-president of the English Stage Society if it's any help.'¹⁰ In essence, the structure of the Taw and Torridge Festival was to be imported as the structure of the new company, together with, implicitly, the Festival's beliefs and objectives. However, an early blow was the decision by Lord Harewood not to be Chairman. Apart from being very occupied with many other artistic schemes, Harewood, astutely enough, pointed out his lack of 'practical experience of how any theatrical enterprise is run, apart that is to say from those connected with opera . . . it must be someone who can be frequently in London, and someone who is prepared to take on the responsibility for the running of the company.'¹¹ As he later commented, 'I then performed the greatest service I ever did for the ESC, by refusing to be its Chairman.'¹²

On 16 October 1954, the *Memorandum and Articles of Association of the English Stage Society Ltd* was published. Finally there were eight directors of the Company, with Blacksell's name added to the original list. Less than a month later, the company name was changed. It was pointed out by Sir St Vincent Troubridge of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, apparently with some strength of feeling, that using the chosen name more than trespassed on the Stage Society of the early years of the century. The Company then proposed two alternative names but

It is not possible for the Registrar (of Companies) to approve the name 'The English Stage Guild Ltd', because it conflicts with

the existing organisation 'English Theatre Guild', and accordingly we have fallen back on our second choice, which is 'The English Stage Company Ltd'.¹³

If the combination, eventually, of the Devon group and the Devine/Richardson partnership, is to be seen as wonderfully coincidental, it is surely a further irony that the 'society' and the 'guild' gave way to the 'company'. It is a further example of the amateur in the best sense confronting the highly professional. When Devine met this group, it is unsurprising that he regarded it with suspicion, since it carried in many ways the marks of the theatre attitudes he most resented and from which he wished to free the English theatre. These attitudes ran through the new Council even as far as the appointment of a Press Officer. George Fearon, who was to clash frequently with Devine, had been Press Officer for the Taw and Torridge Festival and, as will be evident, regarded Devine as an employee much like himself. The freeing of the Artistic Director from hireling to policy maker, together with the gradual diminution of the executive function of the Council, formed one of the great struggles of the early years of the Court. It is a constant feature but one most in evidence when Devine was Artistic Director.

The Council of the Company held its first meeting on 26 October 1954. Poke was appointed Honorary Secretary; A. T. Chenalls & Co were to be Auditors; and Forsyte, Kerman and Phillips were to be the Company's Solicitors. Current plans included *The Threepenny Opera* with Peter Ustinov; the presentation of plays at Aldeburgh, Glyndebourne and Devon; and obtaining the use of the Westminster or Embassy Theatre. There was as yet no formal Chairman of the Company, but in the Minutes of its second meeting on 19 November, the name of Neville Blond appears for the first time.

Blond's name was suggested by Blacksell and, it is thought by some, by Blond's solicitor, Isador Caplan.¹⁴ Blacksell's connection with Blond was via the Blonds' support for the plastic surgery work at the Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, by Archibald McIndoe. Blacksell was a wartime sergeant there. Whichever is correct, it is certainly the case that Blond was invited to lunch by Duncan and

Poke after being asked by Council to approach him. Duncan had lunched with Blond two days earlier and both had gone to see Esdaile in his Park Lane office. Poke recalled that

I arranged a lunch party at the Garrick consisting of you, Neville and myself. In your article¹⁵ you say you wondered if you had enough money to pay for the lunch. You never did! I did! It was over that lunch – historic in its way – after you had explained the aims and objects of the English Stage Company that Neville bowled us over by saying that without a London theatre as a base, our ideas would not work, and if we could find such a theatre he would join us. We reported our conversation to the Council and Alfred Esdaile then offered to sell us the derelict Kingsway Theatre which he owned . . . Neville joined us and he, Oscar and I bore the brunt of the negotiations with Alfred and eventually bought the property from him. It was a matter of some excitement that this was to be the first new theatre after the war in London.¹⁶

On 30 November, Blond was elected Chairman of the ESC at a Council meeting. He had studied a memorandum by Esdaile about the Kingsway Theatre. Esdaile maintained that he had suspended negotiations with an American at the request of Mr Blond. His discussion with Mr Blond therefore was not with the idea of material gain to himself, but with a view to helping the English Stage Company (Minutes, 19 November). The self-justifying tone of these remarks is entirely characteristic of Esdaile's association with the Court.

