

**A critical history of the Soho Theatre: 1968-1975**

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**A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE SOHO THEATRE: 1968-1975**

**MATTHEW MORRISON**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**September 2014**

## **Abstract**

This thesis represents the first detailed account of the Soho Theatre's early history, from 1968 to 1975. During this period, 'Soho' was a pioneer of lunchtime theatre, offering a challenge to conventional theatre-going practice and placing new demands on writers, director and designers. Soho quickly established a dominant position on the burgeoning fringe and alternative theatre scene. It did so, however, in spite of critical misgivings about the value of the lunchtime 'movement'. Commentators often failed to appreciate the innovative qualities of lunchtime work, finding fault with what they saw as a random approach to programming and an apparent lack of clear artistic policy. Many later theatre histories have reproduced this critique. As well as documenting the Soho Theatre's history, therefore, this study offers a reassessment of the contribution it, and other lunchtime companies, made to the theatrical activity of the time.

In my first chapter, I trace the development of the lunchtime theatre phenomenon, situating it within a number of theatrical, political and cultural contexts. I consider its complex relationship with the Arts Council and engage with some of the more dismissive accounts of its practices, revealing the ideological positions on which such assessments rest. In Chapter Two, I examine the company's first 'home', at Le Metro Club on New Compton Street, and show how it quickly became an integral part of the developing theatrical landscape. In Chapter Three, I concentrate on Soho's time at the King's Head pub in Islington. Here it mounted a series of productions that challenged traditional notions of the 'one-act' play and tested the boundaries of the performance space. In 1972, the Soho Theatre moved again, to a basement on Riding House Street owned by the Polytechnic of Central London. Chapters Four and Five examine the company's first years at what became known as the Soho Poly. I pay particular attention to the importance of the venue itself, showing how it played a crucial role in Soho's survival. I conclude by arguing that existing studies of fringe and alternative theatre have underestimated the values of 'eclecticism', 'contingency' and 'responsiveness' that often characterised the Soho Theatre and other companies on the lunchtime scene.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Matthew Morrison

2 September 2014

## Explanatory Notes and Abbreviations

Unless otherwise stated, dates in brackets given after a play's title refer to the date of first production or broadcast. Where this isn't known, I indicate, instead, the date when the play was written or published.

ACGB: Arts Council of Great Britain. In references, ACGB is the prefix given for Arts Council records housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Theatre and Performance Archives, Blythe House, London. The archive's full catalogue is available at:  
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/wid/ead/acgb/acgb-41.html#toc0>.  
Specific file references are given below:

Client Funding Administration, 1944-1995 (ref. ACGB/41)

Drama General, 1944-1995 (ref. ACGB/38)

Policy and Information Files, 1928-1994 (ref. ACGB/43)

Theatre Writing, 1950-1991 (ref. ACGB/40)

EDC: Arts Council of Great Britain's Experimental Drama Committee.

FEDC: Arts Council of Great Britain's Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee. Note, the EDC was renamed the FEDC in autumn 1972. However, official documents (minutes, etc.) were still occasionally labelled EDC after this point.

NDC: Arts Council of Great Britain's New Drama Committee.

THM/317: In references, THM/317 is the prefix given for Tricycle Theatre records housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Theatre and Performance Archives, Blythe House, London.

UWA: University of Westminster Archive, held at University of Westminster, 4-12 Little Titchfield Street, London W1W 7BY

V&A: Victoria and Albert Museum

WTC: Wakefield Tricycle Company

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## Introduction

Today, Soho Theatre on Dean Street houses a 150-seat main auditorium, a smaller 90-seat studio and a basement 'cabaret' space.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its commitment to presenting work by emerging British and international theatre makers, it offers attachment schemes, workshops and study rooms as well as administering the biennial Verity Bargate playwriting award. In 2012-13, it recorded visits by 167,000 audience members and during the same period it generated more in tax revenues (£625k) than it received in government funding (£600k).<sup>2</sup> It has come a long way, in other words, since its inception in the late 1960s. Then, it was forced to hop from one tiny venue to another, barely surviving on minimal Arts Council grants, often given on a play-by-play basis. Despite such limitations, the early Soho Theatre, founded by Fred Proud (artistic director) and Verity Bargate (general director) in 1968, was to have a critical role within the developing fringe and alternative theatre activity of the time. In particular, it was a pioneer of lunchtime theatre, an innovation which increased exposure to writers' work, pushed boundaries of form and content and helped to re-imagine the relationship between theatres and their audiences. At its peak in the early to mid-1970s, cultural commentators estimated that there were a dozen or so regularly operating lunchtime theatres in the capital.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the decade, however, as Rosalind Asquith notes, there were only two: the King's Head and the Soho Poly (the name by which the Soho Theatre was generally referred to after 1972).<sup>4</sup> During the 1980s and 90s, Soho, too, began to move away from lunchtime productions, but it has continued to make a major

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<sup>1</sup> 'About Us', *Soho Theatre* website, accessed 20 February 2014, <http://www.sohotheatre.com/about-us/>.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Impact of Public Investment 2012-2013', *Soho Theatre* website, accessed 20 February 2014, <http://www.sohotheatre.com/news/soho-theatre-economic-and-cultural-impact/>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Barry Russell, 'The Lunchtime Theatre Crisis' *Time Out*, 11 August 1972, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime: Or Business As Usual?', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), 146. Asquith does acknowledge that occasional lunchtime productions remained a feature of the London theatre scene during this time.

contribution to London's theatre ecology for almost half a century. And yet, no dedicated histories currently exist.

The over-arching aim of my thesis is to produce the first detailed study of the Soho Theatre between 1968 and 1975. This phase began with Proud and Bargate's inaugural production - an adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's radio drama, *One Autumn Evening* (1956), presented at Charles Marowitz's Open Space theatre on Tottenham Court Road. It progressed, through brief residencies at a Chinese restaurant on New Compton Street and the King's Head pub in Islington, to the company's arrival in March 1972 at their first 'permanent' home - a former basement garage on Riding House Street, owned by the Polytechnic of Central London. Although I only examine the company's first three years at this venue, the Soho Poly, as it quickly became known, remained on the site until 1990.<sup>5</sup>

With respect to this early history, my research has been guided by three, more specific, questions: (i) how did the Soho Theatre come to establish its dominant reputation on the lunchtime theatre scene; (ii) to what extent did it contribute to the developing discourses surrounding fringe and alternative theatre activity; and (iii) what further insights into these discourses does an examination of its operations provide? To answer these questions, I have explored archives, conducted interviews, entered into written correspondence, examined contemporary reviews and analysed plays that were performed at the theatre during the period. In what follows in this section, I discuss some of the ways in which these research strategies have been both productive and problematic and explain the choices I have made with respect to dilemmas of definition and terminology.

In June 2012, I curated a forty-year anniversary festival to mark the opening of the Soho Poly, drawing together many of those who had been involved with the theatre through various stages of its development. Fred Proud introduced the three-day programme of events which included a panel session with theatre critics Michael Billington, Michael Coveney and Irving Wardle, a lunchtime performance of new short plays produced by the Miniaturists, and play readings of early works by David Edgar and Robert Holman, both of whom were

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<sup>5</sup> A full list of the plays produced by the Soho Theatre during the period 1968-75 is provided in Appendix A.

in attendance. I return to this festival in my conclusion, and consider in more detail the contribution it has made to my research.

I begin, however, by drawing attention to my reasons for engaging in this study. This is not an attempt to identify, and thereby somehow neutralise, subjective bias. Any such impulse, as McConachie has shown, would express a belief in the possibility of uncovering objective historical facts.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is because the researcher's stance towards their subject matter, what McConachie refers to as 'prejudicial preconceptions', will always be constitutive of the research they produce.<sup>7</sup> Without such a stance, indeed, research cannot begin - although with it, as Gale and Featherstone have noted, the best that can be hoped for 'is a *version* of history'.<sup>8</sup>

I acknowledge here, then, that my relationship with the Soho Theatre has both a personal and professional dimension. During the 1970s, my father was a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London from which the theatre leased premises between 1972 and 1990. During the later 1970s and 1980s he also acted as a point of liaison between the institution and the theatre. Both my parents had met Verity Bargate and Fred Proud and would probably have considered themselves 'fans'. Long before I started my research, therefore, I had heard stories about the theatre and met some of those who had been involved.

Professionally, too, I have a prior connection. Towards the end of Abigail Morris' artistic directorship in 2004, I started working as a reader for the theatre's script department.<sup>9</sup> I am now a literary associate. Between 2003 and 2005, I was also the literary manager of another London new-writing venue, Theatre503 (then known as the Latchmere theatre). During my time in this role there was no obvious artistic policy beyond the promotion of the 'best' scripts. The atmosphere was frequently chaotic, decisions were far from democratic, money was short and the artistic team, though full of passion and commitment, just as often felt overworked and undervalued. I have tried to resist the impulse to read my own experiences back onto those of another group of people in

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, 'Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History', *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 4 (1985): 470.

<sup>7</sup> McConachie, 'Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History', 468.

<sup>8</sup> Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, 'The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research', in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, eds. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Abigail Morris was artistic director between 1992 and 2006.

another time. Nevertheless, it has been helpful to remember that artistic decision making can often be contingent, inconsistent and even accidental.

Perhaps I am not the best person to assess the impact such personal or professional links - not to mention my wider cultural background - will have had on this research. But there is no denying that I have approached the subject matter with a sympathy towards the aims and aspirations of those who were involved. My own work as a playwright and sometime dramaturg has also been formative.

### **Names and dates**

Nobody in New York gets uptight if you talk about off-off-Broadway: in Paris you are bestowing a compliment if you refer to *le théâtre pauvre*. But in London you will be put down as patronising slummer if you accuse anyone of working in 'fringe' theatre. Other terms are no better. Alternative theatre. The underground. Any phrase I use for the subject of this article is going to offend someone.

Irving Wardle, *New Society*, 1972.<sup>10</sup>

Definitions are always contentious and the last four decades have done little to resolve the difficulties faced by Wardle in choosing descriptive labels for the theatrical activity of the period. As well as the examples he presents above, we might add 'avant-garde', 'experimental', 'political', 'counter-cultural' and 'radical' to a list of possibilities. As Baz Kershaw has noted, however, two of these - 'fringe' and 'alternative' - have fought the most vigorous 'battle for precedence'.<sup>11</sup>

Although 'fringe' was used widely at the time, and remains popular shorthand, there are good reasons for rejecting it as a stand-alone expression. Kershaw observes that it is particularly problematic for its implication that such theatrical activity belongs at the margins.<sup>12</sup> This problem was certainly recognised by contemporary practitioners. In a meeting of the British Actor's Equity Association in 1973, for example, a motion referred to 'what have

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<sup>10</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', *New Society*, 29 June 1972, 684.

<sup>11</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 55.

denigratingly been labelled “fringe” companies’.<sup>13</sup> Chris Megson, in his 2012 survey *Modern British Playwriting: the 1970s*, agrees that the term ‘tend[s] to codify a set of fixed oppositions (“fringe” versus “mainstream”).<sup>14</sup> It is not clear, however, that his choice of ‘alternative’ avoids this problem. Catherine Itzin, after all, wrote in the Foreword to her 1976 *Alternative Theatre Handbook* that:

The people who do the kinds of ‘theatre’ work described [...] have [...] rejected conventional or mainstream or establishment theatre in favour of what some would hardly regard as theatre at all, but which could appropriately be called ‘alternative theatre’.<sup>15</sup>

My own solution is to use the combined expression ‘fringe and alternative theatre’. In this way I introduce an oscillation between the two terms that keeps the maximum number of possible meanings in play. This is important because, as I illustrate in my first chapter, lunchtime theatre has been variously excluded from one or other category.<sup>16</sup>

There are also difficulties involved in referring to the subject of this thesis itself. During its forty-six year history, it has undergone a number of slight but significant name changes, often reflecting subtle shifts in its status as company and/or venue. In its earliest iteration, the ‘Soho Theatre’ (as it was generally referred to at the time), although nominally a company, was little more than a would-be director/producer team at large.<sup>17</sup> As it became more established,

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<sup>13</sup> Motions tabled at a British Actors’ Equity Association Special General Meeting, 11-12 August 1973, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, ACG/43/43/10.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Megson, *Modern British Playwriting - the 1970s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 37.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Itzin, *The Alternative Theatre Handbook, 1975-76* (London: TQ Publications Ltd., 1976), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Other authors have also made use of combined expressions, particularly in the titles of their work. See, for example: Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987); Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman, 1975).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, for the first five years of its existence, it remained informally constituted. Proud and Bargate did not retain any permanent staff during this period. Instead, where budgets allowed it, actors, guest directors, stage managers, etc. were offered small amounts of money - usually only a few pounds - on a show by show basis. It wasn’t until the end of 1973 that the ‘Soho Theatre Company Limited’ was officially incorporated. The Memorandum of Association names three subscribers - Fred Proud (artistic director), Verity Bargate (general director) and the playwright John Grillo - and records

through residencies at Le Metro Club on New Compton Street in 1970 and the King's Head pub in Islington in 1971, it began to assume the character of a small producing house, although, when travelling to the Edinburgh festival or out on tour, the sense of being an itinerant company asserted itself more strongly. Following the move to the PCL premises on Riding House Street in March 1972, a new name - the 'Soho-Poly Theatre Club' - was agreed in recognition of the institutional affiliation. As this quickly became contracted to the 'Soho Poly', any remaining distinction between company and venue, at least as it was perceived from outside, began to dissolve.<sup>18</sup>

To keep things as simple as possible here, I generally refer to the 'Soho Theatre' unless I am writing specifically about plays produced during the 'Soho Poly' period, occasionally shortening both to 'Soho' when the context allows it. References to the theatre today reflect the fact that, in its current incarnation, it no longer employs the definite article.

With respect to dates, I am conscious of the risk that, in choosing to examine the period 1968-75, I appear to adopt an over-familiar period concept. Certainly, as Megson has pointed out (and as I illustrate in Chapter One), much has been made of 1968 as a 'watershed' moment.<sup>19</sup> The mid 1970s have also frequently been identified as a moment of significant change and/or decline for fringe and alternative theatre movements. Robert Hewison, for example, writes that '[t]he levelling out, and then shrinkage, of Arts Council subsidies after 1975 is one of the firmest justifications for treating 1975 as the end of an era'.<sup>20</sup> This end date has, however, been contested. Keeping within a funding context, for

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the company's proposal for 25 registered members. This new status did not, however, have an immediate impact on organisational or financial structures. More significant - as I discuss in detail in Chapter One - was the gradual replacement of the Arts Council's ad hoc New Drama grants with annual revenue funding, which allowed regular company members (specifically associate directors and stage managers) to be engaged for more sustained periods on small, but relatively secure, 'incomes'. (A full record of the documentation pertaining to the company's registration is available from the Companies House website: <http://wck2.companieshouse.gov.uk/compdetails>, accessed 14 September, 2014.)

<sup>18</sup> However, as Proud is keen to point out, the 'Soho Theatre' *did* maintain an independent identity after this point. So when, for example, he directed a play for the Tramshed Theatre in Woolwich in 1974, it was billed as a Soho Theatre production rather than a Soho Poly one. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 January 2014.)

<sup>19</sup> Chris Megson, "'The Spectacle is Everywhere': Tracing the Situationist Legacy in British Playwriting since 1968", *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 2 (2004), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960-1975* (London: Methuen, 1986), xvii.

instance, Shirley Barrie argues that the organisation of pressure groups like the Independent Theatre Council (ITC) and The Association of Community Theatre (TACT) in the early 1970s led to significant gains in ‘financial and artistic recognition’ by the end of the decade.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, my primary reason for beginning in 1968 is that the Soho Theatre produced its first play in that year. Similarly, I have chosen to conclude at the point at which Proud ceased to be artistic director. 1968-75 can, therefore, legitimately be interpreted as the first decisive phase of the Soho Theatre’s history. Nevertheless, this decision brings its own difficulties. Despite Proud’s dominant directorial influence during these years, the theatre was not his alone. By the time of his departure - which, in any case, was a gradual process - its operations had gathered momentum through the input of a large number of practitioners, many of whom were to continue their active involvement.

### **Research Strategies: Other Voices**

Much of the material for this study has been derived from the many interviews I have conducted with those who have worked for the theatre. In most cases, the interview process began with semi-structured conversations designed to suggest further avenues of investigation. Where relevant, I followed up, usually over email, with more specific questions. In choosing my interviewees, I have kept in mind Di Cenzo’s observation that the same names have had a tendency to come up ‘over and over again’ in the history of this period.<sup>22</sup> Writing in the early 1990s, she singled out David Hare, Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths and Caryl Churchill.<sup>23</sup> Megson’s more recent survey includes interviews with a similar list

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<sup>21</sup> Shirley Barrie, ‘Organizing the Fringe’, *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 14 (Spring 1977): 79. Barrie notes that ‘in 1976/77 the amount of Arts Council subsidy given to Fringe groups increased by 91% over the previous year, while the overall increase to theatre was just over 30% (79). Baz Kershaw records a wider range of opinions in his book *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Interventionism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 42-46. John McGrath is one of a number of others who identify 1968 as a discrete period. See John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1984), 103.

<sup>22</sup> Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain: The Case of 7:84*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

of ‘key playwrights’: Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar.<sup>24</sup> Although David Edgar generously gave me his time, and indeed was involved in the Soho Poly Festival (mentioned above), I have otherwise sought to represent a much wider range of voices, many of whom are at risk of disappearing from the theatrical record. These include playwrights such as Chris Wilkinson, Mary O’Malley and Geoffrey Case, designers such as Miki van Zwanenberg and Sue Plummer and directors including Howard Panter, Paul Alexander and Paul Thompson. The full list of interviewees is listed in Appendix B.

Without doubt, however, the greatest amount of information has come from my discussions, in person and over email, with Fred Proud. Proud’s openness and support has been invaluable and I hope that his voice comes through strongly in what follows. At the same time, an emphasis on his version of events inevitably distorts the picture of what was in fact a joint endeavour with his then wife, Verity Bargate. This is doubly problematic given the limited coverage that female practitioners have generally received in theatre histories. In this regard, Susan Bennett refers to ‘the frequency and density of theatre history’s blind spots’.<sup>25</sup> And, as Worthen comments (in summary of Bennett’s ideas), ‘even lines of periodization are massively distorted by this critical blindness’.<sup>26</sup> This last comment poses a further challenge to my choice of dates. Such difficulties might have been partially avoided had the scope of this thesis been wider, incorporating the period when Bargate assumed the role of artistic director following Proud’s departure. Both time and the huge amount of available material militated against such a decision, but there is a strong, perhaps even an urgent, case to be made for a further study of the period from 1976-81. I do not mean to imply by this, however, that Verity Bargate’s role was less significant than Proud’s during the first stage of the theatre’s history. Given the weight of material provided by Proud, however, it was inevitable that his contribution would be foregrounded here.

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<sup>24</sup> Megson, *Modern British Playwriting*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Bennett, ‘Decomposing History (Why Are There So Few Women in Theatre History)’, in *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, eds. W. B. Worthen with Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71.

<sup>26</sup> W.B. Worthen and Peter Holland, ‘Introduction: Theorizing Practice’, in *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, eds. W. B. Worthen with Peter Holland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

I should also note that there are areas of Proud and Bargate's personal history that I have not felt it appropriate to investigate. The couple married in 1970 and had two children. They separated in 1975, however, and Bargate was later to marry the writer Barry Keeffe, shortly before her early death in 1981. To have encouraged Proud to be forthcoming with such painful memories would have required entirely new research parameters and perhaps suggested a different kind of project altogether. This is not to say that such information would not have cast a revealing light on the theatre's history. Nevertheless, the decision to omit it from this study has been a deliberate one.

This thesis also includes voices of contemporary critical commentary, including a large number of theatrical reviews. By referencing these it is not my intention to endorse their authors' judgements but rather to explore the ways in which they helped shape the public perception of the Soho Theatre's activity. I am interested in the extent to which critics self-consciously sought to influence that activity. In this connection, I take issue with Peter Holland's blunt assertion that '[r]eviewers do not write for theatre workers'.<sup>27</sup> In fact, as will be increasingly evident throughout this research, many were significantly embedded in the wider theatrical infrastructure. *Time Out's* column 'Theatreboard' - established by the magazine's theatre editor John Ford - was a vital information exchange for fringe and alternative theatre practitioners. Of equal, and arguably more troubling, significance was the fact that Ford was a co-opted member of the Arts Council of Great Britain's Experimental Drama Committee (EDC), and was, therefore, intimately involved in assessing who should and who should not receive financial support.<sup>28</sup>

## **The Archive**

Much of my research has been drawn from archives, including those belonging to the University of Westminster (PCL's post-1992 incarnation) and the Arts

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Holland, 'Critics and their Audiences: The Rhetoric of Reviewing', *Shakespeare* 6, no. 3 (2010): 296.

<sup>28</sup> See *The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-72* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1972).

Council of Great Britain.<sup>29</sup> With respect to the latter, as John Bull has noted, much of this material has not been looked at since it was originally deposited.<sup>30</sup> I have also had access to Fred Proud's personal collection, which comprises several folders of review cuttings, promotional documents, magazine features, theatrical programmes, correspondence, receipts, and other ephemera from his period as artistic director. To negotiate such artifacts productively, it has been necessary to engage with the possibilities and limitations of archival research. I have felt this responsibility particularly acutely in the case of Proud's material since, as Helen Freshwater puts it, 'the allure of the archive is perhaps most compelling when the researcher is confronted with the particularity of a unique archival collection'.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary theory in this area has generally moved beyond any positivist belief that the archive represents a value-free site of historical 'truth'.<sup>32</sup> There is a wide acceptance of the fact that those who collect, select and appraise will never do so neutrally and that, as Freshwater writes, 'the archive's very existence indicates an a priori value judgment concerning the worth of the documents or artifacts it contains'.<sup>33</sup> In encountering all the archives associated with this research, therefore, I have immediately been faced with three types of problem.

The first concerns the interpretation of the 'evidence' itself. To give one example, Soho's press releases often referenced a desire to reach out to local

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<sup>29</sup> The University of Westminster's archive is housed at 4-12 Little Titchfield Street, London, W1W 7BY. The Arts Council's archive is housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Theatre and Performance Collection, Blythe House, 23 Blythe Road, London, W14 0QX.

<sup>30</sup> This point is made by John Bull in an interview for the *TheatreVoice* website. Bull is discussing a major AHRC-funded collaboration between the V&A and the University of Reading. The project, entitled 'Giving Voice to the Nation: The Arts Council of Great Britain and the Development of Theatre and Performance in Britain 1945-1995', has also helped facilitate a large scale 'clearing' of material. Previously, there would have been long waits to view records while these were checked to avoid breaches of confidentiality, etc. (Interview with John Bull, Graham Saunders and Kate Dorney, *TheatreVoice* website, accessed 3 January 2014, <http://www.theatrevoice.com/10635/giving-voice-to-the-nation-the-archives-of-the-arts-council-now-open/>.)

<sup>31</sup> Helen Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', *Poetics Today* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 731.