Blond by now had begun the kind of work he was good at. A private meeting between him, Duncan and Esdaile had been held on 12 November to discuss the circumstances of the Kingsway. Esdaile's projected costs were between £65,000 and £75,000. He was prepared to let the theatre for forty-two years at a rental of £5,000 per annum for the sum of £60,000. Writing to Blond on 12 November, Esdaile's solicitor, said that 'Mr Esdaile knows that the English Stage Co Ltd have no finance as yet but . . . he could, no doubt, arrange for a substantial part of the consideration to be left on mortgage . . . if they could get together £15,000–20,000 they could, in six to eight months'

time have the theatre themselves'. On 29 November, Blond received a positive report on the Kingsway from an estate agent. By late December, however, no licence was apparent, and Blond, in his element, was telling the Company lawyers that 'Mr Alfred Esdaile . . . is of no interest to us unless we are satisfied he has in fact the licence.'¹⁷

If the best service Harewood did for the ESC was to decline to be its Chairman, the best service Lewenstein did was to find the ESC's Artistic Director. Recalling Devine's earlier approaches to Esdaile, Lewenstein went in the autumn of 1954 to the Westminster Theatre where Devine was playing Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*. From nowhere within the theatrical establishment had Devine been able to develop his plans. Now, it appeared, the offer was available from the most unlikely source. This case was inadvertently strengthened by a glowing account of him as 'a complete man of the theatre'.¹⁸ The portrait was occasioned by his production of Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* at Covent Garden. It is an account of Devine which would without doubt have appealed to the Council of the ESC. Indeed, when Devine accepted the part of Artistic Director, thousands of copies of the piece were ordered for publicising purposes.

Lewenstein accurately points up the ironies of the situation and the offer to Devine to become the first Artistic Director of the ESC:

George had to be interested, though it came from such an unlikely source. I say 'unlikely' because George Devine's career had been at the centre of English theatrical life. Starting off as President of OUDS, he had worked with all the great names: Laurence Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, Michael Redgrave. Although there had always been an unconventional side to his character, he was basically an 'insider' whereas we of the ESC, even Ronnie, were theatrical 'outsiders'. George Devine belonged to the central magic circle, we did not.¹⁹

Clearly, the perception of Devine as an establishment figure would appeal to the ESC Council. Equally clearly, Devine did nothing to dispel it. He lunched with Duncan and Harewood on 20 January 1955. The following day, Duncan wrote to Devine to say that 'George

Harewood and I enjoyed very much talking to you the other day at luncheon. It's very gratifying to know that we think on similar lines.²⁰ On the same day Duncan wrote to Blond to say that Devine 'is full of ideas and most anxious to see a plan of the Kingsway stage with its dimensions'. The idea that Duncan and Devine would agree on policy is feasible only if it is remembered that Devine was ruthless in pursuit of an objective, as was evident in his earlier dealings with The John Lewis Partnership. There is no record of the lunch but Duncan was demonstrably deceived. At a later date he reflected sourly that Devine said 'he was in complete agreement. I believed him. I was never a judge of character.'²¹ As Harewood put it, Devine 'told the truth but not the whole truth'.²²

Before Devine met Duncan and Harewood, he had checked on Blond. A friend of his 'made some enquiries in the city and my friends do not know much about him as he comes from the North of England but he is supposed to have large textile interests . . . They think that he would be a reliable man to deal with but nobody can, of course, say whether he is sympathetic to the Arts. PS. One rumour said he was rather attracted to the [drawing of a whisky bottle].'²³ At the same time, Devine began to write a series of notes, between 6 January and 15 February, all theoretical, all to do with the requirements of a new theatre and a new stage. He was very clear about one essential:

What is needed, however, is not adaptability, or a synthesis of the past but for the theatre to create a new milieu in modern terms which will be a completely fresh restatement of the old traditions. In fact, we have once more to sweep the stage clear as Copeau did with his *Trétau nu*, and to rethink the whole conception of the stage as an acting space. In what kind of space can the words of a dramatist both live and create the poetic world of the drama?