<sup>32</sup> See Kate Dorney, 'The Ordering of Things: Allure, Access and Archives', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 28, no.1 (Spring 2010): 19-36.

<sup>33</sup> Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', 740.

audiences. Without necessarily inviting cynicism, it must be remembered that there will have been several different ‘targets’ for such material. As well as potential ticket-buyers, Soho was hoping to shape the perceptions of its activities in the eyes of other theatre makers, cultural commentators and funding bodies.

The second difficulty involves the need to draw conclusions about the choices made in an archive’s construction. Such conclusions demand an equal sensitivity to an archive’s ‘dark matter’ - that is to say, the material that is omitted rather than included. In both cases there is considerable potential for misunderstanding. Whilst exploring Proud’s collection, for instance, I was struck by the fact that certain documents - particularly theatrical reviews - had been meticulously collected, but that there was an almost complete absence of photographic material. I felt sure that this would prove a revealing lacuna. But when I consulted Proud, he explained that he had, in fact, kept a large number of photos, most of which had been presented to the new Soho Theatre when it moved to its Dean Street premises in 2000. Sadly, these were all subsequently mislaid.

The third problem has already been touched upon and lies in an acknowledgement that, as Freshwater observes, the researcher’s ‘reading of the contents will necessarily be a reinterpretation’.<sup>34</sup> She goes on to insist that ‘[a]s these archival researchers frequently serve as conduits between the past and the contemporary public, their attitude towards the material they study ought to be a central concern for archive theory’.<sup>35</sup> My brief biography, given above, is offered in partial response to Freshwater’s imperative.

Further difficulties arise when memory clashes with written records.<sup>36</sup> Again, an example from my own research makes the point. During 1973, whilst Fred Proud was involved in a side-project with the Greenwich Theatre, another director, James O’Brien, was responsible for a season of work at the Soho Poly. Amongst the various sources I have investigated - including articles in *Time Out* and the archives of the Arts Council - O’Brien is credited with being ‘acting

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<sup>34</sup> Freshwater, ‘The Allure of the Archive’, 738.

<sup>35</sup> Freshwater, ‘The Allure of the Archive’, 734.

<sup>36</sup> See Matthew Reason, ‘Archive or Memory? The Detritus of Live Performance’, *New Theatre Quarterly* 19, no.1 (February 2003): 82-89.

artistic director'.<sup>37</sup> When I asked Fred about this, however, he replied, 'I don't think he was ever formally artistic director'.<sup>38</sup> My initial temptation was to trust the written sources, especially as there was more than one. There is, however, a significant risk involved in giving less value to Proud's apparently contradictory remark. For, even if O'Brien was nominally acting in this capacity, his responsibilities may well have been markedly different from Proud's in the same role. Proud's recollection might be much more in sympathy with the situation *as experienced* than written records now suggest - expressing, perhaps, the spirit but not the letter of the law. In O'Brien's obituary the following statement appears: '[h]e subsequently trained as a director, directing in Canterbury, Newcastle and at the Nottingham Playhouse before becoming Artistic Director of a lunchtime theatre for new writing in Soho, London'. Where the obituary writer got his or her information from is unknown. But it is possible that a reliance on apparently stable textual records have, in fact, resulted in this more significantly misleading statement.<sup>39</sup>

Given the inherent instability of archives and memory, and the interpretative interventions of the researcher, I acknowledge, with Jim Davis, the strong temptation to see history as a narrative form.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Postlewait disagrees, arguing that such a conclusion is 'facile'.<sup>41</sup> There is no need, however, to do as Postlewait does and equate narrative with fiction.<sup>42</sup> For my own part, I have preferred to be guided by a metaphorical framework suggested by Rebecca Solnit's multiple cartography of San Francisco, *Infinite City* (2010).<sup>43</sup> Here, the author draws on Jorge Luis Borges' short essay 'On Exactitude in Science' which tells the story of an attempt to create a map so perfect that it coincides

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example: John Ford, 'New Soho Poly Season', *Time Out*, 16 February 1973, 19; letter from James O'Brien to Sue Tyler, 13 February 1973, ACGB/40/105/4.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 January 2014. It might be argued that Proud slightly swerves the question here, responding as if I had asked whether O'Brien had been artistic director, rather than 'acting' artistic director.

<sup>39</sup> 'Obituary for James O'Brien', *Telegraph*, 1 May 2012, accessed 4 February 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/9239486/Jim-OBrien.html>.)

<sup>40</sup> Jim Davis, 'Researching Theatre History and Historiography', in Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, eds., *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 89-90.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Postlewait, 'The Idea of the "Political" in our Histories of Theatre: Texts, Contexts, Periods, and Problems', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 12, no.3 (2002): 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2010).

‘point for point’ with the place it describes.<sup>44</sup> The task is, of course, doubly impossible. Not only is such detail beyond practical realisation but the whole endeavour fails to appreciate the meaning and value of mapping as an activity. As Solnit writes:

The Borges map may have been coextensive with its territory, but it could not have been an adequate description of that territory, could not have even approached charting its flora, its fauna, its topography, and its history. A static map cannot describe change, and every place is in constant change. I map your garden. A swarm of bees arrives, or a wind blows the petals off the flowers. [...] Now it is a different garden, and the map is out of date; another map is required; and another [...].<sup>45</sup>

Solnit could just as well be speaking of the archive, or historical research in general, which can only ever tell one story, or set of stories, at a particular time. All histories must be partial, selective, contingent and provisional. Their construction, like the process of map-making, is inexhaustible. Most importantly, like map-making, meaning lies not in the outcome but in the new vistas that the activity opens up. Solnit writes that ‘*Infinite City* is meant to be [...] an invitation to go beyond what is mapped within it’.<sup>46</sup> This thesis, then, is just one attempt to ‘map’ its subject matter - an attempt which might, I hope, point the ways to others.

## **Chapter Outline**

In Chapter One, I establish key contexts for the development of fringe and alternative theatre during this period. With reference to existing critical studies, I establish the importance of global political events, the growth of the student population, the influence of artistic innovations from abroad and the new freedoms heralded by the end of theatrical censorship. I also draw attention to a

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<sup>44</sup> Solnit, *Infinite City*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Solnit, *Infinite City*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Solnit, *Infinite City*, 8.

new supporting infrastructure, including a growing touring network and the emergence of publications such as *Time Out*.

I then take a much more detailed look at the lunchtime theatre 'movement' itself, investigating both its theatrical precedents and sudden flowering in the mid-late 1960s. I consider its aims and ambitions, as well as the ways in which it was perceived within the wider theatrical ecology. Through a detailed examination of material housed at the Arts Council archives at Blythe House, I consider how this crucial funding body helped to construct the very theatre scene it was, in crucial respects, sitting in judgement upon. I also discuss the 1972 formation of the Association of Lunchtime Theatres and explore its significance for both the lunchtime theatre companies and the wider fringe and alternative theatre scene. Finally, I offer a re-assessment of two influential texts: Sandy Craig's essay 'Reflexes of the Future' and Peter Ansorge's monograph *Disrupting the Spectacle*, considering in particular how they have helped to frame lunchtime theatre's contribution to the new theatrical activity.

In Chapter Two, I begin my detailed investigation of the Soho Theatre itself. I chart its progress from the first production in autumn 1968 - a stage version of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's radio play *One Autumn Evening* - to its seven month residency at Le Metro Club on New Compton Street (January - July 1970). By examining the theatre's 'mission statements' during this period, I examine the ways in which Soho wished to be perceived and how contemporary criticism also sought to describe its activity. I then consider Soho's contribution to the contemporary theatrical discourse. By drawing attention to plays by James Leo Herlihy, Heathcote Williams and John Grillo, I suggest that the theatre's output played directly into debates surrounding the 'society of the spectacle', a phrase inspired by Guy Debord's situationist manifesto *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), and a major influence on theatre practitioners of the period. I also suggest other ways in which the Soho Theatre was embedded in the developing fringe and alternative theatre infrastructure. During the theatre's residency at Le Metro Club, for example, it played host to a number of other companies, including the New York Workshop and the Pip Simmons Group. During the summer of 1970, it had a major presence at the Edinburgh festival and later that year took its play *Gilgamesh* on a tour of several other emerging small-scale venues. One of the early criticisms of the lunchtime theatres was that, short of material, they were

forced to fall back on radio and television adaptations, whose length made them suitable for the one-hour slot. I end this chapter with a detailed analysis of one such experiment, a stage version of Peter Weiss's radio drama *The Tower* (1950), produced in March 1970. By doing so, I argue that the relationship between different dramatic media at this time was much more dynamic and creatively productive than many critics were prepared to allow.

In Chapter Three I examine the Soho Theatre's 1971 residency at the King's Head pub in Islington. Through a detailed study of the work produced during this period, I confront two of the other major concerns about lunchtime theatre: (i) that the quality of its output was limited by the lack of 'high quality' or suitably 'experimental' work; and (ii) that its programming expressed no clearly-defined artistic policy. I argue that the Soho Theatre's output offered, in fact, a vigorous challenge to conventional notions of the one-act play. I also question whether too much value has been placed on individual artistic intention in assessments of fringe and alternative theatre activity. In this context, I explore the idea that a more dynamic interaction between practitioners' ambitions for the work and the material circumstances of its production played a decisive role in creative innovation.

A consequence of the fact that the Soho Theatre's history is largely undocumented is that many significant productions have themselves been forgotten. In conducting this research, I have been able to re-encounter a number of 'lost' plays that had powerful resonances at the time and remain of significant interest today. By drawing attention to such texts in this study, I hope that some may be re-introduced into critical discourse. With this in mind, I conclude my third chapter by offering a production history of Chris Wilkinson's *Dynamo* (1971), one of the most controversial lunchtime plays. The piece has much to say about contemporary gender politics and also speaks to notions of 'environmental' theatre as explored by practitioners such as Charles Marowitz and Richard Schechner.

Chapter Four is the first of two to deal with the theatre's early years at new premises on Riding House Street, owned by the Polytechnic of Central London. The 'Soho Poly', as the theatre became known, remained at this address

for eighteen years, until it was finally ‘evicted’ in 1990.<sup>47</sup> I begin by describing the discovery of the space itself, and the work that was done to make it ready for use. The impact that this ‘permanent home’ had on the development of the theatre’s activities will become a recurring theme. The Soho Poly’s first production was an evening presentation of Colin Spencer’s *The Trial of St George* (1972). Like Chris Wilkinson’s *Dynamo*, this play has largely fallen out of the theatrical record. By examining it in detail here, I re-consider the perspective it offers on the cultural events it was inspired by - the publication of a ‘School Kids’ edition of the satirical *Oz* magazine in 1971, and the subsequent trial of the magazine’s editors for ‘corrupting the morals of young people’.<sup>48</sup> I then conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the Soho Poly’s inaugural lunchtime season. In doing so, I engage, once again, with the eclectic nature of lunchtime programming and explore the degree to which such output expressed different cultural currents, including, for example radical politics and a growth in women’s playwriting.

My final chapter examines the remainder of the period from 1972-75. On the one hand, this was a time of consolidation for the Soho Poly. Many critics marked it out as leading the lunchtime pack, even if they expressed anxiety about the wider value of the movement. Just as Soho was establishing itself as a fixture on the London theatre scene, however, Fred Proud was becoming increasingly restless for opportunities elsewhere. In order to investigate the consequences of these internal tensions, I divide the chapter into two parts. In the first, I concentrate on a number of experiments designed to address continuing concerns about the quality of lunchtime work. Of these, the ‘Bunch of Fives’ season of summer 1973 was particularly important, offering a model of creative collaboration in response to a pressing need for new short plays. I also explore Proud and Bargate’s commitment to ‘Bread ‘n Butter’, a community-orientated wing of their operations. In my second section, I draw attention to the large number of other practitioners involved with the Soho Poly at this time. Two significant seasons of work were presided over by associate directors and 1974 was dominated by collaborations with other lunchtime companies. I examine,

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<sup>47</sup> For records relating to the protracted legal wrangles between the PCL and the Soho Poly during the 1980s, see University of Westminster Archive (UWA), PCL/2/2/2/10.

<sup>48</sup> Tony Palmer, *The Trials of Oz* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1971), 14.

therefore, the extent to which the theatre's apparent stability and continuity at this time were illusory. Finally, I consider the impact of Fred Proud's departure from the theatre in 1975.

I return in my conclusion to the 'Soho Poly Anniversary Festival' which I organised in 2012 to mark forty years since Proud and Bargate first moved into the Riding House Street venue.

## Chapter 1

### Lunchtime Theatre

Despite occasional forays into evening and late-night presentations, the Soho Theatre's early years were defined by its lunchtime theatre - plays lasting under an hour, to be enjoyed over a bowl of soup, sandwiches or chop suey. Emerging in the mid-1960s, lunchtime theatre venues and companies (including the Wakefield Tricycle Company, Quipu, the Basement theatre and Ed Berman's Ambiance Lunchtime Theatre) could be found offering avant-garde experimentation from home and abroad, devised and improvised work, 'neglected' classics, adaptations of television and radio scripts and newly commissioned one-act plays. By the early 1970s, they were an established part of the London fringe and alternative theatre scene, a fact evidenced by the existence of dedicated columns/review sections in newspapers and magazines such as *Time Out* ('Lunchtime') and *Plays and Players* ('Lunch Line-Up'). They also provoked considerable debate within the theatrical community. Questions arose about the aims of the individual theatres, the wider importance of the innovation, and the quality of the work produced. At the same time, there was concern that writers, directors and actors were at risk of exploitation in a sector where even the payment of expenses could be a luxury.

There are currently no book-length studies of lunchtime theatre, and although it is referenced - usually only briefly - in many of the more wide-ranging histories of fringe and alternative theatre, its status remains ambiguous and contested. In this chapter, divided into three parts, I trace the development of the phenomenon and begin to offer a reassessment of its aims and achievements.

Drawing on the work of critics and historians such as Michael Billington, Chris Megson, Andrew Davies, David Edgar, Catherine Itzin, Baz Kershaw and Michelene Wandor, I set out some of the cultural, political and theatrical contexts in which lunchtime theatre was embedded. In doing so, I acknowledge Maria DiCenzo's caveat that such 'survey-oriented' histories are rarely able to provide

more than ‘an overview’, and therefore carry a risk of simplification and generalisation.<sup>1</sup>

In Part Two, I provide a more detailed examination of lunchtime theatre itself, considering its origins, the aims and ambitions of its practitioners and its early creative innovations. I also pay particular attention to the ways in which it was perceived and constructed by critics, as well as by the Arts Council of Great Britain, which provided its means of subsistence. Also in this section, I consider the operations of the Association of Lunchtime Theatres (ALT), formed in 1972 in response to growing pressure from the performers’ union Equity for minimum salary payments to apply across the board - a potentially disastrous development for already underfunded theatres.

Finally, in Part Three, I re-engage with DiCenzo’s notion of ‘survey-oriented’ histories, and suggest that, by labelling a large group of sources in this way, she underestimates the significance of the ideological foundations on which individual examples rest. By way of demonstration, I offer a deeper analysis of two key texts: Sandy Craig’s essay, ‘Reflexes of the Future’ (1980) and Peter Ansorge’s monograph, *Disrupting the Spectacle* (1975).<sup>2</sup> By identifying certain implicit value judgments about the nature and purposes of fringe and alternative theatre, I suggest some of the mechanisms by which lunchtime theatre has been pushed to the margins.

## **Part One. Contexts: New Radical Energies**

It is common amongst the theatre histories under review here to start with 1968 and radiate out, the consensus being that this was the year when fringe and alternative theatre achieved ‘lift-off’.<sup>3</sup> Simon Trussler presents the following as evidence on the ground:

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<sup>1</sup> Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain: The Case of 7:84* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Sandy Craig, ‘Reflexes of the Future: The Beginnings of the Fringe’, in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980); Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman, 1975). Press, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Craig, ‘Reflexes of the Future’, 18.

Pip Simmons, Portable Theatre, the Brighton Combination, Albert Hunt's Bradford group, the original Warehouse company, and the Welfare State were among the groups formed during those twelve months. The Arts Lab in Drury Lane, Ed Berman's Ambiance, the Roundhouse, the Royal Court's Theatre upstairs, and the ICA were just some of the new venues which became available in the same period. The Arts Council set up its New Activities Committee in an attempt to comprehend what was happening - and Tony Elliot started *Time Out*, a magazine whose importance in disseminating information about new theatre in London was only fully recognised when, strikebound, its absence from newstands began to severely affect attendances.<sup>4</sup>

In attempting to account for this sudden spike in theatrical activity, historians have focused attention in different ways. The introduction to Catherine Itzin's book *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (1980), for example, contains the following, oft-quoted, passage:

Rarely can one year be singled out as an isolated turning point, but in the case of 1968 so many events coincided on a global scale that it clearly marked the end of an era in a historically unprecedented fashion, and the beginning of a period of equally unprecedented political consciousness and activism.<sup>5</sup>

The 'global' events referred to include the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the violent protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. 1968 was also the year after the Six Day war in Israel and the year before troops returned to the streets of Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> For, Catherine Itzin, therefore, the theatre-makers of the late 1960s - many of whom were drawn from a dramatically enlarged student population - were buzzing with the vibrations of world events.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Trussler, Introduction to *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980*, ed. Simon Trussler (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), xii. *Theatre Quarterly* was itself conceived in May 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Usually attributed to the Butler Education Act of 1944. This introduced free secondary education for all and raised the school leaving age to fifteen. These reforms had the knock-on effect of widening access to university, particularly to working-class students.

A newly-politicised student voice is also a theme of John Bull's *New British Political Dramatists* (1984), which places particular importance on the Paris sit-ins of May 1968, 'a potentially revolutionary situation within the context of a stable and securely affluent society'.<sup>8</sup> But rather than accepting the implied positivity of Itzin's 'unprecedented political consciousness and activism', Bull identifies a 'radical and alienated intelligentsia' defined by 'bruised dreams of the sixties counter-culture' and 'profound disquiet about the current state of the nation'.<sup>9</sup> Bull is certainly not alone in describing a darkening mood.<sup>10</sup> Billington may appear more circumspect when he writes, in *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (2007), that, '[i]n fact, the prospectus didn't seem too bad as we edged into a new decade'. Nevertheless, the chapter from which these sentiments are taken (covering the period 1970-1974) is entitled 'Blasted Heath'.<sup>11</sup>

For David Edgar, the 'upsurge of revolutionary, or at least radical, consciousness among students and intellectuals' defined one of two distinct strands of socialist theatre during the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Rather than viewing the stage as a means of galvanising a revolutionary proletariat, many of the new university-educated writers threw their energy behind a critique of the consumerist society which they believed had 'bought off' the working class 'by a combination of material and ideological bribes'.<sup>13</sup> Edgar summarises this new direction as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 1-2; 10.

<sup>9</sup> DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre*, 19; Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> This theme is dominant in two recent cultural histories of the 1970s: Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the late 1970s* (London: Allen Lane, 2010). Although both also reference developments in the fields of anti-discrimination policy and equal rights, neither allows such progressive steps to destabilise their narratives of despair and decline.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber, 2007), 205.

<sup>12</sup> David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1988), 24.

<sup>13</sup> David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce*, 26.

Revolutionary politics was seen as being much less about the organisation of the working class at the point of production, and much more about the disruption of bourgeois ideology at the point of consumption.<sup>14</sup>

He goes on to describe an emerging split between ‘avant-garde’ groups like Howard Brenton and David Hare’s Portable Theatre - concerned with interrogating artistic forms and destabilising cultural assumptions - and ‘popular’ companies like CAST and Red Ladder which remained more directly engaged with working-class audiences, often performing in non-theatre spaces and encouraging community participation.<sup>15</sup>

### **American Influences**

Another inspiration for the new theatre-makers were the visits to London, in 1967, of two New York-based experimental companies, Ellen Stewart’s La MaMa troupe and Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre. In *Disrupting the Spectacle*, Peter Ansorge explains how both companies made use of physical expression and striking visual imagery to show ‘a kind of tribal existence on the stage’.<sup>16</sup> However, Ansorge also cautions against mapping the American avant-garde experience too closely onto the UK. Referencing the critic John Lahr, he suggests that ‘the basic driving force behind the American *avant-garde* in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a movement away from making direct social or political statements in the theatre.’ He continues, ‘our underground has been least successful when it has attempted to cut off all links with its society’.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Billington is just one of those to draw attention to the importance of Americans already working in the UK.<sup>18</sup> Of these, Jim Haynes - formerly the artistic director of Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre (1964-66) - was to have the most direct impact. In 1968, Haynes moved to London and established the Arts Lab on Drury Lane. The *Sunday Times* critic J.W. Lambert condemned the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> DiCenzo is careful to acknowledge that these approaches illustrate ideological tendencies rather than strict dividing lines. See also Bull, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre*, 1-27.

<sup>16</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Billington, in an interview with the author, 4 February 2008.

venture for being 'less a theatrical breeding-ground than an uncovenanted and bankrupt doss-house'.<sup>19</sup> Ansorge is more helpfully descriptive:

An average evening at the Arts Lab might have involved sitting through a highly subjective one-act play, listening to a combination of Cage and rock on the stereo system, watching the all-night films - but mostly moving in amongst the brigade of permanent hippies who were sipping endless coffees and taking about the future of London's first underground hostelry.<sup>20</sup>

The Arts Lab was significant not just for the centripetal pull it exerted on experimental theatre makers including Portable Theatre, The Freehold, The People Show and the Pip Simmons Group, but also because, when it closed, those companies spread out across the country, creating 'arts labs, campuses and youth clubs' which were to become part of the national infrastructure of the alternative theatre movement.<sup>21</sup> 1968 also marked the opening of the Open Space on Tottenham Court Road by the American director Charles Marowitz. Marowitz had come to prominence some years earlier through his work with Peter Brook on the RSC's 'Theatre of Cruelty' season. And indeed, his continuing theatrical experiments probably owed their greatest debt to the traditions of the European avant-garde. A third American, Ed Berman, established the Inter-Action Trust, an umbrella organisation of several companies involved particularly in community and youth-based theatre projects. These included the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club (later the Almost Free Theatre), one of the earliest and most influential pioneers of lunchtime theatre.

## **New Freedoms**

1968 also saw the end of theatrical censorship in the UK. Scripts no longer had to be submitted in advance to the Lord Chamberlain for approval, a process that militated against writers responding to immediate political circumstances and effectively blocked direct challenges to the establishment. Furthermore, once

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<sup>19</sup> J.W. Lambert, *Drama in Britain 1964-73* (Harlow: Longman, 1974), 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 1.

scripts had been officially sanctioned, no further changes were permitted, which ruled out improvisation as a theatrical device.

Writing in *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990* (1993), Michelene Wandor places the abolition of censorship within the context of a number of progressive legislative reforms passed during the mid-late 1960s, all of which were to have a significant impact on the growth of feminist theatre. The Abortion Act was passed in 1967, the same year in which homosexuality was partially legalised. 1969 and 1970 saw the passing of the Divorce Reform Act and the Equal Pay Act respectively.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, such measures meant that '[t]he nature of gender roles and individual sexual choice became matters for vigorous public debate and took their place onstage in new dramatic developments'.<sup>23</sup> Notably, in 1973, Ed Berman mounted the first of a series of women's theatre festivals. Lizbeth Goodman records that '[t]he success of this festival resulted in the production of several women's plays at lunchtime theatre clubs. The work of Pam Gems, Michelene Wandor, and Olwen Wymark was brought to public attention in this way'.<sup>24</sup> A more troubling consequence of these freedoms, however, was the use of the newly-permitted sexual content as a metaphorical device, often objectifying women's bodies and reducing female characters to political symbols - an issue I return to in Chapter Three.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Assault on Naturalism**

A common denominator amongst much of this new activity was a rejection of naturalism. In part, this derived from Brecht's conception of 'epic' forms of drama, forcing audiences towards critique and action rather than passive escapism. But Brechtian alienation techniques were now joined by the innovations of the American avant-garde. Companies like the Pip Simmons

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<sup>22</sup> Michelene Wandor, *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990* (London: Longman / British Council, 1993), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 58. Olwen Wymark's work had, in fact, already been seen in two Soho Theatre productions from 1971: *Neither Here Nor There* and *The Technicians*. (See Appendix A for a full list of Soho Theatre plays produced at this period.)

<sup>25</sup> Wandor, *Drama Today*, 10-11.

Group, for example, were experimenting with a new, pared-down ‘cartoon-style’, described by Ansorge as follows:

One dimensional characters, dialogue that could well fit into the bubbles in a comic strip frame, grotesque and fast moving action - these have all characterized a special kind of theatre-going that has sprung up since 1968 amongst the underground troupes. *Superman* was obviously the blueprint for cartoon shows. It depicted both the villains and heroes of society as cartoon cut-outs, it portrayed the whole Civil Rights struggle of the early 1960s as a suitable ‘job’ for Superman, it writhed and heaved with a sense of the banality of life in a great ‘metropolis’.<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere, groups like The Welfare State and The People Show were interrogating the boundaries between theatre and the visual arts, whilst Nancy Meckler’s Wherehouse company was seeking to explore the body ‘as a supersensitised instrument of expression’.<sup>27</sup>

In his analysis of those political theatre companies pursuing a ‘popular’, rather than avant-garde, approach, David Edgar identifies a decisive move away from the social realist drama of the 1950s and 60s. Such plays stressed the impact of economic and political structures on individuals’ actions. Edgar argues, however, that the socialist theatre-makers who came of age around 1968 found this form insufficiently differentiated from naturalism. He suggests that audiences, increasingly influenced by the medium of television (in Edgar’s view an almost inevitably naturalistic form), too easily conflated the different approaches. Ultimately they came to interpret all actions as motivated by personal psychology, even when social, political and economic determinants were foregrounded.<sup>28</sup> The response of companies like CAST and Red Ladder was a move towards agitprop, a form which aimed to ‘eliminate the surface appearance it presents, and to portray instead what it regards as the political reality beneath’.<sup>29</sup> Edgar continues:

The capitalist, for obvious example, is shown as a Victorian, top-hatted archetype because the makers of the piece of theatre believe that, despite all the surface changes in the appearance, style, and attitudes of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

empowering class, the fundamental reality is still that of heartless exploitation.<sup>30</sup>

These varied approaches often went hand in hand with attempts to destabilise the ‘bourgeois’ conventions of theatre-going with which naturalism had become associated. There was, for example, a shared desire to experiment with the place and time of performance and to reach out to new types of audience. As I show in Part Two, such ideas were often explicitly presented by practitioners as part of the rationale for lunchtime theatre’s existence.

### **Supporting Infrastructures**

I have already made reference to the nationwide growth of unusual theatre spaces that followed in the wake of Jim Haynes’ Arts Lab. Also crucial was the coverage that new initiatives received through the pages of contemporary magazines, journals and newspapers, particularly *Time Out*, *Theatre Quarterly*, *Plays and Players* and *The Stage and Television Today* (hereafter *The Stage*). Of these, *Time Out* was, perhaps, their most vocal champion. In response to the Royal Court’s 1970 ‘Come Together’ festival, for example, it concluded:

[P]lanned at a time when the Arts Council’s commitment to fringe events is once again in the balance, [it] is a striking recognition by a mainstream London Theatre of the importance of fringe work.<sup>31</sup>

And on the publication of the report of the Arts Council’s 1970 theatre enquiry, *Time Out* remarked disdainfully that:

At a time when increasing numbers of people are rejecting the theatrical context of drama and producing plays in labs, fields, etc, the Enquiry concentrates almost exclusively on bricks and mortar.<sup>32</sup>

In common with all the publications listed above, *Time Out* also provided some of the first surveys of the burgeoning theatrical activity. Issue 49, for example,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Court Embraces Fringe’, *Time Out*, 25 July 1970, 41.

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Arts Council Report’, *Time Out*, 18 April 1970, 27.

published a 'fringe pullout' that attempted to summarise the primary aims of many of the new groups. Here, CAST is compared to US companies, where 'the political message of their plays is more important than "the theatre" that gets the message across'. Freehold (formed by Nancy Meckler and Tony Sibbald) is described as 'that rare thing: a genuine ensemble company'. The People Show is considered to have learned from the absurd, 'but from the English tradition that inspired the Goon Show rather than the intellectualisation of Continental Writers'. The Pip Simmons Group, who 'distrust words', are presented as 'almost like a modern pop-type version of a medieval morality play'. Portable Theatre's 'brilliantly simple solution was to work the educational drama circuit with fringe-type material', and Inter-Action is 'Ed Berman's master plan for revitalising the community through the use of drama'.<sup>33</sup>

Such cataloguing was only one of the ways in which these publications helped to shape the phenomenon they were documenting. All also offered commentary and advice and often, as I will demonstrate in Part Two, strong criticism of emerging innovations. *Time Out* also provided critical support through the introduction of a new regular feature, 'Theatre Board'. Issue 35 announced the initiative as follows:

For the next issue, 'Time Out' will carry *free* advertisements from, by, and for fringe theatre groups, actors, authors and directors. The notices will make up a new regular section in 'Theatre News' [...] But if you're an actor looking for work, a company looking for new plays, someone with room to let for rehearsals, willing to make costumes or paint scenery, anything of that sort, we'll let people know. The idea came from John Ford who complained how isolated groups were: this is your chance to alter that.<sup>34</sup>

At first, people were asked to write in with requests, but Issue 68 printed a phone number to call and offered an open door at the *Time Out* offices.<sup>35</sup> It was a service that was made good use of, as a few characterful examples can attest to, not least from the Soho Theatre itself:

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<sup>33</sup> 'Groups Groped', *Time Out*, 17 October 1970, 60-67. The article also notes another way in which *Time Out* supported alternative theatre activity, quoting Berman as admitting that '[i]nterview fees are an important source of income for Interaction [sic] (62)'.

<sup>34</sup> 'Club and Fringe Theatre', *Time Out*, 4 April 1970, 33.

<sup>35</sup> 'Workshops', *Time Out*, 4 June 1971, 38.

Get a ten foot portrait *free* on the side of our 2 cwt Crommer van if you buy it for only £250 ono Pip Simmons Theatre Group 226 1414.<sup>36</sup>

Low Moan Spectacular comedy theatre group needs an experienced actress, preferably over-weight, aged 22-30, music dance, and foreign language abilities helpful.<sup>37</sup>

Soho-Poly Theatre can pay someone who really wants to help in looking after the box office, food and baby. Ring Verity 437 7689.<sup>38</sup>

Significantly for the present study, *Time Out* was also one of the driving forces behind the Association of London Theatres, formed after a 1972 meeting at the magazine's offices to which the various managements in the field had been invited. For some this was seen to be the moment when lunchtime theatre truly came of age.<sup>39</sup>

## **Part Two. Lunchtime Theatre: Beginnings**

Lunchtime theatre was not an entirely new phenomenon in the late 1960s, and perhaps it would be more accurate to talk in terms of precedents rather than beginnings. A 1960 edition of *The Stage* made reference to the activities of the Mermaid theatre, and suggested that other West End managements could also 'utilise the lunch hour to advantage'.<sup>40</sup> As well as revues and concerts, it proposed that one-act plays familiar from amateur drama festivals might be co-opted.<sup>41</sup> And, in 1963, another article in *The Stage* lamented the fact that London

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<sup>36</sup> 'Theatreboard', *Time Out*, 2 July 1971, 33.

<sup>37</sup> 'Theatreboard', *Time Out*, 25 February 1972, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Douglas Blake, 'Lunchtime Theatre is Growing Up', *Stage*, 7 December 1972.

<sup>40</sup> 'Lunchtime Theatre', *Stage*, 13 October 1960. The Mermaid theatre was founded by the actor Bernard Miles. Opening in 1951, it was initially based in the grounds of Miles' own property in St John's Wood. There it presented concerts, drama and opera. It moved briefly to the Royal Exchange in 1953 before establishing itself in 1959 at the Puddle Dock site in the City of London where it remains today. A *Spectator* article from 1962 mentions that, in this new building too, it was 'a hive of activity' throughout the day. The article makes particular mention of its twice-weekly lunch-time cinema. (K.M. O'Shea, 'The City's Theatre', *Spectator*, 30 November 1962, accessed 22 February 2014, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/30th-november-1962/24/the-citys-theatre>.)

<sup>41</sup> 'Lunchtime Theatre', *Stage*, 13 October 1960.

‘seems to have neglected lunch hour entertainment since the war years, when we had Wolfitt at the Strand, Antony Tudor ballets at the Arts Theatre Club and Myra Hess concerts at the National Gallery’.<sup>42</sup> The piece goes on to extol the economic benefits of venues opening over lunchtime as a means to off-set overheads, before offering advice for appropriate entertainments:

The one-man shows of Joyce Grenfell, Emlyn Williams and John Gielgud would be ideal for a 45-minute programme. A group of actors, singers and dancers could each present popular programmes consisting of purple passages from drama, opera and ballet. [...] Victorian melodrama and Grand Guignol offer scope for short programme planners and established players might be attracted to this sort of entertainment, just for the fun of it.<sup>43</sup>

This is hardly the kind of enterprise that was to take root a few years later. But whilst *The Stage* may not have anticipated some of the dramatic developments in fringe and alternative theatre, their vision also exposes a difference between theatre merely *performed* at lunchtime and lunchtime theatre as a distinct mode or artistic policy - a critical, if slippery, distinction.

This same article also referenced theatrical innovations in Australia, specifically a lunchtime production in Adelaide of John Mortimer’s (appropriately named) *Lunch Hour*, and a new dedicated lunchtime theatre in Melbourne.<sup>44</sup> Three years later, in 1966, an Australian named Bryan King, who had worked at the Melbourne theatre, co-founded, with Paul Adams and Sarah Evans, a company called Theatrescope.<sup>45</sup> Based in the Little Theatre Club in Garrick Yard, this was to become recognised by contemporary critics as the first of London’s new lunchtime theatre clubs. Hard on its heels was David Halliwell and David Calderisi’s *Quipu*, whose opening production at the New Arts theatre in July 1966 also happened to be Mortimer’s perfectly titled one-acter. *The Stage* reviewed it as an ‘amusing essay in sexual frustration [...] in a neat production by David Calderisi’.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, Theatrescope collaborated with the

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Lunchtime Theatre’, *Stage*, 12 December 1963.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> ‘Sarah Evans’, *Unfinished Histories: Recording the History of Alternative Theatre* website, accessed 11 April 2014, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees/sarah-evans/>.

<sup>46</sup> Douglas Blake, ‘Lunch-Hour Entertainments’, *Stage*, 14 July 1966.

entrepreneurial American director Ed Berman to present shows at the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club, a restaurant in Queensway.<sup>47</sup> The opening production was John Arden's *Squire Jonathan*, described by Berman as 'an erotic lunch-time entertainment'.<sup>48</sup>

1968 was also the year in which another American began to make his presence known on the London theatre scene. Charles Marowitz, known best for collaborations with Peter Brook on the RSC's Theatre of Cruelty season, established the Open Space on Tottenham Court Road and presented programmes that included lunchtime and late night work. By the end of that year Fred Proud had also christened the Soho Theatre with a late night production of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *One Autumn Evening*. Twelve months later, Proud's own lunchtime experiment began in earnest at Le Metro Club on New Compton Street.

In August 1968, *The Stage* asserted that '[t]he spread of lunchtime theatre activities is a healthy sign' and conceded, in contrast to its earlier recommendations, that 'the conventional one-acter beloved by competitors at drama festivals [is unlikely] to stand much of a chance, for the managements presenting lunchtime entertainment rightly favour experiment'.<sup>49</sup> The following March, *The Stage* argued, further, that lunchtime plays 'have developed a decidedly worthwhile significance in the past few months' and made reference to the 'encouragement of the Arts Council'.<sup>50</sup>

It is fair to say, then, that lunchtime theatre blossomed in synch with the wider fringe and alternative theatre 'movement', and by June 1972 Peter Ansorge noted that there were 'no less than *ten* separate venues scattered throughout the West End's basements, cellars and pubs'.<sup>51</sup> Ansorge slightly under-estimated. As well as those listed above, we should include the King's Head in Islington, the Basement theatre run by Walter Hall and Carl Forgione, the Half Moon in Aldgate, the Bush based in the upstairs room of a pub on Shepherd's Bush Green, the Act Inn, Recreation Ground, Apex, the Wakefield Tricycle Company, The

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<sup>47</sup> 'Lunch-Hour Productions', *Stage*, 13 June 1968. The Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club was just one of a number of theatrical endeavours that operated under the umbrella of Ed Berman's Inter-Action organisation.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> 'Lunchtime at the Theatre', *Stage*, 29 August 1968.

<sup>50</sup> 'Lunch Hour Theatre', *Stage*, 5 March 1970.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Ansorge, 'Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale? Or Lunchtime Economics', *Plays and Players*, June 1972, 12.

Play Room and the Roebuck.<sup>52</sup> A 1968 article by Michael Billington also made reference to a group called Icarus Productions, touring plays around suburban pubs.<sup>53</sup> As the phenomenon became more established, however, discussion grew about the purposes of lunchtime theatre and who benefitted most from its operations.

### **Aims and Ambitions**

The original intentions were numerous - from the blatantly commercial impulse to showcase the work of new writers and performers in circumstances that were relatively painless economically, to the much more radical motive that, by presenting plays at an unusual time of day, one was breaking through one of the paradigm conventions of Western theatre.

Asquith, 1980<sup>54</sup>

Calls by *The Stage* for the revival of lunch hour entertainments suggest they saw them as a way for West End managements to generate extra income. When the independent lunchtime theatres began to emerge towards the end of 1960s, many critics still argued that their greatest value lay in their potential to feed into and support existing theatrical structures. Indeed, this was an attitude often expressed with respect to the wider range of fringe and alternative theatre activities. It can be detected, for example, in the report of an Arts Council enquiry, published in 1970. On the one hand, the report expressed support for those 'small fringe and experimental theatres' which represent an 'important sector of the London

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<sup>52</sup> Information from various sources, including: Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 135; Rosalind Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime: Or Business As Usual?', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), 147-8. By 1972, Ed Berman's Ambiance Lunch Hour had moved across town to set up at the Almost Free in Piccadilly and Quipu was based at the Little Theatre in Garrick Yard. The Soho Theatre had also moved into its new home on Riding House Street, W1.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Billington, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, August 1970, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime', 145.

theatrical scene'.<sup>55</sup> An offer of increased financial assistance, however, was couched in the following terms:

The Arts Council has recorded its recognition of the past value of these theatres and the ephemeral groups which played in them, and has expressed its readiness to offer limited financial assistance to such low-cost play-producing organizations as are devoted to new and experimental work. This aid does not imply long-term commitment, since the emergence and eclipse of policies, ideas and talents are an inevitable and desirable feature of the work of any advance guard.<sup>56</sup>

Whilst the references to an 'advance guard' might appear to flatter fringe and alternative theatre groups, the resistance to long-term commitment actually expresses a belief that their role was primarily to bring forth new ideas that might then be taken up elsewhere. It does not credit them with being a stratum of theatre worthy of development on its own terms.

Certainly lunchtime managements saw the benefit that their theatres could have for writers, actors and directors. Shirley Barrie, who established the Wakefield Tricycle Company (WTC) with her husband Kenneth Chubb in 1972, is just one of many to point out that actors welcomed the opportunity to 'keep their hand in between jobs, or try something that stretched or challenged them'.<sup>57</sup> And, indeed, star casting was an early feature of lunchtime theatre, since a mid-day commitment was combinable with evening performances. In a 1972 interview with B.S. Johnson, Walter Hall, the artistic director of the Basement theatre, also noted that lunchtime theatre provided valuable developmental opportunities for writers: '[i]t's worth our while doing plays that are not wholly satisfying, just to encourage a playwright we think is worth it, to give him a chance to see how plays go in performance'.<sup>58</sup>

Such endorsements, however, do not need to imply that the lunchtime stages were merely a training ground for more elevated endeavours. In an article written in 1977, Shirley Barrie explains the point:

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<sup>55</sup> *The Theatre Today in England and Wales: The Report of the Arts Council Theatre Enquiry*, 1970 (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1970), 61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Shirley Barrie, in an email to the author, 14 September 2013.

<sup>58</sup> B.S. Johnson and Walter Hall, 'Walter Hall of Basement Theatre', *The Transatlantic Review*, no. 44 (Autumn-Winter 1972): 41.

It used to be assumed that ‘experimental’ groups worked for love not money and were, in any case, only using the Fringe as a stepping stone into mainstream theatre. Neither of these assumptions is any longer true. Many Fringe people have been working the area for 5-10 years and have no intention of moving anywhere else.<sup>59</sup>

In other quarters, however, the view that the ‘fringe’ was primarily a ‘Research and Development department for the rest of the theatre’ was much in evidence.<sup>60</sup> The following extract, for example, published in *The Stage* in March 1970, displays an underlying bias in favour of established practices:

Budding dramatists cannot really be sure of their ability to sustain an idea in dramatic form, while holding the interest of an audience, until they have had their work performed in public. These lunch-hour performances put them to the test and the forty-minutes of their duration is enough to indicate whether or not the would-be author has the gift of writing for the stage. [...] It is quite likely that writers who make their name in the near future will acknowledge the fact that it was a chance given to them by a lunch-time theatre which really put their foot firmly on *the bottom rung of the ladder* [my italics].<sup>61</sup>

An opinion piece from April 1972, implied, further, that there was little intrinsic value in the short lunchtime slot:

[L]ike the Soho Poly, the Almost Free Theatre and the King’s Head pub in Islington, activities could easily be extended to the evening, doing an even more valuable service to the theatre in general and giving writers of full-length plays more opportunities of inexpensive experiment, of the type provided by the Theatre Upstairs and the Open Space.<sup>62</sup>

What remains unacknowledged in such commentary is the disruptive potential of lunchtime theatre. Rosalind Asquith’s quotation, which prefaces this section, picks out a belief amongst lunchtime theatre’s early practitioners that the attracting of new audiences for a mid-day entertainment would destabilise

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<sup>59</sup> Shirley Barrie, ‘Organizing the Fringe’, *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 14 (Spring 1977): 79.

<sup>60</sup> Asquith, ‘Subversion at Lunchtime’, 151-2.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Lunch Hour Theatre’, *Stage*, 5 March 1970.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Lunchtime’, *Stage*, 6 April 1972.

traditional categories of work and leisure and, ultimately, transform theatre into a 'completely different social activity'.<sup>63</sup>

That this view was widely held, was illustrated by a 1972 list of eight pub theatres - all of which were known for offering lunchtime theatre - compiled for *Time Out* by Ramona Gibbs.<sup>64</sup> Gibbs described The Bush as 'perhaps the most committed to bringing theatre to the working class community by means of the pub'. She also quoted Amos Mokadi, the artistic director of the Act Inn, based since earlier in that year at the Duke of Argyll pub on Brewer Street:

People who work in the area can't usually afford to get dressed, pay pounds and pounds to come into town and very often they've never had a chance. But in a pub where they can go anyway for a drink over lunchtime, have conversation for half an hour, it's fantastic, immediate.<sup>65</sup>

Kenneth Chubb, artistic director of the WTC, was particularly concerned with reaching out to the local area (in this case King's Cross), and Pedr James, another lunchtime director, suggested that 'pub theatre is a return to earlier times when eating and drinking were a natural part of the theatrical scene'.<sup>66</sup> In an interview with Peter Ansorge from June of the same year, Fred Proud was quoted making a similar argument with clarity and force:

The ideal audience would be made up of people who had never been to a theatre before. People who just wandered in one lunchtime as a break from their office routine, and then found that they enjoyed the whole setup. This really might present them with an alternative way of living. That's the thin edge of the wedge which could be quite revolutionary. All our plays are really saying to people 'change your own way of life if you don't like it. There are plenty of other, more interesting things you could be doing.' That's really what we are here for - to provide that alternative.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime', 45.

<sup>64</sup> Ramona Gibbs, 'Pub Theatre', *Plays and Players*, September 1972, 54-55. By virtue of the fact that they often had function rooms for hire and food readily available, pubs were the natural home of most lunchtime theatre.

<sup>65</sup> Ramona Gibbs, 'Pub Theatre', 55.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ansorge, 'Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale?', 14. Proud saw no contradiction with the idea that lunchtime theatre could also provide an opportunity for those who were 'dead keen to pick up the craft of acting and directing' and wanted to use the opportunity as a showcase for their talents' (14).

But despite such intentions, lunchtime theatre was rarely taken to be in the vanguard of radical activity. Partly that was because of a perception that, if its aim was truly to reach out to new audiences, it had been largely unsuccessful in the attempt. Irving Wardle was damning in a 1972 article for *New Society*:

When David Halliwell and Walter Hall launched the first lunchtime productions four years ago, it was assumed that they would attract local office and shop workers. But, in fact, the bulk of the audiences turned out to be *Time Out* readers or people who go to the theatre anyway.<sup>68</sup>

Jonathan Hammond, too, commented on the ‘disturbingly high proportion’ of the audience comprised of ‘people in the business’.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, he interpreted this as a consequence of a failure to engage with the major political and social issues of the day.<sup>70</sup> As my next section will make clear, Hammond was just one of many to criticise lunchtime theatre for its apparent lack of clear artistic policy.

### Choosing the Plays

One of the first questions which even a random selection of recent lunchtime and late-night theatre begs,[sic] is: does the work being done outside the structured theatre (by which I mean the large subsidised theatres and the West End) present a genuine and interesting alternative to the work being done within the structured theatre?

Antony Vivis, March 1971.<sup>71</sup>

Vivis’ article goes on to correct a ‘widespread but misleading’ belief that ‘the work of the structured theatre is *by nature* bourgeois and reactionary and that of the non-structured theatre *by nature* progressive and adventurous’.<sup>72</sup> These comments can be read both as a defence of the West End and also as an implied attack on the apparently less than experimental output of much lunchtime theatre.