The stage must have space and air and freedom from the trappings which are used to pretend that it is something which it is not. In an indoor theatre must be created the same state of frankness and clarity which appertains to an architectural open air theatre.²⁴

'Percy' Harris's comments are incisive. She agreed about illusion: 'discard all things destroying illusion but consider the question of distraction and have a point of view about this ... Can such a performance as you give as Tesman work as completely without the illusion of reality, especially in costume? What would be the point of view about costume?' Harris's main theme is

not to try and conceal construction but to make it part of the design: in fact to feature it as being the leading part of the design because in fact it is. And not decorate it or hide it or put something on the other side to balance it or pretend it is something else: in fact *not to pretend at all*, which is something to do with the basis of your idea.²⁵

Tony Richardson's notes react strongly and positively to Devine's notion, as expressed on 6 January, of giving the stage 'air and freedom'. As he puts it, 'This seems to me the first major attempt to re-evaluate the theatre design in contemporary terms.' For Richardson, the notes by Devine 'conceive the theatre in our terms and align it with the whole contemporary movement in architecture and it's there I'm sure the future must lie'.²⁶

By 23 January the notes achieve some sort of synthesis. Devine is also, from hard-won experience, realistic: 'I use the words "fought for" advisedly because I am sure it will be difficult to convince people that it will be worth while to do the work, and to find the way to fit such ideas into a theatre which will, in all likelihood, be structurally conventional.'²⁷ He still had not received the plans of the Kingsway. The final version of the memorandum was sent to Harewood and Duncan. They were extremely enthusiastic and proposed 'a drawing of our own which would then give Esdaile and his architect a precise idea of what we want.'²⁸

Devine, however, was only a potential employee of the ESC and had no say in policy at this stage. Indeed, the Council meeting for 17 January 1955 resolved that staff for the Kingsway be engaged 'in the following order of priority: (a) Club Manager (b) Artistic Director (c) Theatre Manager'. Moreover, when Lewenstein suggested that Devine be invited to the Council's next meeting he was told that Devine

could be invited when the Kingsway work was nearer completion. The manner in which Devine and some of his artistic colleagues were regarded was another area of struggle in the next few years.

News of the renovation of the Kingsway began to circulate. The BBC interviewed Esdaile on 21 January, on which occasion he said that he 'would like to see the Kingsway as another centre of London play-going in the old style – a place reminding you of the good old days with people dressing for dinner and regularly and devotedly going to their old, friendly little theatre'.²⁹ Given this view, a clash was inevitable, and it was to last until Devine resigned. It is the case that Esdaile was utterly unused to any director having views about the running of a theatre. Such a person was hired to produce the play and not formulate policy, still less draw up plans for the redesigning of a theatre. He obviously objected to Devine's memorandum since, on 9 February, Blond sent him a sharp note: 'What is something theoretical and idealistic might well be something practical and I do not think we should treat this project for a new stage lightly.'³⁰ On the same day, Blond affirmed to Devine that he had spoken to Esdaile 'and he says he will be delighted to work with you in regard to the theatre and the decor'.³¹ Devine had still not agreed to accept the job at the ESC and Blond worked hard to keep all the parties together. To Blacksell he wrote privately that 'I hope they do not land me with the whole thing – that is the only thing I am afraid of. As I have informed the noble Earl, I am not "carrying the can back" and I am going to exploit him in the fullest.' He then asked Harewood to look after the artistic side while he looked after the business side. It should be remembered at this point that Blond knew nothing about theatre or theatre people. He had this in common with the majority of the ESC Council, but he was shrewd enough to leave that to Harewood. In so doing, he unwittingly enabled the ESC to survive, for Harewood proved to be both a protector of Devine and a formidable and clever negotiator with Blond. Without such a talented buffer figure, the enterprise would not have lasted.

At the 7 February Council, the membership of committees was decided. An Artistic Sub-Committee, chaired by Harewood, would also have Duncan and Lewenstein as members, and a Finance Sub-

Committee was to consist of Esdaile (Chair), Poke and Lewenstein. The Arts Council representative made a first appearance at this meeting. This was Jo Hodgkinson, recently appointed to head drama.³² Two days later, Devine lunched with Harewood, Duncan and Blond 'and it looks to me that Mr Devine is going to work for us – I only hope he does not ask for too much money'.³³ Devine asked for another meeting with Blond before finally committing himself and it is not difficult to imagine Devine's excitement but also caution. He had been in this kind of situation before, either as part of a scheme which was destroyed (the Vic Scheme) or a scheme which had collapsed (the earlier Court) and he was now close to yet another attempt to go on with his work. Also on offer was the Headship of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. This he turned down, and he received a letter from Harewood expressing his delight that Devine was 'disposed' to join the ESC. Harewood also refers to Devine's final memorandum on the Kingsway:

I think your new memorandum is explicit and helpful, but it has put the wind up Mr Esdaile who, all the same, eats out of Blond's velvet-gloved but definitely iron hand. I think we shall get a bit of what we want if we can formulate reasonably exact demands.³⁴

The general feeling was that Esdaile was not entirely to be trusted. Blond pushed the affair along, asking Devine for a model of the new stage, for 'It is of the utmost importance that we know where we are and that we are not presented with a "fait accompli"' (Blond to Poke, 23 February 1955).

Blond duly lunched with Devine on 24 February and Devine laid out his terms on 26 February. He accepted a minimum salary of £1,560 p.a. (£30 per week) but reserved the right 'to study the planning and the budget' before confirming. The salary was very low for such an appointment and Devine insisted that it be reviewed at the earliest opportunity,³⁵ and that Tony Richardson become his Associate. Blond was pleased with his bargain and, in a nicely ironic letter to Poke of 23 February, his pleasure is apparent: 'I was very much impressed with his approach to our problem and I really think this is just the kind of

fellow we need to have. I hope you will all be as happy as I am with him.'

The ESC now had its major figures in place. As negotiations for the Kingsway proceeded, *Airs on a Shoestring* closed at the Court on 5 March after 770 performances. Devine was officially appointed two days earlier. The significant fact for the ESC was that the next show at the Court, also brought in by Lister and called 'The Burning Boat', began on 10 March and was withdrawn after only a few performances. Its replacement was 'Uncertain Joy', which opened at the Court on 31 March and transferred to the Duchess on 20 June. While *Airs on a Shoestring* ran so well (Poke's view was that 'Alfred thought it was going to become a sort of *Mousetrap*, and it was going to go on forever'³⁶), Esdaile comfortably dealt with the ESC in relation to the Kingsway. He changed his view once his 'Mousetrap' ended.

It was at this stage that the ESC produced the brochure containing its 'Aims and Objects'. The first of these had been prepared on 3 December 1954. The aims were to present plays by modern authors; to present 'from time to time' a London season; to visit other festivals; to play at venues which could not support a theatre; to tour contemporary English plays abroad; to stimulate new unity; 'to encourage the theatre of imagination and poetry as against the theatre which predominates today'. Versions in early 1955 carried illustrations of the Kingsway Theatre, complete with limousines, chauffeurs and a doorman. Devine is described as the 'Art Director'. A brochure dated 5 April 1955 replaces the Kingsway illustration with John Piper's version of the top part of a monument erected at Stowe in honour of Congreve. It shows a monkey looking in a mirror, representing, according to Piper, the stage as a mirror of life.³⁷ Reaction to the monkey was swift. Blond wrote to Poke on 14 March: 'The brochure looks very good apart from the drawing by John Piper which I hope to speak to you about.' Lewenstein asked for it to be removed in a letter to Poke of 8 April and it eventually was.