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<sup>68</sup> Irving Wardle, ‘Fringe Theatre’, *New Society*, 29 June 1972, 686. Wardle’s reference to David Halliwell and Walter Hall is an example of what Rosalind Asquith calls ‘a certain amount of hazy recollection’ with regard to the origins of lunchtime theatre. (Asquith, ‘Subversion at Lunchtime’, 147.)

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Hammond, ‘Lunch Line-Up’, *Plays and Players*, September 1971, 70.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Antony Vivis, ‘Lunch and Late Night Line-Up’, *Plays and Players*, March 1971, 52.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

In fact, as this study will show, the Soho Theatre presented a great deal of work that could happily be labelled ‘experimental’. Nor was it an isolated example. For some, however, the problem was not so much the lack of such work on lunchtime stages, but apparently random programming decisions that often saw ‘bourgeois’ naturalism and avant-garde experimentation muddled incoherently together.

In an article published in June 1973, Peter Ansorge argued that, ‘it is precisely its haphazard history which makes the Lunchtime movement difficult to define in terms of the new underground network of theatre groups. [...] [T]he lunchtime companies are held together by no definite artistic principal or policy’.<sup>73</sup> Quoting Joan Crawford’s (quite possibly tongue-in-cheek) declaration that ‘[p]remieres, lots of premieres’ was the only policy of the King’s Head pub in Islington, he suggested that the same held true across the lunchtime scene. Like Ansorge, Jonathan Hammond also felt that the lack of a defined artistic policy, or equivalent binding agent, set lunchtime theatre apart from the general thrust of fringe and alternative theatre activity. Writing in September 1971 he argued that:

Many of the lunchtime theatres have really got to ask themselves about the reason for their existence. Of the regulars, only two seem to have a clear-cut policy: the Open Space with its programme of American plays and the Ambiance [...] with its various seasons like the Black and White Power Season.<sup>74</sup>

He went on to imply that lunchtime theatre should move decisively into more overtly political territory, making the point with reference to the recent trial of the editors of *Oz* magazine for allegedly corrupting the morals of young people:

In a month when the OZ trial has been a dominant event on the domestic political scene, it was exceptionally hard to give lunchtime shows the undivided attention they deserved. Perhaps there is a clue here as to why I’m beginning to find so much lunchtime theatre irrelevant, sterile and boring - it reflects so little of the external realities of our political and social situation and so much of individual writers’ not very interesting personal hang-ups.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ansorge, ‘Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale?’, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Hammond, ‘Lunch Line-Up’, *Plays and Players*, September 1971, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

It is interesting to note, in the light of Hammond's comments, that this very trial was to be the subject matter of the Soho Poly's inaugural production in March 1972. I consider the play in question, Colin Spencer's *The Trial of St George*, in some detail in Chapter Four.

On the one hand, then, there were anxieties over individual artistic policies, or lack of them. On the other, there were more general concerns about the quality of the work presented. Sometimes these were reframed in terms of risk-taking. For example, here is Nigel Andrews in the August 1971 edition of *Plays and Players*:

Any alternative to the West End theatre is welcome, not because West End theatre is bad but because it has to play safe. Lunchtime theatres are welcome not because they are good but because they can afford to take much greater risks. [...] Bad plays are a natural hazard if we wish to create an effectively wider choice of available theatre.<sup>76</sup>

Andrews' unqualified use of the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' is revealing. It implies a belief that theatrical worth should be measured primarily by 'output' - the final performance - rather than, for example, the developmental process or the interaction between theatre and audience. I return to such questions later in this chapter with reference to the criteria employed by the Arts Council in their allocation of funds. Ultimately, however, issues of quality and coherent artistic policy were seen to derive from the same source: the dearth of good material. Irving Wardle put the case succinctly in June 1972:

As things stand now, the lunchtime stage is rich, pathetically rich, in good acting; and desperately short of firm directorial policy [...] and the general impression is of a rapid turnover of short-winded material.<sup>77</sup>

In summary, then, it can be seen that there was a commonly-expressed view that, since the lunchtime theatres were having to cast their nets far and wide for material, it was all but impossible to guarantee consistent quality or develop a

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<sup>76</sup> Nigel Andrews, 'Lunch Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, August 1971, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', 686. Despite this damning indictment, Wardle singles out Soho as an exception, commending Proud and Bargate for their energy, dedication and taste.

coherent artistic policy. To some extent, as I demonstrate later in this chapter, lunchtime theatre was restricted by the conditions of its existence. This was particularly true with respect to its relationship with the Arts Council. At the same time, however, there is considerable evidence of the lunchtime companies' commitment to new dramatic forms and innovative creative practice.

### **Lunchtime Innovations**

A particularly vexed issue with regard to the quality of available material was the frequent practice of adapting radio and television scripts for the stage. In the summer of 1971, the artistic director of the Open Space theatre, Charles Marowitz, made a stinging attack on 'one-act lunch cellars presenting tame slivers of old telly plays, toss-offs by writers too undernourished to provide full-length work'.<sup>78</sup> Rather than leaping to lunchtime theatre's defence, Nigel Andrews agreed, in the pages of *Plays and Players*, that it was 'depressingly true that [...] the lunchtime clubs have tended to fall back on old radio plays [...], familiar authors' one-acters and dramatised short stories'.<sup>79</sup> In a similar vein, Peter Ansorge commented in June 1972 that: '[d]espite Proud's claim of providing an "alternative" way of life for his audiences during the lunch hour, there are frequent criticisms made that midday plays are somewhat tame in their subject matter and, often, re-workings of TV scripts'.<sup>80</sup>

If some critics, and indeed practitioners, felt uneasy about work intended for one medium being co-opted for use by other, there was also evidence that such adaptations could provoke creative innovations.<sup>81</sup> In 1971, the Soho Theatre

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<sup>78</sup> Although I have been unable to locate the original article, these passages are quoted in Jonathan Hammond, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, July 1971, 50.

<sup>79</sup> Nigel Andrews, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, August 1971, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Ansorge, 'Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale?', 14. Jonathan Hammond too, in response to Marowitz's comments, remarked that: '[h]e does have a point about lunchtime theatre. [...] [T]here are *not* that many good writers about and lunch-time directors are being forced to fall back on TV plays and inferior work to fill up their schedules.' (Jonathan Hammond, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, July 1971, 51.)

<sup>81</sup> Marowitz was, himself, a producer of lunchtime plays. In his interview with B.S. Johnson, Walter Hall (the artistic director of the Basement theatre) is quoted as follows: '[u]nfortunately there are not as many good new plays as we'd wish, and this means that a high proportion of the time we're doing things that have been done in other media. The

produced a stage version of Joe Orton's television drama *The Good and Faithful Servant* (1967) at the King's Head. Forced to find solutions to the televisual use of multiple locations, Fred Proud directed a multi-stage production with the audience's attention directed to a variety of different playing spaces. Later in this study, I return to this production, as well as offering other examples to suggest that the relationship between dramatic media in this period was more dynamic than contemporary commentary suggests.

It is also important to note that, despite persistent criticism, there was an acknowledgement that the lunchtime theatres were coming to understand and define some of the particular characteristics of their theatrical mode. There was widespread agreement, for example, about the effectiveness of the dramatic monologue on the lunchtime stages, a consequence of the proximity of actor and audience as well as the relative informality of the environment. John Ford remarked on the particular qualities of the 'intimate' club theatre where '[t]here is no hiding behind an actor's mask'.<sup>82</sup> Ansorge suggested that the lunchtime stages provided 'a unique kind of confession box for the individual actor; a platform for revealing an author's private, surreal fantasies'.<sup>83</sup>

In comments made in a 1972 interview with Peter Ansorge, Fred Proud himself argued for lunchtime theatre's ability to offer 'intense and intimate performances of great honesty'.<sup>84</sup> He also made a revealing reference to 'television-size acting [...] but with the big difference than an actor has to project his thoughts and opinions to a live, not an imaginary audience. An actor has to include the audience in his thought processes, and in the issues being presented on the stage'.<sup>85</sup> Similar thoughts were expressed by Irving Wardle in a *New Society* article from the same month:

What you get, in talking to lunchtime directors, are claims for the 'intimacy' of the form, and its capacity for dropping actors in the audience's lap. Hot television in other words. As a spectator, the work which has always affected me most strongly in this environment has been

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two William Trevor plays, for instance: one was a radio play and the other written for television. (Johnson and Hall, 'Walter Hall of Basement Theatre', 41.)

<sup>82</sup> John Ford, 'Lunch Line-Up', May 1971, 50.

<sup>83</sup> Ansorge, 'Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale?', 14.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

either un-impeded story-telling (preferably by a single actor) or some form of confessional.<sup>86</sup>

In this direct appeal to the audience, Rosalind Asquith sees an expression of the 'reaction against the dominant naturalism of the day'.<sup>87</sup> There is, however, an interesting tension in her argument. For, having suggested that the dramatic monologue offers a challenge to naturalism, she goes on to write that 'though capable of adaptation for television or radio, such a form seems set apart from the rest of theatre'. Somewhat ironically, therefore, she highlights the possibility of a crossover into, arguably, the most naturalistic of all media: television. Such commentary strengthens the suggestion, made above, that the lunchtime theatres were sites of significant interaction between different dramatic media at this time.

The confessional monologue was not, however, the only form that was becoming increasingly associated with lunchtime theatre. Ansorge also commented that John Grillo, whose work was often produced by the Soho Theatre, was pioneering 'a fast-moving, anti-naturalist, cartoon-style of performance which has proved very adaptable to a lunchtime environment'.<sup>88</sup> Asquith agrees that 'lunchtime plays did encourage the more general development of what has been called the 'cartoon-style' of writing and performance: a racy, no-frills shorthand method of writing and direction'.<sup>89</sup> *Time Out* offered a pragmatic explanation for the success of this style of presentation: 'actors at lunch-time face the problem of involving an audience which has just munched or is about to munch. There is not the time or scope to woo an audience gradually'.<sup>90</sup> A related argument is made by Gary O'Connor in his 1975 book *French Theatre Today*. Here, O'Connor makes brief mention of lunchtime theatre's French equivalent, 'café theatre', described as a 'popular marginal theatre' with a 'mixed repertoire'.<sup>91</sup> Although somewhat dismissive of the work on offer, he suggests that it is 'at its best with spectacles influenced by the Theatre of Cruelty (a college based on de Sade, for example), or surrealist, Dadaist experiments in which some sort of image can be sharply established'. A

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<sup>86</sup> Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', 686.

<sup>87</sup> Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime', 149.

<sup>88</sup> Ansorge, 'Underground Explorations No 5: Cakes and Ale?', 14.

<sup>89</sup> Asquith, 'Subversion at Lunchtime', 146.

<sup>90</sup> Sandra Newlands, 'Theatre Review', *Time Out*, 13 June 1970, 35.

<sup>91</sup> Garry O'Connor, *French Theatre Today* (London: Pitman, 1975), 74

good example, drawn from the Soho Theatre's own early repertoire, was the British premiere, in 1970, of the Spanish-born writer Fernando Arrabal's *The Solemn Communion* (1967).<sup>92</sup> Settling in France in his early twenties, Arrabal had been strongly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty and, alongside Roland Topor and Alejandro Jodorowsky, was a founder member of the Mouvement Panique, dedicated to the creation of surreal and visceral images of violence and degradation.

At the start of *The Solemn Communion*, two men enter carrying a coffin, followed by a predatory 'necrophile'.<sup>93</sup> Next, a young girl enters the stage dressed only in her underwear. She is being prepared for her first communion, and her grandmother arrives to help her dress. The grandmother administers advice on how to keep a clean house, and therefore a loyal husband, whilst trying to avoid the macabre characters behind her. Eventually, the coffin-bearers leave and the necrophile, in a state of noticeable tumescence, begins to have his way. 'What's he doing with the corpse?' the young girl asks. To which the grandmother replies, simply, 'He's fucking her!'.<sup>94</sup> The women exit, but the girl quickly returns with a dagger. Approaching the coffin she plunges it into the necrophile. She laughs as '[r]ed balloons rise from the coffin towards the moon'.<sup>95</sup>

The play was translated by John Calder, and is described in the preface to the printed edition as 'a short play [which] tellingly contrasts a young girl preparing for her first communion with a necrophile violating a corpse. The ritual elements of both acts combine to create a powerful theatrical image'.<sup>96</sup> And in a contemporary review for *The Times*, Michael Billington also referred to 'a bizarre, surrealist and momentarily effective image'.<sup>97</sup> The play was to be one of the most successful of the Soho's first season, and was one of three to transfer that summer to the Edinburgh festival.

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<sup>92</sup> In fact, this was first of a double bill of pieces by the Spanish writer, the second being his play *Orison*, written in 1958.

<sup>93</sup> Fernando Arrabal, *The Solemn Communion*, in *Plays. Vol. 3*, trans. Jean Benedetti and John Calder (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), 221.

<sup>94</sup> Fernando Arrabal, *The Solemn Communion*, 227.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> John Calder, Preface to *Plays. Vol. 3*, by Fernando Arrabal, trans. Jean Benedetti and John Calder (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), unpaginated.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Billington, 'In Dead Earnest', *Times*, 29 April 1970.

As well as considering specific styles and forms, I will also demonstrate in this study that the struggle to find suitable material could be an important engine for change. In 1973, for example, the Soho Poly addressed the problem of a shortage of new work by pulling together a company of actors, writers and directors to develop five brand new plays. Writing retrospectively, in 1980, Rosalind Asquith remarks that the experiment was ‘an impressive attempt to help un-established writers find their feet both by removing their sense of isolation and by allowing them to test writing ideas constantly against the reality of acting and the stage’.<sup>98</sup>

### Lunchtime Theatre and the Arts Council

Funding for lunchtime theatre came from a number of sources within the Arts Council. Ed Berman’s Inter-Action, for example, whose many activities included lunchtime productions at the Ambiance and later the Almost Free Theatre, was offered direct subsidy on the recommendation of the Council’s Drama Panel.<sup>99</sup> Charles Marowitz’s Open Space also received an overall grant for its theatre activities.<sup>100</sup> In most other cases, more limited funding was administered via two smaller committees: the New Drama Committee (NDC) and, from 1971, the Experimental Drama Committee (EDC, later to be renamed the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, FEDC). A sense of the sums involved, with respect to the Soho Theatre between 1969 and 1975, is given in Figure 1 below:

	1969/70		1970/71		1971/72		1972/73		1973/74		1974/75	
	EDC	NDC	EDC	NDC	EDC	NDC	EDC	NDC	EDC	NDC	EDC	NDC
Soho Theatre	0	280	750	806	2,985	0	3,380	3,460	7,200	750	9,000	2,209

<sup>98</sup> Asquith, ‘Subversion at Lunchtime’, 150.

<sup>99</sup> Graham Saunders, ‘The Freaks’ Roll Call: Live Art and the Arts Council, 1968-73’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012): 35.

<sup>100</sup> Lunchtime Theatres Funding Spreadsheet, n.d., Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, ACGB/43/43/4.

Figure 1: Table showing funding for the Soho Theatre from the New Drama Committee and the Experimental Drama Committee, 1969-1975.<sup>101</sup>

Given that the Arts Council was, in most cases, the sole funding body for the lunchtime scene, it is critical to consider how it both viewed, and influenced, the development of the movement. In a meeting of the EDC in October 1972, the Assistant Drama Director, Nicholas Barter, made reference to an ‘illuminating and critical’ report on the lunchtime scene commissioned from the playwright and co-opted committee member John Grillo. There then followed an ‘urgent’ discussion in which the following comments were recorded:

The Committee felt that the main problem with the lunchtime theatres at the moment was that they were running out of ideas, new material and audiences. [...] The major lunchtime theatres such as the Soho/Poly [sic] were now having to do revivals rather than new material, and it seemed that the only consistent point about lunchtime theatres was that they performed at lunchtime.<sup>102</sup>

As I have already shown, a concern that the lunchtime theatres were artistically and/or politically rudderless was widely expressed - and contested. However, the committees of the Arts Council’s Drama Panel were themselves involved in fixing this perception by severely limiting the criteria by which lunchtime theatre was assessed. A report prepared by the FEDC for the Drama Finance and Policy Committee in December 1972, for example, included the following remarks:

Those lunchtime companies who have proved they can attract audiences and maintain standards of play and production should be given grants of sufficient size to enable them to arrive at a ‘reasonable’ payment to actors [...].<sup>103</sup>

Although such summary documents may tend towards abbreviation, it is worth acknowledging some of the other ways in which a theatre company might be

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<sup>101</sup> *Arts Council of Great Britain Annual Reports 1970-1975* (London: Arts Council, 1970-1975). In 1970/1 and 1971/2 the Arts Council Reports also show small capital expenditure grants of £150 and £415 respectively.

<sup>102</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/36/2. Note, the minutes are headed Experimental Drama Committee rather than Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee. The naming of the committee in official documents is inconsistent during this period.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Fringe and Experimental Drama Policy 1973/4’, 7 December 1972, ACGB/43/43/5.

commended: for presenting provocative or challenging work; for giving voice to marginalised voices; for exploring innovative working practices; for willingness to take risks; etc. Such criteria were certainly applied to other types of theatrical activity at this time. In February 1973, the FEDC listed eight companies that it wished to support at a level capable of meeting the performers' union Equity's minimum payment contracts.<sup>104</sup> But of a ninth company, Low Moan Spectacular, John Ford suggested that 'nothing this group had ever done had challenged the audience, whereas all the others in this list had'.<sup>105</sup> For the lunchtime theatres, however, a perceived lack of governing philosophy meant that funding came to be offered primarily on the basis of whether or not their output was considered 'good' and/or 'popular'. With regard to the former, for example, a February 1973 recommendation that the Richmond Fringe Group receive £2,550 was made in the light of 'high standards'. In the same months, another lunchtime company, Quipu, received a last minute reprieve after John Ford acknowledged that 'some plays by this company were good'.<sup>106</sup> In March the following year, on the other hand, an application from the Act Inn was met with the more ominous suggestion that 'the Committee might like to read some scripts [...] to assess whether the work was likely to be good'. Two committee members reported back that they were 'not enthusiastic' and the decision was recorded as pending.<sup>107</sup>

It is unclear, from such brief records, what exactly these concepts of 'goodness' or 'high standards' were supposed to pick out. John Grillo's report of autumn 1972, referenced above, offered one suggestion: '[f]or a good experience in the theatre one needs good script, acting, production and also set which is often underestimated'.<sup>108</sup> Grillo was himself in the vanguard of new playwriting at this time. Reporting in the context of an official commission, however, he falls back on aesthetic concepts that are largely tautologous. For a sense of an alternative perspective, here are comments made by John Arden and Margareta

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<sup>104</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 14 February 1973, ACGB/43/36/2. The listed groups were: Portable Theatre Workshop, Combination, People Show, Landscapes and Living Spaces, Welfare State, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Natural Theatre and Red Ladder.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 12 March 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

<sup>108</sup> Letter from John Grillo to Nicholas Barter, received 12 October 1972. ACGB/43/43/12.

D'Arcy, speaking about the Arts Council's related, and equally problematic, concept of 'excellence' at a 1976 meeting organised by Malcolm Griffiths. Both draw attention to the communicative power of theatre, understood as a live exchange between performer and audience, rather than simply the presentation of a finished product:

Arden: What I understand the Arts Council to mean by excellence bears no relation to five or six flesh and blood people playing in a sweaty room to thirty or forty hard seats. Basically, an imperfect, temporal atmosphere is being judged according to some eternal concept of platonic values, which bears no relationship to the process of communication by one group or the other.

D'Arcy: You know, I think they [The Arts Council] actually treat theatre as if it was an aesthetic object, as if it was like a piece of pottery.<sup>109</sup>

Separated, fairly or not, from the broader thrust of more overtly experimental or political practice, lunchtime theatre found itself judged according to just such 'platonic' ideals, founded, at least sometimes, on vague cultural assumptions about what a proper theatrical experience should be.

Given that a company could be refused vital funding if their work was not judged good enough, it is important to consider the ways in which Council policy impacted on, and to a certain degree directed, both the choice of material and its likely reception. A case in point was the system of New Drama grants, administered by the NDC. In 1972, these were offered to the lunchtime theatres at a rate of £80 per production (rising to £100 for 1973/74).<sup>110</sup> For emerging companies, these small financial awards provided a clear incentive to produce new work, rather than plays which had already had successful productions elsewhere and were therefore ineligible for further support. A company's programming choices were thereby restricted, since a season of plays related to one another by subject matter or style was much harder to curate if all the work had to be previously unproduced. This issue was raised directly in an FEDC

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<sup>109</sup> John Arden et al., 'Theatre Quarterly Symposium. Playwriting for the Seventies: Old Theatres, New Audiences, and the Politics of Revolution', *Theatre Quarterly* 6, no. 24 (1976): 64-5.

<sup>110</sup> Grants were offered at the higher rate of £250 for full-length work. Alongside such grants were amounts of money offered in the form of author's royalty payments.

meeting in January 1973 to which a delegation from the Association for Lunchtime theatres had been invited:

Miss Smith wondered about the pressure on lunchtime theatres to do mediocre new plays because they could get new play grants. The ALT admitted there was a pressure, and Mr Proud added that because of the New Drama system it was impossible to do the third or fourth production of good modern plays.<sup>111</sup>

The NDC did operate a parallel scheme for the production of neglected classics. As the comments expressed in the EDC's meeting of October 1972 made clear, however, the presentation of such work was considered something of a last resort.

The operations of the (F)EDC could also have problematic consequences for lunchtime theatres, and, indeed, fringe and alternative theatre companies in general. This committee had been established in 1971 to administer a new system of revenue grants. The intention was that the more established theatres would increasingly move onto this track and away from reliance on individual production grants. Having qualified for revenue funding, however, a theatre would now be effectively bound into what Sandy Craig refers to as a 'productivity deal' for the year ahead, a 'genteel and hidden persuasion [...] instituted through the practice of asking companies for estimates [...].'<sup>112</sup> Craig's implication is that, whilst guaranteed revenue allowed for greater stability, it could also encourage a company to make 'safer' choices, rather than risking projects that might backfire. After all, a 'trouble-free' year was likely to be the best guarantee of continued funding. This is, perhaps, the dilemma for all companies sustained by government subsidy. Combined with the subtle pressures of NDC grants, however, lunchtime theatre found itself somewhere between a rock and a hard place, with both funding routes placing obstacles in the way of seasons of work which were artistically and/or politically bold and coherent.

As well as the impact of the administrative structures, the committees of the Arts Council also attempted to exert more direct influence on the development of lunchtime theatre, seeking, for example, to steer companies

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<sup>111</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 16 January 1973, ACGB/43/36/2.