More indicative of the struggle to come was the action Duncan was taking. A Council of 21 February had authorised him to contact Eliot, Fry and others 'to discover whether they would be willing to offer a play to the English Stage Company'. On 11 March, Duncan

wrote to John Whiting and Peter Ustinov on the matter,³⁸ in terms which indicate how well he thought of himself and his role in the company: 'As you may know, I have formed the English Stage Company.' There's no reference to any consultation with Devine, since the idea that Devine should be consulted would not have arisen. Equally, on 21 March, Duncan sent off to the printers of the brochure the celebrated statement of artistic support: 'The following artists support our aims, and the Company hopes to present their work: T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, Peter Ustinov, John Whiting, Ronald Duncan, Berthold Brecht, Gabriel Marcel, Benjamin Britten, John Piper.' This brought a rapid response from Lewenstein (Devine was abroad with *Hedda Gabler*). On 8 April he wrote to Poke objecting to the list and, in particular, to the inclusion of Brecht's name. This was partly because he was concluding agreements with Brecht's agent to produce *The Threepenny Opera*. He also states bluntly that 'I am sure we have never been asked to pass this wording.' Though 'support' in the statement was replaced by 'in sympathy with', the names, with the exception of Brecht, remained. None of the writers, except Duncan himself, ever had work done at the Court and when, in 1960, Duncan famously inveighed against Devine for breaking his promise, he conveniently forgot that he alone made the list and had it put in the 'Aims and Objects'. Council had been told by Duncan on 21 March that Eliot had suggested the ESC consider optioning *The Family Reunion*, and that Whiting would send the play he was currently writing. It's worth stressing that Devine did not at this stage go to Council meetings. The relationship between Council, which made executive decisions, and its Artistic Director was that of employer and employee and remained so for some time. Devine made his first appearance at a Council meeting on 28 April. He had returned from Europe on 24 March.

It was at the 28 April Council that the Artistic Sub-Committee made its first report. It proposed a plan of operation of true repertory, with eight plays in the repertoire over a forty-week period. These plays would consist of three original plays by British authors, a British revival, two translations, a mixed bill of short plays and a classic. The report was approved, as was Lewenstein's budget. Esdaile assured

Council that by 17 July he would be able to give a definite date for completion of the work on the Kingsway. This would enable the first season to begin on 23 January 1956. Esdaile further undertook to approach the Masons, who owned the adjacent bombed site, with a view to renting it to provide a workshop and storeroom for the ESC. Finally, Blond guaranteed Esdaile against any loss incurred in the structural alterations of the Kingsway if the ESC failed.

Devine instinctively mistrusted Esdaile. On 4 May, he drafted a prophetic note to Blond: 'I am far from convinced that he wants all this, although in front of you he always sings to your tune. It is not to his taste and, as he took some pains to explain to me *after* you left, from *his* point of view, the more conventional the theatre, the better.' Devine felt that Esdaile was going to carry on as though the ESC did not exist until the contract was signed and the money in the bank: 'To be obliged to listen to my advice or opinion is useless, as he will wriggle his way out of anything, unless constrained.'³⁹ As Devine voiced his growing concern, elsewhere Osborne recorded in his diary for 4 May 1955: 'Began writing *Look Back in Anger* ... Friday, May 13th: Went to see *Hedda Gabler*.'⁴⁰

Towards the end of May, Harewood wrote to Blond about Esdaile's choosing a House Manager. Esdaile wanted a certain Herbert Ray. When Devine asked to meet Ray, Esdaile said bluntly that it was not Devine's business. Harewood and his committee 'were really seriously concerned to hear of such a show of hand from Esdaile, which confirms the fears that I for one have had all along ... how can we accept such an appointment without the backing of our Artistic Director – and why should we? It seems to me crucial that Devine should be concerned in the selection of *all senior personnel*.' This worry is critical. The struggle involved here stands for the overall struggle of the emerging job of Artistic Director of a theatre in the modern world, and Harewood, as always, was sensitive to it. Esdaile has

so far acted exclusively as the vendor of the property we want to acquire, not at all as one of our directors. I myself can only view this latest effort to force one of his nominees on us *without an*

interview with the artistic head of the enterprise as something to be strongly resisted. We – and that includes Esdaile – have chosen Devine as the man to give practical and artistic expression to the Company's objects, and we must rely on his enormous theatrical knowledge and experience to help us.⁴¹

Harewood further urged Blond to import a consultant architect to supervise the decorative scheme. If this isn't done, 'We shall have Esdaile's gilt-and-plush everywhere (I started to type "guilt", so you can see the way my mind is working!).'

Blond replied to what he called Harewood's '*cri de coeur*' letter and assured Harewood things were all under control. He also soothed Esdaile, 'who wanted to resign, but I told him that it was very silly to take his wickets [*sic*] home and not play with us' (2 June). To some extent, Blond was in his element. However, he appears not to have realised how close he came to losing his Artistic Director over the question of who ruled the roost in some areas. Poke reported to Blond on 6 June that Esdaile was in the habit of saying to Devine, 'I am the Gov'nor around here', not a sentiment likely to appeal to Devine. The problem was compounded by the fact that Devine was even then beginning a seven-month tour for Stratford with *Much Ado About Nothing* and his remarkable production of what became known as the 'Noguchi' *Lear*.⁴²

In early July, there occurs the first reference to the Royal Court. At a Council held on 5 July, a piece of paper was circulated on which is scribbled: 'How do you react to leasing the Royal Court Theatre from December as an alternative pending the Kingsway being built?' This is in Lewenstein's hand. Below it, Duncan's reaction is 'Not worthwhile if Kingsway can open early 1956.' Harewood's note is: 'The point is if, we ought not to open in any other theatre than the Kingsway, *unless* there will be a long stay, and the Kingsway not ready until, say, mid-1956.' This thought is clearly occasioned by the delays in work on the Kingsway and the fact that the Court was not enjoying a long run. Working with Esdaile did not get easier. As reported by Poke to Blond on 18 June, Esdaile refused to show his lighting plans to Devine because he did not want them vetted.

Despite talk of the Court, the work on the Kingsway went on and a party to launch the Company was announced for 20 July in the Kingsway itself. The Council for 18 July was introduced to a Paul Anstey who undertook to decorate the theatre in 'an appropriate way'. He had a plan 'for making the auditorium look as if the builders were really in, with ladders, pots of paint, odd bits of scenery and builders' materials lying around'. An elaborate deception was about to take place. In the same meeting, Esdaile offered the ESC its eventual home. This means that the famous occasion when Blond passed Poke the note which read 'Alfred says would we like the Court instead of the Kingsway and I scribbled on the note, "not half" and handed it back to him' must have taken place at a Council meeting earlier than 18 July.⁴³ It was not realised at the time that Esdaile had a very good reason for the offer. It became apparent that the Masons 'wanted the Kingsway to extend and they made Alfred a fantastic offer, which made him want to get out of his obligation to us'.⁴⁴ It was perfect for Esdaile. He made money from selling the Kingsway; he could appear to be acting generously in offering the ESC the Court. And he could off-load a theatre which, since *Airs on a Shoestring* had closed, had not done particularly well.

Devine, on the other hand, having had a model of the new stage prepared by Jocelyn Herbert, saw the prospect of a new theatre from the floor up, disappear, even if the new offer was for the theatre he had most wanted. Harewood met Devine before 15 July 'and I then explained the position about the Kingsway Theatre and the Court Theatre, and found that he inclined to my own view – that we are publicly committed to the Kingsway Theatre, and ... Only if it seems unlikely that it will be finished in time should we consider the Court Theatre' (to Poke, 15 July). Poke, however, could see some advantages: 'The more I think of the Royal Court, the more I like it. To have a theatre without having to find a heavy capital sum is attractive' (to Blond, 30 July).