<sup>112</sup> Sandy Craig, 'The Bitten Hand', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), 184.

towards touring, and to block other types of expansion. For example, in a joint meeting of the NDC and FEDC in December 1973, John Ford suggested that the Soho Poly might consider 'touring colleges in the evening'.<sup>113</sup> A few months later, EDC members were recorded as being 'concerned that none of the companies seemed to be considering touring'.<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, when, the year before, the Soho Poly had applied for a large grant to include an increased number of evening shows, the EDC expressed a view that 'lunchtime theatres were expanding too fast' and refused revenue funding for the evening portion of the application.<sup>115</sup>

Perhaps the greatest difficulty for lunchtime theatres in this respect was that, once the Arts Council had come to recognise them as a particular type of 'thing', it was very difficult for them to follow new directions of their own choosing. In the April 1974 meeting, referenced above, this double-bind situation was well expressed by the chair of the ALT, Kenneth Chubb, who was minuted as follows:

Other companies were not limited in this way, but lunchtime companies had to apply separately to do evening work or touring. [...] [The lunchtime companies appreciated] that comparison with other groups were inevitable, but felt the Committee should give them the financial opportunity to do something new or more ambitious which could then be assessed, rather than waiting to see the work done and then awarding money.<sup>116</sup>

As far as the second key Arts Council criteria was concerned - audience attendance - this often unraveled into a question of 'chicken and egg'. In a Drama Finance and Policy Committee (DFPC) meeting in December 1972, for example, the Drama Panel's chair, J.W. Lambert, suggested that 'a greatly increased contribution to Fringe and Experimental Drama [...] would also need evidence of increasing support from the general public in the form of larger

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<sup>113</sup> Minutes of the Joint Meeting of The Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee and the New Drama Committee, 4 December 1973, ACGB/40/126/2.

<sup>114</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 9 April 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

<sup>115</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 12/13 February 1973, ACGB/43/36/2.

<sup>116</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 9 April 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

audiences'.<sup>117</sup> Those who did acknowledge low or fluctuating attendance figures, however, argued that this was more often a consequence of inadequate funding rather than a reason not to receive any more. Here, FEDC minutes record an ALT member making exactly this point:

Miss Coveney said that if audiences were erratic it was because the activities were sporadic, and if they were sporadic it was because they had not received sufficient grant-aid.<sup>118</sup>

At an FEDC meeting in January 1973, the point was also made that if a theatre was to go dark for any significant length of time - a frequent consequence of inadequate funds - it was difficult to build up audience loyalty.<sup>119</sup>

In light of such considerations, it is worth returning to John Grillo's highly critical report of Autumn 1972. By way of a general summary, he has this to say about the majority of London's lunchtime theatres:

They are bad theatres and play to deservedly small audiences. One may use three pointers of judgement. Firstly the environment of the theatre. Secondly the standard of production. And thirdly choice of material.<sup>120</sup>

With respect to these 'pointers of judgment', it might be countered that the first could be improved with increased funding (as might audience attendance), the second is rooted in unqualified value judgments, and the third was at least a partial consequence of the Arts Council's own funding criteria.

This is not to suggest, necessarily, that the lunchtime theatres were unfairly maligned, or to deny that there needed to be some way of selecting between the competing demands for limited money. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the Arts Council was intimately involved in the question of how 'lunchtime theatre' was perceived, and implicated in the very choices and practices it was seeking to assess.

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<sup>117</sup> Minutes of the Drama Finance and Policy Committee, 7 December 1972, ACGB/43/49/5

<sup>118</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 9 April 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

<sup>119</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 16 January 1973, ACGB/43/36/2.

<sup>120</sup> Letter from John Grillo to Nicholas Barter, received 12 October 1972. ACGB/43/43/12.

## Equity and the ALT

In the summer of 1972, lunchtime theatre, in common with much of the fringe and alternative theatre scene, was faced with a serious threat to its survival. In an article published by *Time Out*, Barry Russell laid out the problem:

For quite a while [performer's union, Equity] managed to turn a blind eye to things like minimum salaries and contractual conditions for actors engaged in fringe, experimental or small-scale productions - largely because they weren't sure which was which. It was a mixed blessing, because it meant that the Experimental Drama Committee didn't have to consider requests for full scale salaries when they allocated their subsidies, and they got away with spreading the little money they had more widely than they might otherwise have done. *But that is coming to an end – and the very existence of lunchtime theatre is threatened.*<sup>121</sup>

In view of this looming crisis, Russell also used the article to make a direct overture to the lunchtime companies, proposing 'an informal get-together' at the *Time Out* headquarters to consider their response.

On 13 August, Russell's offer was taken up by over 40 representatives of the lunchtime theatre movement, as well as Equity's assistant secretary Vincent Burke and, apparently 'incognito', a representative of the Arts Council.<sup>122</sup> As well as discussing subsidy and Equity minima, the meeting also considered issues such as the 'vetting' of plays by Drama Panel readers, the need for improvised or unscripted work to be fairly assessed, and new possibilities for the sharing of information, resources, and even productions.<sup>123</sup> It also agreed to the creation of an Association of Lunchtime Theatre (ALT), the significance of which was described by Russell as follows:

[F]or the first time a cross-section of this shapeless, insular mass called 'The Fringe' have found the chance to assert a coherent corporate identity,

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<sup>121</sup> Barry Russell, 'The Lunchtime Theatre Crisis' *Time Out*, 11 August 1972, 16.

<sup>122</sup> Barry Russell, 'The Great Step Forward', *Time Out*, 18 August 1972, 24.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

a means of speaking from the position of power that only unification can bring.<sup>124</sup>

Over the next few months the ALT began to take shape. Kenneth Chubb of the Wakefield Tricycle Theatre (WTC) was appointed chair, with Fred Proud as secretary. As well as Soho and the WTC, the membership comprised the Basement, the Open Space, Recreation Ground, the Act Inn and The Playroom.<sup>125</sup> Towards the end of the year, a series of open meetings was held in order to hammer out the new association's aims. For this purpose, Fred Proud and Verity Bargate offered the use of their new Soho Poly premises on Riding House Street. A number of guest speakers were also invited, including Nicolas Barter, John Ford, Frank Marcus, Sheila Allen and John Grillo.<sup>126</sup> *Time Out* continued to champion the initiative and announced the meetings in combative style:

Theatre-loving sadists may like to know that they can help put the boot into London's lunchtime theatres next week when Frederick Proud's Soho Poly, in Riding House Street, opens its doors for a series of open forums on the future of lunchtime theatre. If you want to help in the slaughter, get in quick: with skilled surgeons like Nicholas Barter, the Arts Council's assistant drama director, around, there won't be much left much longer. Barter is reported as saying that he thinks there's too much lunchtime theatre in London, and wouldn't it be a good idea to kill a few off... Humanely - of course. You simply stop their grants and watch them wither.<sup>127</sup>

Though somewhat mischievous, Russell's article was not entirely inaccurate. As examined in the last section, the (F)EDC had recently discussed John Grillo's damning lunchtime theatre report, and Barter himself had been minuted as wondering 'whether there was a case for supporting fewer companies at a better level'.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, the article prompted a panicked response from *Time*

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. Although *Time Out* is often credited with bringing the ALT into existence, others had also made a similar case for greater organisation between groups. See, for example, 'Lunchtime', *Stage*, 6 April 1972.

<sup>125</sup> Dusty Hughes and Naseem Khan, 'Lunchtime Birthday', *Time Out*, 24 August 1973, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Barry Russell 'Lunchtime Theatre and The Arts Council', *Time Out*, 24 November 1972, 43.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/36/2.

*Out's* theatre editor, and (F)EDC member, John Ford. Writing directly to Barter, Ford sought to distance himself from the comments.<sup>129</sup> For his part, Barter responded in good humour, joking in a letter to John Grillo that he would be coming to the meeting 'wearing rubber gloves and carrying a scalpel'.<sup>130</sup>

In the event, reports of the meetings suggest that they were vigorous and productive rather than fractious. Michael Coveney wrote that '[t]he debate was informed and good-humoured: platform contributions from such people as Nicholas Barter [...] and playwright Frank Marcus were supplemented by many an impassioned plea for their cause by the lunchtime practitioners themselves'.<sup>131</sup> And, in an article for *The Stage* entitled 'Lunchtime Theatre is Growing up', Douglas Blake listed ALT's newly-drafted aims:

- To promote lunchtime theatre.
- To present, principally, new and neglected plays and playwrights.
- To provide alternative venues for actors and directors.
- To encourage audiences by making theatre more accessible.
- To establish a code of practice for lunchtime theatres.
- To provide facilities for mutual help and information.
- To provide means for the representation of lunchtime theatres in their dealings with other official bodies.<sup>132</sup>

The code of practice, referenced in this list, included commitments to transparent book keeping and a minimum weekly salary of £3.<sup>133</sup> Whilst Equity was unable to endorse this latter policy, it represented a determination on behalf of the lunchtime managements to offer some protection to the actors, writers and directors on whom it relied.<sup>134</sup>

The lunchtime theatres, nevertheless, found themselves in a perilous situation in early 1973. Despite acknowledging an 'extremely strong case made [...] by the Association of Lunchtime Theatres', the FEDC was preparing to reduce the number of revenue-funded companies from six to three: the Soho Poly,

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<sup>129</sup> Letter from John Ford to Nicholas Barter, n.d., ACGB/43/43/12.

<sup>130</sup> Letter from Nicholas Barter to John Grillo, 23 November 1972, ACGB/43/43/12.

<sup>131</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Soho Poly Lunch-Ins', *Financial Times*, 16 December 1972.

<sup>132</sup> Douglas Blake, 'Lunchtime Theatre is Growing Up', *Stage*, 7 December 1972, 16.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 16 January 1973, ACGB/43/36/2.

The Basement and the Richmond Fringe Group.<sup>135</sup> The broader situation with respect to all those fringe and alternative theatre companies making applications is revealed in a note on the committee's recommendations for the forthcoming year. Here, the FEDC listed fifteen groups it wished to offer funding compatible with the payment of Equity minimum salaries. However, it was also stated that, 'were this policy to have been adhered to in 1973/4 the entire allocation of £96,750 would have been expended on these 15 companies'. In reality, therefore, the committee found it could only recommend that seven be supported at this level.<sup>136</sup>

In the end, the FEDC's deliberations produced a slightly less bleak outcome for the lunchtime theatres. As well as the three which the committee had already committed to fund, albeit not yet at a rate capable of supporting Equity minima, a case was made for the WTC, Recreation Ground and Quipu.<sup>137</sup> And, whilst it is difficult to know how much the ALT's representations affected these decisions, it is certainly the case that the lunchtime movement had successfully asserted itself at a time when its position seemed most fragile.

The ALT was also to prove successful in many of its other aims, particularly those that involved encouraging co-operation amongst its members.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps the most important step in this direction was the Basement and WTC's joint seasons at the King's Head and the Soho Poly in 1973 and 1974 respectively. I consider the second of these in some detail in Chapter Five. The ALT also made several deputations to the Arts Council. In April 1974, for example, six of the association's members visited the FEDC to express their concern over a new policy of funding companies for specific seasons. The previous autumn, WTC and the Basement had been engaged in complicated (and ultimately unsuccessful) negotiations for new premises in North Kensington. At the time they had been unable to satisfy the Arts Council that their plans for

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<sup>135</sup> 'Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee: Notes on Recommendations', in Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 14 February 1973, ACGB/43/36/2.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. The seven companies listed at this point were: The People Show, Yorkshire Gnomes, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Sal's Meat Market and the Natural Theatre Company. The full minutes of this meeting show that there was a certain amount of fluctuation with regard to who should be included in the final list.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Hughes and Khan, 'Lunchtime Birthday'.

1974/5 were sufficiently stable, and their revenue grants had been duly cut. With the backing of the ALT, however, they lobbied successfully for a new application to be considered.<sup>139</sup>

Perhaps the most important consequence of the ALT's creation, however, was the impetus it gave to other interest groups. In 1973 the Association of Community Theatres (TACT) was formed and, the following year, the ALT was itself absorbed within the wider compass of this new organisation.<sup>140</sup> Also in 1974, another, larger, umbrella group, the Independent Theatre Council (ITC), was established 'to fight for the interests of all self-organising groups and individuals'.<sup>141</sup> Forming a Joint Action Committee with TACT in 1975, these groups were to have a decisive impact on Arts Council policy. They were, for example, instrumental in resisting a funding freeze for many alternative theatre groups in the second part of that year.<sup>142</sup> An emergency conference was organised at the Oval House in October and, when subsequent negotiations with the Arts Council headed towards stalemate, they moved to more militant action, including demonstrations outside the Council's premises. Shirley Barrie, co-founder of the WTC, and a driving force behind both the ALT and ICT/TACT, describes such action as 'a procedure highly embarrassing to the Arts Council's usually refined and respectable way of working'. She records the result: 'a gradual re-opening of the Council's purse strings to the groups in question'.<sup>143</sup> Barrie also notes that: 'in 1976/7 the amount of Arts Council subsidy given to Fringe groups increased by 91% over the previous year, while the overall increase to theatres was just over 30%'.<sup>144</sup> Having shown their collective strength, ICT/TACT focused their efforts in the second part of the decade towards the full unionisation of the fringe and alternative theatre sector as well as contracts that would acknowledge its particular modes of operation.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 9 April 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

<sup>140</sup> See: Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 176; Barrie, 'Organising The Fringe', 79.

<sup>141</sup> Barrie, *ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> As Itzin notes, this was at the same time as the RSC received an emergency grant of £200,000 and the National Theatre's costs were escalating. (Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 212.)

<sup>143</sup> Barrie, 'Organising The Fringe', 80.

<sup>144</sup> Barrie, 'Organising The Fringe', 79.

<sup>145</sup> Barrie, 'Organising The Fringe', 80-81.

### Part 3. Lunchtime Theatre in the Historical Record

Having considered lunchtime theatre in some detail, I return in this section to the role played by what Maria DiCenzo calls ‘survey-oriented’ texts in its historical representation. Specifically, I have chosen to examine two influential studies of the alternative theatre scene: Sandy Craig’s chapter ‘Reflexes of the Future’, in his edited collection *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (1980), and Peter Ansorge’s monograph *Disrupting the Spectacle* (1975). Baz Kershaw commends these for providing, jointly, ‘the most accurate image of the range of practices in the movement through a judicious balance of fact *and* analysis’.<sup>146</sup> In each case, the writers have sought to organise their material according to particular structural principles. In Craig’s text, an emphasis is placed on the establishment of specific categories of alternative theatre practice. Ansorge, on the other hand, proposes a common objective to which fringe and alternative theatre practitioners were, in different ways, directed. In pursuing such approaches, I suggest that each writer expresses distinct, and arguably contradictory, ideological positions, both of which significantly impact on their treatment of the lunchtime theatre movement.

#### ‘Reflexes of the Future’

With respect to the importance of 1968 itself, Sandy Craig criticises a ‘myopic concentration on one year’.<sup>147</sup> Whilst accepting it was a watershed moment, he argues that ‘alternative theatre did not start from a single seed, and though for many it quickly assumed the cultural equivalence of warfare it wasn’t, unlike

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<sup>146</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 45. It must be acknowledged that, in Craig’s case, Kershaw is referencing the full collection of essays contained in *Dreams and Deconstructions* rather than just those that Craig, the editor, has contributed.

<sup>147</sup> Sandy Craig, ‘Reflexes of the Future’, in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Amber Lane Press, 1980), 18.

wars, declared on a particular day'.<sup>148</sup> The statement is immediately notable for its combative language.

Craig then proceeds to give brief acknowledgment to the difficulties in categorising fringe and alternative theatre activity, noting that '[t]he boundaries between different areas remain unclear and shifting. Individual groups often start out as one thing and end up as something different'. Nevertheless, he presents an argument for five distinctly identifiable strands:

(1) political theatre companies; (2) community theatre; (3) groups exploring the area between theatre and education; (4) performance art groups; and (5) companies who - whether they wished to change the production process or emphasize the visual, as opposed to the verbal, elements of performance - adopted the traditional role of theatre: presenting plays.<sup>149</sup>

In the manner of most survey texts, Craig provides examples of companies that fall under one or other label. The overtly socialist CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) is given as an example of a 'political theatre company', as is the Ken Campbell Road Show. Both are noted for the way in which they reached out to working class audiences, particularly through the presentation of their work in 'non-theatrical' venues such as pubs and folk clubs.<sup>150</sup> 'Community theatre', which Craig admits is closely associated with political theatre, picks out those companies that based themselves in a particular area and then sought 'to become central, as opposed to peripheral, in the networks of relations within that locality'. Ed Berman's Inter-Action, 'an umbrella organization involved in a wide range of community and self help projects', is singled out as '[t]he most influential model'.<sup>151</sup> One of Inter-Action's projects was the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club, later to transform into the Almost Free Theatre, which pioneered seasons of gay, black and women's theatre, aimed at communities not merely geographically constituted. The inclusion of Berman's lunchtime activities is an exception however. Other lunchtime theatres are not included in this category, or, indeed, in any of the other four.

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<sup>148</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 14.

<sup>149</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 21.

<sup>150</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 21-22.

<sup>151</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 23.

Craig places 'theatre and education' in the context of 'a growing focus on education generally and the large-scale increase in school drama teaching'. 'Performance art', including companies such as The People Show and The Welfare State is seen as 'rooted as much in the visual arts as theatre'. In such work '[t]he performance artist is his own means of expression'. 'Companies presenting plays' are subdivided into either actor-based or writer-based groups. Examples include Nancy Meckler's Freehold, Steven Berkoff's the London Theatre Group and Mike Bradwell's Hull Truck.<sup>152</sup>

It is not my intention here to evaluate Craig's system of categorisation but rather to draw attention to the ideological positions on which it rests. A good place to start is his own description of the demand that he believes alternative theatre attempts to create and satisfy:

That demand is three fold: to restore theatre to its traditional position of importance by re-creating a fresh, unsullied language of theatre; to extend the social basis of theatre to include the working class, the oppressed and the dispossessed; and to make obvious the enjoyment and the possibility of creation - particularly, collective creation - as something neither mysterious or the privilege of the elite few but the democratic right and the inherent human capacity of the many.<sup>153</sup>

The language used in this extract - the plea for a 'fresh, unsullied language of theatre', the reaching out to the 'oppressed and the dispossessed' - places alternative theatre in a moral and political context. Crucially, Craig sees such impulses as under threat from the mainstream or establishment theatre. He writes:

The growing establishment tendency, a form of thinking hall-marked by the Arts Council, is to conceive of British theatre [...] in terms of a continuum shading indivisibly from the ultra-violet to the infra-red. This analysis is, however, often only an attempt by the establishment to incorporate and thus defuse potentially revolutionary activity.<sup>154</sup>

In a similar vein, commenting on the opening of the Royal Court Upstairs, Craig interprets William Gaskell's motives as two-fold:

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<sup>152</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 25.

<sup>153</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 9-10.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

[...] to present new work faster and cheaper, and to provide a bridge between traditional and experimental theatre. Neither aim was radically new, while the latter can be seen as a way of siphoning off talent and incorporating oppositional elements into the mainstream.<sup>155</sup>

That the 'mainstream' is something to be rejected is also made explicit in Craig's analysis of the new large-scale subsidised theatres, particularly the National Theatre, which he describes as follows:

In the behind-stage machinery it expressed a mindless utopian belief in technology; in the auditoria it equated democracy with anonymity; and in its foyers it transmuted luxury into airport-lounge transience.<sup>156</sup>

In the context of these remarks, Craig's impulse towards categorisation can be understood as an attempt to demarcate the territory occupied by alternative theatre movements, shoring them up so as better to resist the incorporating instincts of the 'established' theatre. Indeed, he himself writes that '[t]he challenge for alternative theatre has been and is, continually, to set a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of incorporation into the mainstream and cultural ghettoization'.<sup>157</sup>

Craig's polemical position is carefully argued. Such an approach, however, which derives much of its strength from well-defined boundaries, runs the risk of excluding complicating examples. The activities of lunchtime theatres, as I will demonstrate throughout this study, speak to many of Craig's concerns - not least the desire to reach out to different sorts of audience and disrupt the norms of bourgeois theatre-going. And yet Craig dismisses the lunchtime companies as 'too often merely showcases for writers or actors operating within the mixed-market economy'.<sup>158</sup> Given the analysis offered above, it is significant that this dismissal contains an implication that lunchtime theatre is involved with precisely those elements of the 'mixed-market' from which Craig wishes alternative theatre to stand apart.

## **Disrupting the Spectacle**

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<sup>155</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 15.

<sup>156</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 12.

<sup>157</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 10.

<sup>158</sup> Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future', 23.

The approach taken in Peter Ansorge's *Disrupting the Spectacle* is somewhat more 'high-concept'. The central thrust of his argument is that much fringe and alternative theatre activity can be understood in the context of a rejection of the 'Society of the Spectacle', a phrase drawn from the situationist manifestos so important to the students of the Paris sit-ins. Throughout his book, he sets out to correlate factors that influenced the growth of alternative theatre with strategies developed in the service of this disruption.

For example, in his first chapter, Ansorge concentrates on the Portable Theatre writers, Howard Brenton, David Hare, Tony Bicat, Christopher Wilkinson and Snoo Wilson. He draws particular attention to Hare's professed interest in the presentation of 'tightly knit social situations in extreme decay' and Brenton's fascination with presenting the criminal elements in society and the corruption at the heart of its laws and institutions.<sup>159</sup> He quotes Brenton acknowledging his debt to the situationists and comments that:

To many of Brenton's generation, for whatever differing reasons, public life has come to appear more and more as a kind of 'spectacle', a vast game or confidence trick, played by politicians on the public through the mass media.<sup>160</sup>

In a similar vein, Ansorge explores the influence of the American avant-garde on British work, suggesting that the visits in 1967 by the Open Theatre and La Mama 'might be compared with the visit made by Brecht's Berliner Ensemble to London's Palace Theatre in 1956'.<sup>161</sup> Nancy Meckler, an original member of La Mama settled in London in 1968 forming both the Wherehouse Company and then Freehold. Ansorge views her approach - using the body as a 'supersensitive instrument of expression' - as part of the wider rejection of naturalism, writing that her 'style of theatre is making a direct attack on our most notable stage convention - namely drama as literature'.<sup>162</sup>

Ansorge then turns his attention to new methods of environmental theatre pursued by The Welfare State and Ed Berman's Inter-Action. These made use of

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<sup>159</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 2-3.

<sup>160</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 7.

<sup>161</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 23.

<sup>162</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 26.

‘circus tents, bridges, universities, streets, the sea and a motorway as backgrounds for the performances’.<sup>163</sup> He references attempts by Berman and Naftali Yavin to break down the traditional boundaries between performer and audience and considers new forms of theatrical collaboration, notably the Traverse Workshop productions that included Howard Brenton’s *Hitler Dances*. Here, once again, his central argument asserts itself:

We have noticed several times in the course of this book that a concern with seeing society as a false ‘spectacle’ can lead to a particular style of writing and acting in the theatre. Shows like *Hitler Dances* have been labelled by reviewers as insubstantial ‘comic-strip’ performances but they can be justifiably read as a reaction against a false representation of reality.<sup>164</sup>

In his final chapter, Ansorge, like Craig, also confronts the issue of acceptance by and incorporation within the ‘establishment’. He writes that ‘[a]n immediate problem arises when this kind of work becomes of interest to more conventional theatre’.<sup>165</sup> Unlike Craig, however, Ansorge’s concern is that the work that had ‘become of interest’ was being ghettoised in the new studio spaces of the major repertory companies, rather than on their main stages. In this connection, he welcomes the 1973 production of Brenton and Hare’s *Brassneck* as a potential game-changer. Describing the production at the Nottingham Playhouse, he writes that ‘[i]t was the hit of the season, won praise from the critics, and established the fringe as a powerful potential force in the traditional theatre’.<sup>166</sup> Ansorge re-iterates and strengthens the point toward the end of the chapter, commenting that, ‘I still think there is an immense amount to be gained by filtering the most talented artists of the fringe into our larger subsidized auditoriums - not into those buildings’ studios’.<sup>167</sup>

It now becomes clear that Ansorge, whilst endorsing many of the counter-cultural impulses of alternative theatre, does not see the subsidised theatre (or even the commercial sector) as antagonistic to its aims. There is, in fact, no reason why these stages could not be co-opted for the fight against the spectacle

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<sup>163</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 41.

<sup>164</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 51.

<sup>165</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 80.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 81.

of modern society. The conclusion is derived from a structural approach which, rather than embracing rigid classifications, sees the various strands of alternative theatre as developing new forms and techniques in pursuit of the guiding idea which gives his thesis its title.

In key respects, this analysis is diametrically opposed to Craig's, allowing as it does for exactly the kind of permeable membranes - the continuum - that Craig is so anxious to resist. It also has its own implications for the treatment of lunchtime theatre, which is examined in a somewhat dismissive manner in his penultimate chapter, 'Lunchtime Line-Up'.<sup>168</sup> Immediately notable is Ansorge's decision to except the lunchtime companies from the general thrust of his argument. Instead, he proposes that:

Rather than aimlessly listing the countless new plays and playwrights that have emerged on the lunchtime circuit, I have found it more relevant for the purposes of this chapter to place the movement within its economic and administrative framework.<sup>169</sup>

Ansorge goes on to question lunchtime theatre's 'commitment to a new way of working', arguing that 'it becomes increasingly difficult to draw a line between the exploitation of resources created by an inflationary profession, too many people chasing after too few jobs, and a genuine commitment to a bohemian life-style opposed to the commercial "system"'.<sup>170</sup> Whilst he does make passing reference to the idea that entertainments at lunchtime could present a subversive challenge to the practices of conventional theatre-going, he argues that any such intention is undermined by the reality of audiences composed primarily of '[u]nemployed actors, friends of the director and cast, students, reviewers, agents, and BBC talent scouts'.<sup>171</sup> Most significantly, he is concerned that the majority of output fails to express consistent political or aesthetic motivation. Although he mentions David Halliwell's experiments with 'multiviewpoint' drama, he views such dedicated (if largely, in his opinion, unsuccessful) explorations of form as atypical of most lunchtime activity. He suggests instead that the presentation of

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<sup>168</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 68.

<sup>169</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 69.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 70.

premieres 'seems to sum up the basic policy of all the lunchtime groups, however distinctive their theatres might at first sight appear to be'.<sup>172</sup>

The questions surrounding lunchtime theatre's artistic and political aims have already been considered in detail in Part Two of this chapter, and will be a continued focus of attention in all that follows. Here, it is enough to note that the construction of a fringe and alternative theatre scene governed by a defined (if variously expressed) 'philosophy' is complicated by a phenomenon whose intentions appear mixed or unspecific. Ansorge's response is to push lunchtime theatre to the margins in terms of its relevance within the wider alternative theatre ecology. He thereby preserves the elegance of his argument, but at the expense of a more nuanced analysis.

In *Disrupting the Spectacle*, the significance of lunchtime theatre also suffers in the context of an underlying bias towards the values of more traditional theatre. There is no doubt that Ansorge is a sympathetic supporter of fringe and alternative theatre activity. Nevertheless, his conclusions, in the final paragraph of his book, are revealing. He writes:

*Christie in Love, The Great Exhibition, Superman, Offending the Audience, Point 101, AC/DC*, each has provided as brilliant an evening as anything that has been offered by the West End or the subsidized theatre in the last five years.<sup>173</sup>

The implication is that the West End and the large-scale subsidised theatres provide the standards by which other theatrical practices are to be measured - and that the evening is the proper time for them to be enjoyed.<sup>174</sup>

## Conclusions

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<sup>172</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 74.

<sup>173</sup> Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 81.

<sup>174</sup> Nor is this a one-off instance, as the following quotation demonstrates: '[y]et his [Naftali Yavin's] last season of plays at the Almost Free showed that the fringe could concern itself with actor-audience relationships with a standard of work as high as anything to be seen in the West End'. (Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 46.)

The lunchtime theatre 'movement' that developed during the mid-late 1960s was met with cautious enthusiasm by contemporary critics. The idea of presenting plays at unusual times of the day offered a challenge to theatrical convention, an impulse which was in sympathy with the broad thrust of much fringe and alternative activity. In response to the lunchtime theatres' varied output, however, anxieties began to grow over the quality of the work and the apparent lack of clearly-defined artistic policies. These concerns were quickly transmitted to the Arts Council which openly questioned whether the lunchtime companies deserved continued financial support. At the same time, the Council's own funding structures ensured that these companies had little room for manoeuvre. Ad hoc grants from the New Drama Committee encouraged the production of new short plays, of which there was a relatively short supply, militating against the possibility of coherent seasons. At the same time, the system of EDC revenue grants that came into being during 1971 arguably dis-incentivised risk taking. Nevertheless, the lunchtime groups continued to respond positively to their perceived limitations. Certain types of drama - such as confessional monologues and 'comic-strip' plays - were seen to respond particularly well to the short lunchtime slot as well as the intimate qualities of the venues in which they were performed. At the same time, practitioners continued to lobby for increased subsidy and recognition of their wider artistic ambitions.

However, as commentators and historians increasingly sought to describe and categorise the new theatrical activity, they found it hard to accommodate the lunchtime companies' eclectic programming into their unfolding narratives. As a result, many significant contributions - which I will be exploring in depth throughout this thesis - have been pushed to the margins. In the next chapter, I begin my detailed examination of one lunchtime company in particular, the Soho Theatre. In doing so, I hope to offer a detailed reassessment of its relationship to the wider fringe and alternative theatre landscape of the period.

## Chapter Two

### The Soho Theatre, 1968-70

I begin this chapter by offering some brief biographical detail about the Soho Theatre's founders, Fred Proud and Verity Bargate, before tracking their progress, via experiments with street theatre and a late-night spot at Charles Marowitz's Open Space theatre towards their arrival at Le Metro Club on New Compton Street. The theatre company remained in residence here from December 1969 until July 1970, during which time it produced work drawn from the American and European avant-garde as well as plays by half a dozen emerging British writers. It also opened its doors to a number of outside companies from the UK and abroad. Following its last production at Le Metro Club, Soho decamped to the Edinburgh Festival for the summer. Returning to London, Proud and Bargate then divided their time between searching for a new venue and mounting a touring production of *Gilgamesh* (1970), a play based on a Sumerian epic poem from 3500 BC.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in January 1971, they secured a second residency, this time at the King's Head pub in Islington, the subject matter of Chapter Three.

In order to develop this narrative, I have selected several productions from the period for more detailed analysis. I begin with the first show, an adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's radio drama *One Autumn Evening* (1956), performed at the Open Space theatre on Tottenham Court Road.<sup>2</sup> The choice of this production, and the 'mission statements' that accompanied it, give an early indication of how the Soho Theatre wished to construct itself. They demonstrate that, from the start, Proud and Bargate were committed to the promotion of a new type of theatrical experience, one that challenged established conventions and reached out to new audiences.

The first production at Le Metro Club was James Leo Herlihy's *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* (1969). This was a play that seemed to speak directly to the contradictions

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a full list of plays produced during this period.

<sup>2</sup> This was the title given to the play when performed by the Soho Theatre. In the original German the title is *Abendstunde im Spätherbst*. For the production, Proud used the following translation: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Episode on an Autumn Evening*, trans. Gabriel Karminsky (Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Company, 1959). The title has also been translated as *Incident at Twilight*.

of American society, as well as to wider anxieties surrounding the ‘spectacle’ of modern life. It was followed by British writer Heathcote Williams’ *The Local Stigmatic* (1966), a key staging post on the way to his 1969 play *AC/DC* which explored, in more explosive fashion, the twin effects of growing consumerism and technological overload. Later in the season, John Grillo’s *Number Three* (1970) provided a bold example of the new ‘comic-strip’ style of theatrical presentation particularly associated with American companies such as the Living Theatre. By examining these plays in some detail, I hope to demonstrate that the Soho Theatre made a significant contribution to contemporary theatrical discourse.

As suggested above, the emerging Soho Theatre also operated within a number of fringe and alternative theatre networks, including the Edinburgh Festival and a new small-scale touring circuit. Whilst based at Le Metro Club, it provided a venue for companies such as the Pip Simmons Group and the Low Moan Spectacular. In April 1970, it also hosted the New York Workshop, which presented Sam Shepard’s *Red Cross*, first produced Off-Off-Broadway in 1966. Writing retrospectively about his early career, to which this play belongs, Shepard offers a revealing analysis of the Off-Off Broadway scene. This, I will suggest, casts a new light on its British equivalent.

Finally, in this chapter, I consider another key production from the period - a staged version of Peter Weiss’s radio play *The Tower* (1950), first broadcast in English in 1964.<sup>3</sup> Proud was responsible for the adaptation and a copy exists in his private collection. This document offers a valuable opportunity to track the creative choices made in the process of translating work across dramatic media. As explored in my previous chapter, critics often expressed concern about the value of this common lunchtime practice, considering such work to be a poor substitute for new plays written specifically for the stage. By examining *The Tower* in details here, I show that such anxieties could be misplaced.

## **The Soho Theatre: Beginnings**

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Cohen, *Understanding Peter Weiss* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 30.

Fred Proud and Verity Bargate met in 1967 through a mutual friend. Neither came from a theatrical background. Previously Bargate had trained as a nurse, but gruelling night shifts at the Chelsea hospital had left her exhausted and depressed. She abandoned nursing to take up a job in a fledgling PR firm called Media Analysis, a useful introduction to the subtle art of theatre promotion. Proud's parents were from Cambridgeshire and had little formal education. Settling in the East End they sent their son to Davenant Foundation School, a marginal grammar. Proud left with three O-levels and made a living in various administrative and office jobs while taking acting classes at the City Lit. His first performance was in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by his then tutor, Steven Berkoff. In 1964, he decided to enrol at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the acting training he received had the effect of pushing him away from performing, and he left convinced that running a company was preferable to an actor's life. The course, however, instilled the virtues of hard work and attention to detail essential for anyone hoping to cut their teeth in the precarious world of fringe and alternative theatre.<sup>5</sup>

The first task was to find a venue and Soho seemed the ideal location. During a personal conversation in 2010, Proud offered an eloquent rationale for the decision. Referring to the contrast between perceptions of Soho at the time - 'a place of razor gangs, brothels, strip clubs and near beer clubs' - and its rich history of immigration, trades guilds and artistic activity, he explained that the hope was to lay down another positive layer of meaning and history for the area.<sup>6</sup> There were also, he admitted, less high-minded motivations. If you wanted reviews, you needed to be somewhere the critics could get to. A West End venue was the best way of getting noticed.

Proud and Bargate's first incursion into Soho was a small flat in Archer Street, round the corner from New Compton Street. Fred recalls the significance of the move:

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<sup>4</sup> Now the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Proud, in an interview with the author, 19 July 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. The area had, for example, been a home to Handel, Mozart, Hazlitt and Blake.

The first objective had been won which was to have a permanent flat in the middle of the West End. In fact we could spit at the roof of The Lyric and The Apollo from the roof immediately above flat 4, 4 Archer Street. That was progress!<sup>7</sup>

Whilst continuing to search for a venue, the couple were also keeping their eyes peeled for an opportunity to mount their first professional production - a stage version of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's radio play *One Autumn Evening*, written in 1956 and first broadcast in the UK in 1959.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of the year, an opportunity presented itself at the Open Space theatre on Tottenham Court Road, recently established by Charles Marowitz and Thelma Holt.<sup>9</sup> Proud recalls that he had been watching Marowitz with interest since his involvement with Peter Brook in the 'Theatre of Cruelty' season at the RSC.<sup>10</sup> And when he saw that the new theatre was having considerable success with its long-running production of John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, first produced in New York in 1967, he proposed that the Dürrenmatt piece could follow it in a late-night slot. Proud recalls that negotiations were mainly conducted with Thelma Holt and the first production by the Soho Theatre duly opened on 8 November, 1968.<sup>11</sup>

### **One Autumn Evening**

*One Autumn Evening* is a self-referential 'thriller'. It begins with a prologue in which the character of an author, Maximillian Korbes, describes a room in a luxurious hotel suite. There is a desk covered with books and papers, comfortable sofas, and, visible from the balcony window, a sunset over a lake. There are also passing references to a dagger and a revolver. Having set the scene, the author asks the listener to imagine a man entering from the bedroom. In fact, this man is

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<sup>7</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 7 October 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See 'Friedrich Dürrenmatt', *Diversity Website*, accessed 1 May 2014, <http://www.suttonelms.org.uk/friedrich-durrenmatt.html>. The title is here translated as *One Evening in Late Autumn*.

<sup>9</sup> See Jinnie Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages: Fringe Theatres at the Open Space and the Round House 1968 - 1983* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 13 September 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Korbes himself, and crossing a border into dramatic dialogue, the play begins in earnest.

A knock at the door brings in a second character, a humble bookkeeper named Hofer Fearguard, who is here to meet his idol. Hofer has read all of Korbes' novels - murder mysteries with a distinctive unifying feature: in each one, the murders are wrongly attributed to death by misadventure. But Hofer has also developed a theory. He believes that nothing can happen in literature that hasn't already happened in life. It follows that every murder must be based on real events, and, worse still, that Korbes himself is the killer. Confronted with this accusation, Korbes is unperturbed. Of course he's guilty, he explains, and, what's more, his crimes have all been sanctioned by the government. After all, isn't that what people want nowadays? Violence, murder, vicarious thrills. And speaking of which, he's just had an idea for his next story. A few moments later, Korbes' secretary, Sebastian, enters the room to find there's been a terrible accident. Poor old Hofer appears to have fallen from the balcony. Korbes sighs and takes another whiskey - he's got a long night of writing ahead of him. So, sitting at his desk, he begins his introduction: a description of a suite in a luxurious grand hotel...

Dürrenmatt's circular narrative is tightly constructed, and makes a certain ironic use of its medium. An early speech by Hofer, for example, pokes fun at the pitfalls of exposition as the character unnecessarily recaps the properties of the suite:

Ah, books and manuscripts everywhere. May I take a look at the photographs on the wall [...] And now the view. What a superb sight - the lake with the mountains behind it and the ever-changing clouds above it! And the sun just going down. Glowing red. Impressive.<sup>12</sup>

In other respects, however, there is little to suggest that the drama is uniquely suited to the airwaves. Although Proud wrote, in the production's programme, that '[r]adio is a medium that Dürrenmatt seems to have mastered', few changes

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Incident at Twilight*, in *Postwar German Theatre: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. and trans. Michael Benedikt and George E. Wellwarth (London: Macmillan, 1968), 165

were needed to adapt it for the stage.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the setting was simply evoked: '[a] large white chair, that all purpose [sic] bit of cheap stage design the white Venetian blind, an exotic carpet and that was about it'.<sup>14</sup> The programme notes also offer a revealing insight into Proud's reading of the play:

Co-existing as we all seem to be with an ideology which includes Genet, Truman Capote and William Penn, and a still increasing movement to condone violence in art, it seems to me apt to produce this play for the stage. A play that dissects the morality of artistic commitment within the individual artist, taking to an extreme the inherent urge present in one form or another in all artists, towards anarchy. An anarchy represented by Dürrenmatt as mass murder.<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation - that the play is an exploration of the moral limits of the artist - is open to challenge. Irving Wardle, for example, in his review of the production, argued that, '[a]s his hero is clearly a literal-minded hack, Dürrenmatt is concerned not with the creative temperament, but with the perversion of culture into a poisonous social drug'.<sup>16</sup> Wardle's analysis can be seen to reflect contemporary critiques of the 'spectacle' of modern society, corrupted by the all-pervasive effects of consumerism (see Chapter One). Under such conditions, a debased, populist entertainment suffocates true artistic expression. Such an analysis, however, is also rooted in a culturally determined position that accepts defined boundaries between high and low art. In Proud's view, *One Autumn Evening* problematises such distinctions:

[I]t seemed to me that Frederick [sic] Dürrenmatt had neatly pinpointed the grand hypocrisy of the State. Everybody is hoodwinked into believing that culture ennobles and enriches life whereas it is usually only the artist who is ennobled and enriched and there is never ever any threat to the all powerful [sic] cannibalistic System along the way.<sup>17</sup>

For Proud, therefore, the play is an encouragement to resist any criteria for aesthetic judgement established and promulgated by a ruling class (i.e. the 'System'). Indeed, in this reading, Dürrenmatt's target is precisely those who,

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<sup>13</sup> Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 3 September 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>16</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Play on Artist as Criminal', *Times*, 11 November 1968.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 3 September 2013.

speaking from a position of power, seek to draw lines between the cultivated endeavours of the true artist and the commercial impulses of, in Wardle's expression, 'the hack'.<sup>18</sup> There is no need to resolve the debate here. It is enough to note that Proud's first professional production was a play that, he believed, offered a challenge to prescribed ideas of artistic worth.

The play's programme also provides an early articulation of the relationship the new company wished to form with Soho itself, a location described as 'a very rich, cosmopolitan area' which 'deserves its own 'Folk Theatre'.<sup>19</sup> The use of the phrase 'folk theatre' is initially surprising, since it would usually refer to early dramatic forms within an oral tradition. Here, however, the expression can be understood in the context of a desire to draw from, and respond to, a local constituency. Later uses of the phrase, considered again in Chapter Five, encompassed an ambition to incorporate 'popular' forms of entertainment into the theatre's output, including pantomime, bingo and drag.<sup>20</sup> As discussed in my previous chapter, lunchtime theatres were often criticised for failing to reach beyond an audience of *Time Out* readers and regular theatre-goers. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that Proud and Bargate's commitments in this respect were sincere. I have already referred to Proud's interest in Soho's social and cultural history, and, in a 1999 edition of the *Soho Clarion*, he wrote movingly about Bargate's interaction with their Archer Street neighbours. It is also telling that Proud has continued to live in the heart of the area.<sup>21</sup>

In order to build audiences, Proud and Bargate were also aware of the need for critical attention. This was part of the motivation for what was to become the frequent lunchtime practice of 'star-casting'. In the case of *One Autumn Evening*, Kenneth J. Warren and John Rutland, both of whom were

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<sup>18</sup> The literary critic Roger Allen Crockett draws attention to a tension in the original German between the words *Dichter* and *Schriftsteller*, the former picking out the artist of high ideals, the latter referring to the writer who views their work as a money-making business. Dürrenmatt's own relationship to these concepts is complex. Crockett refers to an essay written in the same year as the play in which the playwright 'concludes with the pragmatic warning: "[i]n general the writer does well to be guided by the marketplace."'. Roger Allen Crockett, *Understanding Friedrich Dürrenmatt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>20</sup> See 'Soho Poly Theatre', *Gen: The Students' Handbook*, 1972-73, 26, University of Westminster Archive (UWA), PCL/8/1/2/5.

<sup>21</sup> Fred Proud, 'Buildings Soft as Mattresses', *Soho Clarion*, Winter 2000, 12.

simultaneously appearing in a West End production of *The Canterbury Tales*, provided the draw.<sup>22</sup> Warren's programme biography also shows how the benefits of such a policy could cut both ways:

Dissatisfied with the limitations of TV drama, so much of which he says has become 'TV Soap Opera', he [Warren] is keen to get back to the grass roots of theatre.<sup>23</sup>

It is slightly ironic that the 'grass roots of theatre' were, in this instance, represented by an adapted radio play. Nevertheless, Warren's comments express an enthusiasm felt by many actors for the new opportunities offered outside the commercial sector. For those with less experience or exposure, such opportunities could also provide a valuable showcase for their talents. In this regard, theatres like Soho became a rich site of theatrical exchange, where practitioners at different stages of their careers could inspire and influence each other.<sup>24</sup>

Opening within six months of the Open Space's own launch, the Soho Theatre's first production also benefitted from serendipitous timing. In her book *Off Centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Roundhouse*, Jinnie Schiele quotes from an early publicity leaflet produced by the theatre's artistic director, Charles Marowitz:

Apart from main-bill performances, there will be regular lunchtime shows and midnight matinees. The theatre will feature mixed-media events, environmental-pieces, pop-concerts, poetry recitals and happenings. It will stage regular public discussions on urgent social, political and artistic topics. It will also be a centre for theatre-study and maintain a full-time actor's workshop. Its permanent company will explore new techniques in writing acting and direction, taking the sorts of risks that only an adventurous non-commercial company can take.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> At the Phoenix Theatre, Charing Cross Road.

<sup>23</sup> Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>24</sup> At the same time, such free movement between theatrical strata was an example of the 'mixed-market' economy that troubled critics like Sandy Craig. See 'Reflexes of the Future: The Beginnings of the Fringe', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Jinnie Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, 9.

Proud's production was one of the first of these auxiliary experiments, the trumpeting of which was intended to excite the critics as well as the Arts Council. In fact, as Shiele points out, during his time at the Open Space, Marowitz was often unable, or unwilling, to make good on his promises, prioritising his own evening productions at the expense of other activities.<sup>26</sup> Critics were to become increasingly frustrated by the gap between his words and actions. *One Autumn Evening* opened, however, when there was still plenty of interest and goodwill to go round and reviewers from the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Stage* were amongst those who visited the Soho Theatre's first production.

The notices, when they came, were mixed. Irving Wardle was ultimately critical of the play, but admitted there were some 'effective moments of shock and macabre comedy'. More scathing was Nicholas de Jongh's suggestion in the *Guardian* that the drama was 'chiefly remarkable for the evidence it provides of Dürrenmatt's declining abilities'.<sup>27</sup> The review in *The Stage*, on the other hand was effusive in its praise:

If the future presentations of Fred Proud's Soho Theatre are all up to the standard as [sic] the first production [...] then we are in for some stimulating evenings. The Dürrenmatt piece runs for forty minutes but those forty minutes are packed with wit, intelligence and literacy, and I'd say they were worth half the plays currently running in London. [...] Fred Proud has directed with skill and panache in a manner which perfectly brings forth the abundant qualities of the play.<sup>28</sup>

Such an endorsement would certainly have boosted the morale of the fledgling company.