In fact, Devine knew about the offer. He received a telephone call from Esdaile on 4 April. His notes record 'incl. bars ... the whole shoot ... Says no structural alterations ... absolutely perfect'.⁴⁵ In 1965, he recalled the moment. Esdaile telephoned him with the offer:

I flipped naturally, with the history of that theatre and said, 'sure' . . . I went round and the place was in a frightful mess. It was very poorly re-installed. Esdaile kept saying, 'It's a lovely theatre, beautiful condition, the switchboard . . .' Well you couldn't touch the switchboard without getting a 1,000-volt shock . . . But I wasn't telling them . . . I wasn't really going to be fool enough to tell them what it was going to cost them to put the place in order.⁴⁶

By this stage, the launch of the ESC had taken place in the shell of the Kingsway on 21 July, at which gathering the purpose of the new venture was explained. By 8 August, the ESC had formally accepted the invitation to move into the Court. The lease was for thirty-five years at the rate of £5,000 per annum; a capital payment immediately of £5,000, and the repayment of another £20,000 over ten years. Devine had concerns and requests very quickly; on 15 August he wrote to ask Blond about the chances of acquiring the derelict cottages at the back of the theatre.

The meeting of the Artistic Sub-Committee of 24 August noted that *Look Back in Anger* had been read by Devine, Duncan and Lewenstein 'and it was thought to be a very promising find, although a difficult play to swallow'. Osborne was to be offered £25 for a short option.⁴⁷ The play was one of 675 received in response to an advertisement by the ESC.⁴⁸ Other writers discussed by the Committee included Sean O'Casey with *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy*, Miller's *The Crucible*, Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and a Lorca play. Whiting's new play would not be ready for the season but, as Duncan reported, Eliot had given permission for the Company to do *Sweeney Agonistes*. Devine proposed to open the season with the O'Casey. It was objected that he was not British. Devine had opted for Brecht and Lorca. It was objected that there were not translations. Devine also conceived the notion of novelists writing plays. One of the authors he had contacted was Nigel Dennis who had replied in September 1955 to say that he 'very much appreciated your letter: thank you for your interest. The only play I have ever written is 'The Prince of Antioch' in *Cards of Identity*. Is there any hope of your being interested in

that?⁴⁹ Another writer was suggested by John Lehmann of the *London Magazine*:

my very best wishes for the success of your venture. During the last ten years or more I have frequently tried to persuade such writers as V. S. Pritchett and Henry Green, whose skill with dialogue is particularly outstanding, to write for the theatre, but without much success. If you can persuade them that it's going to be much more rewarding than it looks, more power to your elbow . . . Angus Wilson has just had a play accepted by the Bristol Old Vic; he might be very good indeed.⁵⁰

At the beginning of September, Devine proposed to the Artistic Sub-Committee a number of Sunday rehearsed readings for promising but not yet performable plays. These became the 'Sunday Nights' which began in May 1957. He also wrote an important document about the stage at the Court. He knew that he would have an opportunity when back on tour for Stratford to see Brecht's theatre but

Before I see the Brecht theatre, I want to develop my own mind about the stage of the Royal Court. This is a small stage in a small theatre. It will be difficult to 'work', being small. Elaborate or complicated mechanisms will be an encumbrance and defeat their own ends . . . The problem is how to create, in that limited and encumbered area, a feeling of space and air. It is an architectural/sculptural/stage design problem . . .