## **Finding a Home**

The production of *One Autumn Evening* had provided Proud and Bargate with a degree of momentum, and a follow-up piece in *The Stage* indicated they were ready to capitalise on it. The article, published in December, implied that a venue

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<sup>26</sup> Jinnie Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> 'Review of *One Autumn Evening*', *Guardian*, November 11, 1968,

<sup>28</sup> Peter W. Burton, 'Soho Theatre Presents "One Autumn Evening"', *Stage*, 14 November 1968.

had been found and made further reference to the theatre's 'folk' ambitions. It also reveals that the idea of opening a dedicated lunchtime venue had not yet taken hold:

Set within existing club premises in Soho, the theatre intends to cater for Soho denizens, the fringe theatregoers in general, people who find the theatre an attractively alternative to rush hour travel, and those who want to enjoy a play and a meal in the same evening.<sup>29</sup>

These 'existing club premises' are almost certainly a reference to a space above Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, for which the company was attempting to raise funds. A second *Stage* article, published in the same December issue, announced that this fundraising was to take the form of a street theatre performance of a Mummers Play based on the legend of St George and the Dragon.<sup>30</sup> Proud recalls the experience as follows:

The street is where you go if you have nowhere else! But it was artfully done. Staged on Shaftesbury Avenue in the run-up to Christmas! The shoppers were inveigled through an archway into St. Anne's gardens (the side garden) around fifteen minutes each performance - then get a new audience in. I'm sure it did help (collection boxes) - money was in short supply anyway.<sup>31</sup>

In the end, however, the proposed rent at Ronnie Scott's was prohibitively high and it was not until the end of the following year that a replacement became available. 1969 was not completely without theatrical activity, however. In November, Proud directed a three-night run of Heathcote Williams' *The Local Stigmatic* at The Oval House theatre in Kennington, then under the administration of a supportive Peter Oliver. This play was given a full production in early 1970, and I consider it in more detail later in this chapter.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Soho Folk Theatre', *Stage*, 19 December 1968, 15. The article also contains a reference to the early involvement of Paul Thompson as a co-artistic director. Although Thompson was later to direct for the company, he did not, ultimately, take on this role.

<sup>30</sup> 'Miracle Play in Soho', *Stage*, 19 December 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 7 October 2013. In fact, in an article written for the *Soho Clarion* in 1998, Proud recalled that the experiment had been filmed by the BBC, netting the company a fee of £149.2s. (Fred Proud, 'The Soho Theatre: A Short History', *Soho Clarion*, Summer 1998, 3.)

By the end of 1969, Proud and Bargate had finally found a space - the basement of a Chinese restaurant on New Compton Street, known as Le Metro Club and primarily used for east-west fusion music nights. Fred had struck up good relations with the tenant, Raymond Mann, and an agreement was made to allow the Soho Theatre to rent the space over lunchtime. Proud remembers the price as being 'ridiculously cheap' but in a contemporaneous interview with Audrey Slaughter, Bargate admitted that the financial pressures were considerable: '[w]e daren't come to get ready for a performance too early because it costs a pound an hour to hire this place. It's all a last minute rush'.<sup>32</sup> And certainly, from the beginning, the new theatre was forced to operate on a shoe-string budget. When it came to set building, Fred remembers that raw materials were purloined from Westminster council skips. And to avoid further rental costs, rehearsals often took place in the Archer Street flat. In order to circumvent entertainment licensing restrictions, the new Soho Theatre was forced to operate as a 'club', but this at least meant it was able to generate a small amount of income 'up front'. Membership was initially set at £1.<sup>33</sup>

In her piece on the new theatre, Audrey Slaughter also gave a brief description of Le Metro Club itself:

The premises are small, you could almost call them intimate. For in the shadows I saw one of the actors changing his trousers. It's a chummy place, too. Three times I had to shift up on the settee I'd found to make room for a trio of young actors whose 'in' gossip had my ears flapping.<sup>34</sup>

Naturally, lunch could be provided on site. The venue was also only a few doors down from Better Books on Charing Cross Road, then in the process of changing hands. In January 1970, John Calder became the new owner and links were quickly established between the bookshop and theatre. In March, for example, a Soho Theatre information sheet referenced their joint presentation of two Japanese 'Noh' plays - *The Birds of Sorrow* and *The Damusk Drum* by Zeami Motokiyo - performed by students from the University of Birmingham. The publicity material also advertised poetry readings by Adrian Mitchell and Brian

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<sup>32</sup> Audrey Slaughter, 'Living Out a Dream on a Shoestring', *Evening News*, 27 January 1970.

<sup>33</sup> 'Theatre Clubs' *Time Out*, 10 January 1970, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Slaughter, 'Living Out a Dream'.

Pattern, to be accompanied by live jazz.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Proud and Bargate's creative ambitions were not so far removed from Marowitz's plans for the Open Space. Film and music nights, public discussions, the (brief) establishment of a permanent repertory company, experiments in 'environmental theatre' - all these and more were to be pursued to a greater or lesser extent in the Soho Theatre's first half-decade.

### **'Murder, Hippy Style'<sup>36</sup>**

The opening production at Le Metro Club was *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* (1969), a short play by the American author James Leo Herlihy. Herlihy was best known at the time for his novel *Midnight Cowboy* (1965), a commentary, in part, on the myth of the American dream. The novel had also been the source material for the X-rated and subsequently Oscar-winning film of the same name starring Dustin Hoffman and John Voight (1969).

The decision to christen the New Compton Street venue with a play by an American writer, especially one with counter-cultural associations, was a shrewd one.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned in my introduction, visits by the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre and La Mama had energised the emerging fringe and alternative movement and a number of expats, such as Ed Berman, Charles Marowitz and Jim Haynes were at the cutting edge of new theatrical activity. For his part, Fred Proud insists that there was '[n]o special significance to [the] American choice. [It] didn't matter where [the scripts] came from as long as they looked really promising'.<sup>38</sup> But even if he believed he was merely responding to the quality of the material, he was also channelling, and contributing to, the wider interest in American culture and society.

The discovery of the play had, in fact, been a direct consequence of the company's earlier production of *One Autumn Evening*. Irving Wardle

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<sup>35</sup> Publicity material for the Soho Theatre, March 1970, Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>36</sup> This phrase appears in the *Time Out* listing for *Bad Bad Jo-Jo*, 'Theatre Clubs', *Time Out*, 10 January 1970, 29.

<sup>37</sup> The publicity surrounding the adaptation was no doubt helpful to the new Soho Theatre from a marketing point of view and was referenced in many of the play's reviews. See, for example, 'Reality, Fantasy, Nightmare', *Stage*, 8 January 1970.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 18 March 2013.

recommended the former in his review of the latter, and Proud remembers contacting the critic for help in obtaining the script.<sup>39</sup> In many respects, the two plays are companion pieces. Both have three characters and a single set, and in each case the play's anti-hero is a renowned author. But whilst Dürrenmatt's grotesque creation gets away scot free, Herlihy's equivalent, Kayo Hathaway, faces a brutal and blackly-comic demise. Wardle's subsequent review offered a concise plot summary:

The play recounts the last day in the life of Kayo Hathaway, a hugely successful hack author who has made his pile from a series of kinky melodramas featuring a pair of folk-lore characters. Bad-bad Jo-jo [sic] and his Mother, respectively embodying the savagery and small-town innocence of American conservatism. Believing that 'something dreadful is going to happen here', Hathaway has decided to emigrate to Switzerland: but before leaving he gives a final interview to a young reporter - a tongue-tied admirer who writhes with pleasure under the great man's contempt, and then summons a friend up to the apartment to give their idol a going-away present. You can see what's coming. One dresses as Mother in a poke bonnet: the other, in an Uncle Sam topper with a chain around his neck, as the bestial Jo-jo; and together they carve Hathaway to pieces in the style that has won him so many fans.<sup>40</sup>

As already discussed, much of the American work identified, variously, as experimental, avant-garde or counter-cultural, was directed towards a critique of the 'spectacle' of modern life. Writing in the *Guardian*, Nicholas de Jongh was one of several critics who framed *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* in this way, interpreting it as a direct attack on the anesthetising qualities of contemporary society:

Mr Herlihy's writer (Hathaway), a fat pampered fairy in gold slippers, is both the symbol of artistic decadence and the American nightmare: his fame has been achieved by manufacturing satisfying trivia in which Jo-Jo and his mother always kill the Communists. He reflects his country's wish to be sated with comic-strip reassurances.<sup>41</sup>

Of particular significance here is the reference to the 'comic-strip'. This phrase was becoming part of a lexicon of terms used to describe emerging modes of theatrical presentation. Whilst the similar expression 'cartoon theatre'

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. And see Wardle, 'Play on Artist as Criminal'.

<sup>40</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Baleful Parable on Author's Last Day', *Times*, 31 December 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Good Good Soho', *Guardian*, 3 January 1970.

(sometimes used interchangeably) also had links with older forms of agitprop, the 'comic-strip' was particularly associated with the heroes v. villains storylines of Marvel comics. By co-opting elements of this aesthetic, companies such as The Living Theatre and La Mama aimed to isolate and disrupt the way in which American culture had internalised such narratives. That *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* played into this discourse is further evidenced by the following *New Statement* review:

James Leo Herlihy's *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* [is] a piece of social protest from the US, slyer, funnier, less shrill than most of its kind. [...] It takes no great experience of contemporary American drama to recognise Uncle Sam when one sees him, and it's no surprise to learn that the creature's he's spawned - the characters the novelist has created - are monsters too, crude, disloyal, violent. Inevitably, they destroy him. The Living Theatre recently went back to Mary Shelley in order to mount an attack on American Society. In effect, Herlihy does so too; but his handling of the Frankenstein myth is more entertaining and disciplined and scarcely less ferocious in impact.<sup>42</sup>

Not all the critical opinion viewed the play in such radical terms, either with regards to form or content. The critic Eric Shorter, for example, described it as 'a modest and somewhat outmoded anecdote'.<sup>43</sup> And even Irving Wardle's more positive assessment compared the play to Patrick Hamilton's *Rope* (1929), an enjoyable, but rather conventional melodrama.<sup>44</sup> Despite these more ambivalent assessments, however, *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* proved an eye-catching way to announce the new venue. In a letter to the Arts Council, dated 19 January 1970, Proud noted that the play 'did some marvellous houses at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week - it was almost a shame to take it off!'<sup>45</sup>

### **The Local Stigmatic**

*Bad Bad Jo-Jo* was followed by Heathcote Williams' *The Local Stigmatic*, first produced in 1966 at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre in a double-bill with Harold

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Court Order', 9 January 1970, *New Statesman*.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Shorter, 'Author Whose Characters Spring to Life', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 January 1970.

<sup>44</sup> Wardle, 'Baleful Parable'.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Fred Proud to Dennis Andrews, 19 January 1970, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, ACGB/40/20/4.

Pinter's *The Dwarves* (1966). The play also had two Sunday-night performances at the Royal Court later that year.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that the piece had already been performed was addressed directly, with a notice for *The Stage* announcing that, '[i]t is part of the policy of The Soho Theatre to revive rarely seen plays which still have strong topical relevance'.<sup>47</sup> The statement suggests, perhaps, that the theatre's artistic policy was evolving to fit the given circumstances. It should also be remembered, however, that Arts Council policy effectively militated against such ambitions since the New Drama guarantees scheme - one of the primary funding routes - was designed to incentivise the production of new material. And indeed, although Soho continued to present work that had been produced abroad - always marketed as 'British' premieres - revivals of recently written home-grown plays were rare.

*The Local Stigmatic* opens with two men, Graham and Ray, discussing the former's bad luck at the races. The picture Graham paints is a memorable one:

I was watching this dog, you see, and they walked it round and back again, and just as they were putting this dog into the trap, it stopped dead in its tracks, shivered, then it tightened up, then it lowered its little arse, then it had the mother and father of all dumps. It was standing at only fifty-two pounds as it was, but after that lot had shot through its glory hole, it was nearer forty...<sup>48</sup>

Later that day, bored and looking for trouble, the two head into town. En route, Graham attempts to intimidate a stranger in the street. The two then find a pub and Ray reads out a vacuous newspaper article about what celebrities would do if they only had an hour to live. Suddenly spotting a well-known actor, they follow him into the street, where, at Graham's instruction, Ray punches and kicks him to the ground. Finally, Graham produces a switchblade and delivers the chilling line, 'Let's have a bit of daylight through his cheek'. In a final scene, set some days later, Ray mentions the actor again and the two decide to prank-call him. This continued persecution brings little gratification, however, and the play ends as

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<sup>46</sup> See Heathcote Williams, *The Local Stigmatic*, in *Traverse Plays*, ed. Jim Haynes (London: Penguin 1966), 170.

<sup>47</sup> 'Lunchtime', *Stage*, 15 January 1970.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *The Local Stigmatic*, 171-2.

the conversation returns to the subject of the day's races.

Williams' writing is fast-paced and laced with cruel comedy. Of particular interest, however, is the way in which it demonstrates a movement away from his direct influences - both Osborne's social realism and Pinter's language of menace - and towards more contemporary pre-occupations. 1970 was the year in which the playwright's extraordinary *AC/DC* opened downstairs at the Royal Court. That work explored the potentially liberating effects of the 'schizophrenic' mindset in the face of an overwhelming barrage of technology and media-driven consumerism.<sup>49</sup> Such concerns are bubbling beneath the surface in *The Local Stigmatic*, notably in the disturbing early interaction with a stranger in the street.

In the scene in question, the stranger's arrival is announced by the stage direction: '[t]hird set of footsteps approaches. Undisciplined'.<sup>50</sup> Ray interprets this lack of 'discipline' as a sign of drunkenness. But when the man re-enters a few moments later, he berates his would-be assailants in a manner that is suggestive of both mental illness and a visionary perspicacity:

What you come up to me for? Why don't you... why don't you just walk about the streets with RAYS COMING OUT OF YOUR EYES, and RAYS coming out of the tips of your fingers... that's what you're at, and LEAVE ME ALONE... you DAMN WELL GO AWAY... DAMN WELL GO AWAY.<sup>51</sup>

The sense of psychic overload that pervades *AC/DC* is therefore present, at least in embryo, in *The Local Stigmatic*. Writing in his book *English Drama Since 1940* (2003), David Rabey also acknowledges the relationship between the two plays. Referring to one of the characters in *AC/DC*, he writes:

Perowne's recall of an attack upon a (real) media figure contextualises and develops the central event of Williams' earlier play *The Local Stigmatic* (1966) and locates Williams in a vein of counter-cultural iconoclasm

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<sup>49</sup> In an interview with Irving Wardle's which appeared in a printed edition of the text, Williams commented that 'I think the life style of the schizophrenic contains some useful recipes for dealing with the information overload that's also round the corner'. (Heathcote Williams, *AC/DC and The Local Stigmatic: Two Plays* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), x.)

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *The Local Stigmatic*, 176.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, *The Local Stigmatic*, 177.

[...] <sup>52</sup>

In this context, *The Local Stigmatic* can be considered an important transitional text, marking a moment where writers associated with the post-68 generation began to pull away from the strategies and preoccupations of their predecessors.

### **The Continuing Season**

In many respects, the Soho Theatre's first three productions (including *One Autumn Evening* at the Open Space) set the pattern for the rest of its 'in house' programme at Le Metro Club. This included further dispatches from the European avant-garde, in the form of a double bill of plays by the Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal (mentioned in Chapter One) and Peter Weiss's *The Tower*. American writers were represented again in a triple bill that included *The Old Jew* (1966) by Murray Schisgal and *Laughs* (1969), another shorter piece by James Leo Herlihy. The continuing season, however, was to be dominated by new work by emerging British writers. Malcolm Quantrill, David Selbourne, Simon Brett, John Grillo, and John Bowen were to follow Heathcote Williams in the line up.

Quantrill's piece, *A Crucial Fiction*, opened on 17 March 1970. The play follows the actions of two 'layabouts' who have set about plundering the house of their apparently deceased landlady. But just as they are about to open her coffin and steal the jewellery from the corpse, the old woman walks in, very much alive. She also reveals that she's been writing a novel about the pair. Infuriated by the deception, the two men finish her off for good.

In a review for the *Listener*, D.A.N. Jones commented on the relationship between this piece and Soho's previous output:

The Soho Theatre Club, since its recent opening, has presented four plays, each of which shows two men killing a victim in a ritual manner; in three of these, the victim is some kind of an artist.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> David Rabey, *English Drama since 1940* (London: Longman, 2003), 129-130.

<sup>53</sup> D.A.N. Jones, 'John Whiting', *Listener*, 26 March 1970, 428-429.

Whether any particular conclusions can be drawn from Jones' observation is less important than the fact that such apparent similarities allowed reviewers to cross-reference productions and start to develop opinions about the theatre's 'character'. I have already shown how Irving Wardle sought to draw parallels between *One Autumn Evening* and *Bad Bad Jo-Jo*. In response to the decision to follow up Herlihy's piece with *The Local Stigmatic*, Nicholas de Jongh also remarked that:

They [the Soho Theatre] have realised the advantages of presenting plays which contrast with or complement each other: so the first two plays both elaborated on a ritual killing, an English and American idea of mutilation and violence.<sup>54</sup>

Lunchtime theatres were frequently criticised for their seemingly scattergun approach to programming. It is significant, therefore, that at this early stage in the Soho's development, it was at least seen to be making strategic choices.

*A Crucial Fiction* was, however, less well received than the theatre's previous productions. B.A. Young criticised the expositional nature of the storytelling whilst J.W Lambert argued that it 'doesn't hang together at all'.<sup>55</sup> Writing in the *Telegraph*, Eric Shorter commented that the play 'sends a reminiscent shiver of "Rope" down the playgoer's spine'.<sup>56</sup> As already noted, *Rope* had also been referenced in a review of *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* and these comparisons draw attention to a certain 'conservatism' of form common to some of Soho's early productions. *One Autumn Evening* and *Bad Bad Jo-Jo* were well-constructed stage thrillers, set in single locations and written for small casts. Both Quantrill's piece and Simon Brett's *Mrs Gladys Moxton* (1970) - a comic study of a radio DJ who drifts into private reverie as his songs are played - were similarly contained.

The final play of the season, John Bowen's *The Waiting Room* (1970), also belonged to a strand of lunchtime output that privileged robust storytelling above formal innovation. The play opens with the meeting of a man and a woman in a dirty waiting room. We don't know what they're waiting for, but

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<sup>54</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Lunchtime Successes', *Guardian*, 27 July 1970.

<sup>55</sup> B.A. Young, 'A Crucial Fiction', *Financial Times*, details. J.W. Lambert, 'Review of *A Crucial Affair* [sic]', *Sunday Times*, 22 March 1970.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Shorter, 'Detailed Feeling for Sadness', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 March 1970.

inexorably the clock ticks past their appointment times. Harriet, full of nervous energy, is sure she recognises Paul from somewhere. At last the penny drops: Paul is the lover for whom her husband has left her. Throughout, the man they are discussing is referred to in the past tense, and when they are finally summoned, jointly, for their appointment, we realise where they are: a morgue.<sup>57</sup>

Bowen's play proved to be one of the most successful of the season, and its run was extended until the end of July. Its 'conventional' qualities, however, were acknowledged in an article by Irving Wardle which also drew attention to wider shifts in the theatrical landscape:

John Bowen's neat little play [...] is a good index of the extent to which our dramatic expectations have changed over the past ten years. [...] [W]e are accustomed to playwrights who use the stage as an empty canvas where every stroke is an act of exploration. [...] So it is a shock to discover that the playwright knows where he is going all along.<sup>58</sup>

Two other British plays in the Soho's opening season certainly belonged to this more 'exploratory' strand. David Selbourne's *Samson*, directed by Raymond Ross, was a dense and allegorical work.<sup>59</sup> Measured out in short, episodic scenes, it tells the story of a young man's passage into adulthood. On the page, at least, its wider resonances are somewhat obscure and several contemporary reviews commented on its literary, rather than dramatic, qualities.<sup>60</sup> John Grillo's *Number Three* was, however, to have more immediate impact.

Grillo's play is a black comic portrait of institutional brutality in which a psychiatric nurse tries to get his patient, Three, into bed for the night. The nurse attempts various tactics, drawn from Dr Rommell's Book of Nursing Ethics, as Three dances increasingly inventive rings around him. At last the nurse resorts to a tried and tested method: the truncheon.

Throughout the piece, both characters are revealed as fantasists. Three perceives himself as 'Churchillian. Irremoveable' even as he lies, apparently

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<sup>57</sup> John Bowen, *The Waiting Room* (New York: Samuel French Inc. 1971).

<sup>58</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Double Surprise', *Financial Times*, 8 July 1970.

<sup>59</sup> This was one of three 'in house' productions not directed by Proud. The others included the triple bill of short plays and John Bowen's *The Waiting Room* which was directed by the playwright.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Douglas Blake, 'Thought Provoking', *Stage*, 11 June 1970.

unconscious, on the floor.<sup>61</sup> For his part, the psychopathic nurse is motivated by an absurd ‘poetry of home’: ‘[a] peck on the cheek when I go through the door. Slippers by the coal fire. Pipe on the mantelpiece. Dinner piping hot in the oven. Plenty of spuds. Television in the corner. Kids doing homework. Wife knitting socks’.<sup>62</sup> There are also moments when the audience is implicated in a kind of commentary on the action, such as when Three remarks:

I know some people get excited by four-letter words such as piss, cock, fuck, arse or cunt. I’m a normal man myself and never go to the theatre because I enjoy watching television on my nights off but I understand that whenever a four letter word is uttered in the theatre, one section of the audience stands up and cheers, while another section walks out very red in the face. In the lunatic asylum you get these words thrown at you all the time as if they were bombs.<sup>63</sup>

Reflecting on the play in his 1975 monograph *Disrupting the Spectacle*, Peter Ansorge wrote that it represented ‘a near perfect example of the kind of cartoon style of characterisation which has become so prevalent in the lunchtime movement’. He defines this style as follows:

The dialogue, action and conflict work in a very basic Punch and Judy manner. We never learn about the characters in any precise way, there is no interest in expressing any psychological or human depth. Rather the characters engage in a very different kind of struggle, a comic summary of all nurse-patient relationships.<sup>64</sup>

In his essay, ‘Reflexes of the Future’, Sandy Craig also engages with the ‘cartoon’ style. He begins by contrasting it with naturalism which, he suggests, operates like a Constable painting, ‘forcing on its audience [...] an attitude of reflection and contemplation’. He continues:

On the other hand, cartoons emphasize the movement contained within them and the breaks between them. Similarly, alternative theatre emphasizes action and the breaks, or commentary, between the action [...] In the best examples of alternative theatre these elements, in their

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<sup>61</sup> John Grillo, *Number Three*, in *New Short Plays 3* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 67.

<sup>62</sup> Grillo, *Number Three*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Grillo, *Number Three*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman, 1975), 71.

variety and their continuous self-reflective commentary, constitute a much more complex yet significantly less mysterious form of communication than that of naturalism.<sup>65</sup>

For Craig, the formal features of the cartoon style are considered powerful tools for those dedicated to ‘a theatre which dismantles the world in order to demonstrate the possibility of creative change’.<sup>66</sup> Given the strong link between the material conditions of the lunchtime slot, and the dynamic, visual and abbreviated nature of the cartoon, or comic-strip, style, it is somewhat surprising that, as demonstrated in Chapter One, both Craig and Ansorge sought to minimise lunchtime theatre’s contribution to the new theatrical landscape.