Some form of masking is essential for reasons of economy and time . . . How flexible must it be? And how rigid? Too much flexibility means nothing, too much rigidity kills . . . Our solution must appear to be essential, as opposed to ideological, functional as opposed to decorative, natural as opposed to theoretical . . . We do not want to say, 'Look, there is nothing up our sleeve' BUT 'Yes, there is plenty up our sleeve but we do not want to pretend that we have nothing' – for the pretence starts in the scenery, lights, costumes, acting and words, all specifically inspired by the dramatic action. It is these thoughts

which bring me back always to the idea of suggesting solidity without actually having it . . . There are two main ways in which this idea of space/air may be created on a limited stage inside a building; by the shape and direction of the masking – suggesting that the limiting planes do not end but lead to further space; by the material of the masking – suggesting that air can pass through, that the solidity is conventional rather than pictorial/actual . . . We want something that will seem as impermanent and of the moment as the life that takes place on the stage, which lives and dies in less than a second . . . Next instalment – all the answers!⁵¹

Not only is this paper written before Devine saw Brecht's theatre, but it, together with his theoretical papers focused on the Kingsway, establishes him as a theatre thinker of importance, perhaps a good antidote to the avuncular image sometimes thought accurately to characterise him.

By 13 September the first season consisted of O'Casey, Miller, Duncan, Osborne and Brecht. Devine was due to meet Brecht on 18 September. Given the objections to the O'Casey opening, Devine was at pains to stress that at that stage the ESC did not have an opening play. Duncan, Harewood and Poke were strongly of the view that the opening season should contain a preponderance of English plays: 'Authors like Brecht are no doubt of some importance in their proper place but he is German . . . Speaking personally, having read *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy* I am against its inclusion altogether because it is a mad Irish play which in my opinion can only be done by Irishmen with that wonderful flair for putting over the blarney' (Poke to Blond, 22 September). Clearly the relationship between Devine and some members of the ESC would never be resolved in some areas, particularly to do with taste. Many issues were being raised which would take a long time to resolve. The question of play-reading was central and begins to appear as an impending conflict. Another was publicity. No one had told George Fearon, the Press Officer, of the move to the Court. He was, not unreasonably, angry at going ahead with publicity for the Kingsway, only to find it a waste of time. It is one of the few

times Fearon was entitled to sympathy. He wrote to Poke on 5 October to say he was 'Furious! More Furious!! Most Furious!!!'.

At the 19 October Council, the central issue was that of the opening play. Blond was obviously nervous that a play was not in place and good publicity time was being wasted. Esdaile, who at this meeting was confirmed as the ESC Vice-Chairman, 'urged that the Company should obtain the services of two good stars to open. Lord Harewood pointed out that Mr Devine had this matter well in hand.' If Esdaile wanted stars, Kennedy-Cox wanted to make a star. It was for this purpose that he had put up his £2,000 for Duncan's original venture. Letters from Kennedy-Cox to the ESC run through 1955 and 1956 and raise a serious matter of principle, for the money was conditional upon George Selway playing second lead parts in ESC productions. Devine, unsurprisingly, objected strongly. Poke reported to Blond in a letter of 24 October that he felt Devine was 'taking an entirely unrealistic view of this matter. Nobody admires anyone more than I do for acting on principle . . . and quite rightly, he says he is not going to have bad actors and actresses foisted on him for money [but] People who can put up £2,000 are not found on every tree [and] Selway is practically Sir Reginald's adopted son.' Eventually, Devine was persuaded to see Selway and some other actors so lauded by Kennedy-Cox. Devine wrote to Kennedy-Cox on 30 January 1956. He turned one actor down flat, thought another might eventually be useful and went to see Selway in a play: 'To be frank I am of the opinion that this actor has a great deal to learn. He is uneasy, constricted and vocally tight.' Devine refused to give Selway good parts but offered to help him in his acting if he would come to the Court in small parts. Selway played in *The Crucible*, the Duncan double bill and *Cards of Identity* and nothing after that. It was a kind of compromise, except that Devine clearly would not allow an actor of whom he disapproved to take second leads.

On 15 November, Devine sent to Harewood 'Plan Z set out properly: no longer Z, I think, but THE plan! I think it is good.'⁵² The note makes clear that Devine and Harewood were allies, and that Duncan was already a problem. After asking Harewood to get it typed (Devine was on tour in Newcastle), the letter says 'If you do so, I