### **Fringe Networks**

As well as the ‘in-house’ work discussed above, the Soho Theatre’s New Compton Street premises also provided a valuable platform for work by outside companies. This included a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) from the Exeter-based Northcott Theatre, the Pip Simmons Group’s adaptation of Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale* (1970), a revue by the comedy troupe the Low Moan Spectacular, and a New Traverse production of Euripides’ *Electra* (c410 BCE). This last production was billed as Soho’s second evening presentation. A *Time Out* notice also announced that, ‘[t]he Soho are trying to expand into evening performances’.<sup>67</sup> Here, then, is further evidence of Soho’s initially ambivalent attitude towards the lunchtime slot. As noted in Chapter One, however, the Arts Council were unwilling to support such expansion. It is

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<sup>65</sup> Sandy Craig, ‘Reflexes of the Future: The Beginnings of the Fringe’, in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), 28. Craig also references John Grillo in this connection, although he expresses some anxieties about the more violent and sadistic elements of the writer’s work (29).

<sup>66</sup> Craig, ‘Reflexes of the Future’, 29.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Club and Fringe Theatre’, *Time Out*, 4 April 1970, 32.

arguable, indeed, that the theatre's consolidation as a lunchtime venue was shaped, to some degree, by such resistance.<sup>68</sup>

In April 1970, Soho also hosted the New York Workshop's production of Sam Shepard's vividly surreal *Red Cross* (1966).<sup>69</sup> This play is set in a cabin in the woods and begins with a young woman, Carol, complaining to her boyfriend about a problem with her glasses. Jumping onto the bed, she then describes a strange fantasy that involves her head exploding as she careens down a ski-run. Carol exits and Jim is left alone. He starts to scratch himself and, when a few moments later, a maid arrives to clean the cabin, he explains that he has pubic lice. He also persuades her to lie on the bed and practise her swimming technique. The maid is quickly exhausted, and indulges in her own fantasy of drowning. She leaves and Carol returns, distressed at having discovered her own infestation of lice. The play ends as she sees blood dripping down Jim's face - implying, possibly, that it is *his* head that is about to explode.

Although the play left some reviewers perplexed, others, like B.A Young, found themselves strangely compelled. Irving Wardle, too, commented that:

It makes no kind of conceptual sense, and you feel it was damned easy to write. Still, unlike most easy writing, it plays extremely well partly through a vigorous breeding of related images, and partly through the tirades in which the actors shed character to follow some fantasy to a level of pure impersonal sensation.

Shepard himself has suggested that such early pieces can only really be understood in the context of their first performances:

Each play had a distinctive life of its own and seemed totally self-contained within its one-act structure. Partly, this had to do with the immediacy of the off-off-Broadway situation. Anybody could get his or her piece performed, almost any time. If there wasn't a slot open at one of the cafe theatres or in the churches, you could at least pool together some actors and have a reading. [...] Experimentation was the lifeblood not only of the playwright but also of actors, directors, and even of producers and critics. [...] The only impulse was to make living, vital, theatre which spoke to the moment. And the moment, back then in the mid-sixties, was

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<sup>68</sup> Around the same time, Fred Proud had also noted, in a funding application to the Arts Council, that '[p]ulling in our belts a little, we have to sit on early evening theatre for a while'. (Letter from Fred Proud to Dennis Andrews, 13 April 1970, ACGB/40/20/1.)

<sup>69</sup> The play actually opened on 31 March 1970.

seething with a radical shift of the American psyche. Today I don't see how these plays make any real sense unless they're put into perspective with that time.<sup>70</sup>

Although Shepard is referring to the American experience, and from a writer's point of view, the extract resonates with Fred Proud's insistence that programming decisions at the early Soho Theatre were always driven by the quality of the material and the desire to test the potential of each individual play.<sup>71</sup> As I suggested in my previous chapter, theatre histories have tended to organise fringe and alternative theatre activity either into defined strands, or according to fixed political/artistic objectives. Contemporary commentary, too, often placed a high value on 'coherence'. Shepard's comments, however, point the way to an alternative description of contemporary theatrical activity, motivated by 'moment to moment' experimentation - a restless and responsive artistic impulse.

Following the final production at Le Metro Club in July 1970, the Soho Theatre arranged a programme of lunchtime work for the rapidly expanding Edinburgh Festival. Three plays were chosen from the year's repertoire: Heathcote Williams' *The Local Stigmatic*, Fernando Arrabal's *The Solemn Communion*, and John Grillo's *Number Three*. Although these were amongst the most critically successful productions, they also were also examples of the theatre's more 'experimental' output. As had been the case in London, *The Solemn Communion* was to provoke a range of reactions, with the *Scottish Daily Express* titling its review, 'Lunch Time Fare Baffles the Audience'.<sup>72</sup> *The Scotsman*, however, was fulsome in its praise both for this production and the revival of *Number Three*:

[*The Solemn Communion*] is an astonishing piece of theatre. The Soho Theatre [...] have made a stunning contribution to the Fringe. At last the Fringe has come alive as the experimental showcase of shocking (in the deepest sense) work it was meant to be - and has failed to be too often. They prove this again in the longer 'Number Three,' John Grillo's black comedy about the relationship between a lunatic and his nurse. This, too,

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<sup>70</sup> Sam Shepard, Introduction to *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 1996), ix-x.

<sup>71</sup> Fred Proud, in informal conversation with the author, 17 March 2014.

<sup>72</sup> 'Lunch Time Fare Baffles the Audience', *Scottish Daily Express*, 25 August 1970.

is quite outstandingly performed and produced with a wealth of comic, madcap invention and brilliant George Innes as the lunatic.<sup>73</sup>

Soho shared their Cranston Street venue with the Low Moan Spectacular and the Pip Simmons Group, whose production of *Superman* was, itself, to become one of the sensations of the festival. Although the relationship between the Pip Simmons Group and the Soho Theatre was only loose, their individual successes would have helped consolidate the impression that both were in the vanguard of new theatrical activity.<sup>74</sup>

Returning to London in September, the Soho Theatre was homeless again, although negotiations were in progress for the use of a much larger venue in Covent Garden. 43 King Street had previously been the home of a music club called Middle Earth. Its redevelopment was now being sponsored by the entrepreneur Anthony Blond who envisioned a huge arts complex containing shops and restaurants as well as spaces for theatre and concerts.<sup>75</sup> Rather than waiting whilst these plans were being advanced, Proud and Bargate prepared to mount the Soho Theatre's first touring production. In fact, Proud remembers that the project was undertaken at the encouragement of the Arts Council, which was seeking to promote the growing national network of small-scale studio spaces.<sup>76</sup>

The play chosen for the experiment was a theatrical version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Sumerian narrative poem dating from 3500 BC. The piece's full title gives a brief idea of its content: *Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, his Friendship with Enkidu, the Death of Enkidu and the King's search for Everlasting Life*.<sup>77</sup> Proud was responsible for the adaptation and, despite the scope of the storytelling, the cast was pared down to five. Designer John Hallé was also called upon to create a simple, mobile set. Proud describes it as follows:

The set was suspended from a bar overhead, upstage, and was simply one very large piece dropping down in the general direction the forestage.

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<sup>73</sup> David Gow, 'Arrabal's Twin Obsessions Provide Stunning Theatre', *Scotsman*, 27 August 1970.

<sup>74</sup> Soho's Edinburgh company also put together a comedy revue, the title of which, *Oh Bangkok!*, was a mischievous reference to Kenneth Tynan's extravaganza *Oh, Calcutta!* See Douglas Blake, 'Oh Bangkok!' *Stage*, 17 September 1970.

<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Pearson, 'Blond Goes Underground', *Sunday Times*, 24 January 1971.

<sup>76</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 26 March 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Peter W. Burton, 'Vanity of Man', *Stage*, 10 December 1970.

This created an effective acting surface area underfoot [and] a kind of simulated backdrop with no horizon.<sup>78</sup>

The first performances of *Gilgamesh* were at the Oval House at the end of November. From there, the production travelled to the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh as well as campus studios at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, playing a handful of nights at each. Proud remembers that the company's morale was high and the play itself warmly received:

I think it was unusual enough for people to be rather held by it. Well its not often you see ancient Sumerians brought to life - one was inclined to give them - the very English cast - the benefit of the doubt and accept what they had to tell you. And when it came to the alternative version of Noah which closes the show, and which incidentally pre-dates Genesis by a thousand years or more, you could hear a clay tablet drop.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, Proud had not been inspired by this first, short, experience of touring. In email correspondence, he commented to me that, as a Londoner, he 'didn't see [why] the need to reach a new audience in Edinburgh [was] any more meaningful or important than to reach a new audience here'.<sup>80</sup> The remarks provide a further illustration of the way in which Arts Council policy often clashed with the instincts and ambitions of the practitioners they were supporting.<sup>81</sup>

## **Radio Re-imagined**

Finally in this chapter, I turn my attention back to the third production at Le Metro Club, a staged version of *The Tower*, an expressionist radio drama by Peter Weiss. As well as a copy of the original play (in a translation by Michael

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<sup>78</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 26 March 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> It should be acknowledged that I have found no corroborating evidence for the direct influence of the Arts Council's involvement in the decision to tour *Gilgamesh*.

Hamburger), I have also had access to Proud's theatrical adaptation.<sup>82</sup> This document, I will suggest, provides evidence of a deep engagement with the dramaturgical properties of different dramatic media, as well as the specific demands of the place of performance.

Weiss's story follows the willing return of a young man, Pablo, to a macabre circus (the tower of the title) from where he has once previously escaped. Arriving late at night, a decrepit director and manageress, who appear not to recognise him, hear his pleas for re-employment as an escapologist. They offer him a bed, but as the night wears on, he is tormented by nightmares and visions at the hands of a malevolent conjuror. In the morning, the various artistes begin rehearsing for the evening's show. Pablo is taunted by Carlo, 'a kind of brother', and seduced by a female lion tamer.<sup>83</sup> And, as the action continues to move strangely through time and memory, it becomes unclear whether he has ever, really, left the tower at all. Finally, it is time for the performance. Pablo is bound with rope and struggles to free himself as the other acts are presented before a baying crowd. In the last, desperate moments, Pablo finds 'freedom' through a kind of transcendence, banishing the tower from his mind, even as it exerts its fatal grip.

In advance of the broadcast version in 1964, the *Radio Times* printed the following billing from the Head of BBC radio drama, Martin Esslin:

It is a play which is perfectly adapted to the radio medium. It takes place within the mind of a young man struggling to free himself from the domination of his family background with its respectability, its rigid rules, its possessiveness. Everything that happens in the play happens within the hero's mind at different levels: the present and the past, reality and grotesquely distorted fantasy constantly intermingle.<sup>84</sup>

A private memo from Esslin also expressed his delight at the finished product. In particular, he offered glowing praise for Delia Derbyshire and John Harrison at the BBC's radiophonic workshop, acknowledging that, 'I regard their

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<sup>82</sup> Peter Weiss, *The Tower*, trans. Michael Hamburger, *Quarterly Review of Literature* 14, nos. 3 and 4 (1965): 223-250. The adaption belongs to Fred Proud's private collection. I have not been able to find a recording of the original broadcast.

<sup>83</sup> Weiss, *The Tower*, 223.

<sup>84</sup> Martin Esslin, 'Preview for *The Tower*', *Radio Times*, 25 June 1964, 55.

contribution to this production as being at least of equal importance to that of the producer himself'.<sup>85</sup>

Esslin's enthusiasm for the piece, and the realisation of its aural qualities, can be best understood in the context of his influential essay, 'The Mind as a Stage', published in an issue of *Theatre Quarterly* in 1971.<sup>86</sup> Here, he set out what he took to be the essential aesthetic qualities of the radio form. Crucially, he argued that there was a powerful relationship between the essentially solitary act of listening to the radio and the subjective experience of dreaming. In both cases, 'the mind is turned inwards to a field of internal vision'. 'No wonder,' he continued, 'that dreams - and daydreams - are the favourite subjects of the radio play proper and the internal monologue its ideal form'.

When the broadcast aired, *The Listener* expressed a more ambivalent response:

The Tower [...] was one of those plays which are often said to be ideal for radio, being wholly internal and psychological-symbolical. There is something only half-true here. When a play is freed from the ordinary rules of physical theatre it needs to make some strict ones of its own, or liquefaction sets in. Where anything can happen, and any given thing can at the author's convenience turn into any other, nothing takes us by surprise. I thought *The Tower* suffered a bit in this way.<sup>87</sup>

However, even if Esslin's claim that *The Tower* was 'perfectly adapted to the radio form' is open to challenge, Proud's choice to co-opt it for the New Compton Street basement was a bold one. It is perhaps significant that he had not, in fact, heard the original broadcast and had come to the play in its printed form. He was, nevertheless, immediately struck by its dreamlike qualities and worked hard to find a new theatrical language with which to express them.<sup>88</sup>

What emerges clearly from Proud's blueprint for theatrical performance is his desire to add a powerful visual dimension to the storytelling. In particular, lighting effects were used (together with sound) to signal the transitions between different psychological/metaphysical states. A 'cold blue light', for example,

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Martin Esslin to Desmond Briscoe, 30 June 1964, cited in *Delia Derbyshire: An Audiological Chronology* website, accessed 5 May 2014, <http://delia-derbyshire.net/#TheTower>.

<sup>86</sup> Martin Esslin, 'The Mind as a Stage', *Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1971): 5-11.

<sup>87</sup> 'Review of *The Tower*', *Listener*, 3 July 1970.

<sup>88</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 21 September 2013.

accompanies the night-time arrival of the ethereal conjuror. Pablo's final moment of transcendence - whether that be into death, escape or madness - is also dramatically marked by the sudden raising of the house lights.<sup>89</sup>

In the original radio version, the tower's forbidding presence is initially described through sound. Pablo's knocks are met with a resonant echo, the rattling of keys and the grind of the key in the lock.<sup>90</sup> Working in sympathy with the limitations of the New Compton Street basement, Proud sought, instead, to capture the tower's cavernous qualities through the use of light and staging levels: '[t]he Manageress descends stairs with lighted lamp'.<sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere, Proud also sought creative solutions to the question of how to replace the suggestive and shifting 'images' of the radio version with more 'concrete' stage pictures. At one moment in the story, for example, a midget dances with rags of cloth belonging to Pablo's lost love, Nelly. With only the imagination to construct this scene, the cloth itself becomes a spectral, fleeting presence. Here, perhaps, is an example of radio's ability to evoke the kind of abstract images that, in David Wade's phrase, 'risk and usually receive reduction by sight'.<sup>92</sup> Proud's response, in production, was to represent the midget by means of a ventriloquist's dummy, controlled by the ringmaster. Whilst the image of the dance is therefore substantially changed, something of the macabre, unreal quality is preserved. Commenting on this decision retrospectively, Proud recalls that:

I have always been interested in such theatrical alternatives - puppets, machines, miniatures, or if you like dream-like devices. [...] anti-realistic. Maybe that's what we should call these things? The Terry Gilliam factor but for small live spaces!<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Weiss, *The Tower*, adapt. Fred Proud, trans. Michael Hamburger, unpublished manuscript, Fred Proud's private collection, unpaginated.

<sup>90</sup> Weiss, *The Tower*, 224.

<sup>91</sup> Weiss, *The Tower*, adapt. Fred Proud. In a review of the production, Michael Billington also complimented the production's 'intelligent use of spotlighting'. (Michael Billington, 'Escapism', *Times*, 12 February 1970.) Fred Proud himself recalls that 'I only remember there was a lot of scope for circus-like lighting effects even though all we had at the time were a handful of spots and a Junior Eight dimmer board'. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 21 September 1970.)

<sup>92</sup> David Wade, 'British Radio Drama Since 1960', in *British Radio Drama*, ed. John Drakakis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 231.

<sup>93</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 21 September 2013.

With respect to *The Tower*, challenges presented by the source material pushed Proud into deeper experimentation with such ‘anti-realistic’ devices.

Throughout his adaptation, Proud also makes a number of textual interventions that show a keen sensitivity to the perceived demands of a viewing, rather than a listening, audience. A brief consideration of two scenes will demonstrate the point. In the first, Pablo is visited in the middle of the night by the conjuror and then by the manageress and director. When, in the radio version, the conjuror speaks for the first time, his voice is described as ‘still distant’. At a later moment his words ‘die away in a resounding echo’ before returning with a ‘spell-binding’ and ‘hypnotic’ tone. When he finally departs, it is to the sound of ticking clocks, the director’s snoring and mattresses creaking. More strikingly, another sound cue reads, ‘everything drowned as though in the swell of a great wave’. And yet, whilst all these effects contribute to the impression of ‘dream’, there remains something indeterminate about the encounter. The question of whether or not the conjuror and Pablo have interacted directly with one another remains unresolved.

For the theatrical adaptation, as noted above, Proud specifies the use of lighting and sound to announce the appearance of the conjuror - here re-imagined as a ringmaster:

The lighting suggests the fantastic perhaps with cold blue light. The ringmaster is seen standing stock still upstage. He speaks into microphone softly.

Crucially, stage directions then instruct that:

Over the next section Pablo though soundly asleep with his eyes tightly shut talks and moves like a somnambulist. He has a drowsy manner of talking with a sudden overemphasis on certain words that push forcefully from his unconscious.

Here, therefore, a much clearer division is drawn between states of waking and sleeping. Similarly, whereas, in the radio version, a second night-time visitation from the manageress and director also maintains a suspended quality between

illusion and reality, in the text of the stage version it is introduced decisively as a '2<sup>nd</sup> nightmare sequence'.<sup>94</sup>

It is likely that Proud's decision to reduce the impression of slipping in and out of consciousness was made in the service of narrative simplicity. For, whilst radio allows and encourages a fluidity of perception, a viewing audience might struggle with such ambiguity. In other words, it is easier to imagine a state halfway between waking and dreaming than to see and make sense of it on stage. Certainly, this is the argument put forward in 'The Mind as a Stage', summarised by Frances Gray and Janet Bray as advancing radio's 'existential flexibility' over and above the 'solidity of the playhouse'.<sup>95</sup> Of critical importance here, however, is the detailed way in which Proud worked through the dramaturgical implications of this choice.

The next day, Pablo joins the rest of the circus troupe for breakfast. In the radio version, the manageress berates him as follows:

Why, we did everything we could for you. [...] We looked after you as though you were our own children. And what was the good of all the work! - Not a word of thanks - O how futile it all is! - Night after night I lay sleepless, wondering what I could do for you. And never a word of thanks. Only complaints. Where did I go wrong, then?'<sup>96</sup>

In the stage version, however, this speech (and Pablo's response) have been cut and reinserted into the dream-like encounters of the previous night. This alteration is necessary since the speech demonstrates that the manageress knows Pablo's true identity. This is potentially puzzling since she appeared not to on his arrival, and her night-time visit has been clearly established, in Proud's adaptation, as Pablo's subjective nightmare. For her to recognise him now would be unmotivated and potentially disorientating (in an unhelpful way) for the audience. The problem does not arise in the more 'existentially flexible' radio version where the states of waking and dreaming are in constant flux.

In discussing such changes, I am not necessarily suggesting that all Proud's choices were successful. Certainly, the critical reaction was mixed,

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<sup>94</sup> Weiss, *The Tower*, adapt. Fred Proud.

<sup>95</sup> Frances Gray and Janet Bray, 'The Mind as a Theatre: Radio Drama since 1971', *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1985): 293.

<sup>96</sup> Weiss, *The Tower*, 239-240.

although the more negative responses tended to point to the ambiguous nature of Weiss's symbolism. Michael Billington argued, for example, that 'imprecision is not the same as universality, and because the tower can stand for almost anything it comes in the end to stand for almost nothing'.<sup>97</sup> Referring to the various performers, Harold Hobson also commented in the *Sunday Times* that, '[t]hey are all symbols of something, but of what I have not the slightest idea'.<sup>98</sup>

Rather than seeking to analyse the critical response to the play/production, however, my intention here is to show how an engagement with the process of adaptation prompted bold directorial choices. As I discussed in Chapter One, there was a widely-expressed anxiety about the adaptation of TV and radio scripts for use by the lunchtime theatres. And there will, of course, have been more and less successful examples of the practice. It is important, nevertheless, to question the implication, detectable in much of this criticism, that the presentation of work originally intended for other media was, in some sense, a path of least resistance - a convenient but artistically compromised way to plug programming holes. On the contrary, the rigorous examination of one form amidst the material conditions of another could release a considerable amount of creative energy. Specifically, in the case of *The Tower*, the need to express shifting realities and states of fractured consciousness encouraged Proud to experiment with light, augmented sound, puppetry and costume.<sup>99</sup> The extrapolation from such observations, which in the present study must take the form of a provocation rather than a conclusion, is that the intermingling of dramatic media could be a dynamic engine for theatrical innovation.

## Conclusions

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<sup>97</sup> Michael Billington, 'Escapism'.

<sup>98</sup> Harold Hobson, 'Shots in the dark', *Sunday Times*, 15 February 1970. Proud was well aware of the shifting significance of the archetypal roles (conjuror, lion-tamer, etc.) in the original translation, as a programme note makes clear: 'The symbols are deliberately ambivalent. I have tried to keep them so in production'. (Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.)

<sup>99</sup> A review in the *Quarterly Theatre Review*, for example, also referred to '[t]he use of whitened faces for the Clown and Illusionist'. (Randal Craig, 'Fringe', *Quarterly Theatre Review*, no. 96 (1970): 31.)

When Fred Proud and Verity Bargate established the Soho Theatre in 1968, they brought different but complementary skills to the undertaking. In Proud's case, the acting training at Rose Bruford Drama School had taught him the value of discipline, patience and attention to detail. Although, as he himself recalls, his artistic abilities were rather overlooked at the time, these were soon recognised on the professional circuit where he was marked out as a director of subtlety and imagination. Proud's co-founder, Verity Bargate, had no previous theatrical background. However, her experience in PR, combined with a natural charisma, made her a formidable promoter of the theatre. Indeed, a common refrain amongst the people I have interviewed was that Bargate had remarkable powers of persuasion. In his entry on her for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Irving Wardle remarked that 'one reason for the theatre's success was her ability to win over the press with intelligence, good humour, and excellent home-cooked food'.<sup>100</sup> The couple was also resourceful enough to cope with the exigencies of life on the 'fringe'. Sets were built from materials found in skips and rehearsals were held in the couple's Archer Street flat. The expertise and commitment of the theatre's founders, in other words, were key factors in the Soho Theatre's early achievements.

With respect to its inaugural production, *One Autumn Evening*, the company benefitted from the general upsurge of interest in new theatrical activity, as well as more specific excitement surrounding the establishment of Charles Marowitz's Open Space theatre on Tottenham Court Road. Then, once Soho had moved into Le Metro Club, the prospects for continued critical engagement were enhanced by its own central London location. The casting of well-known actors, often simultaneously performing in the West End, offered further encouragement for reviewers and audiences. An apparent, though perhaps misleading, sense of deliberate design in the theatre's early programming also helped it to gain critical traction.

From its base on New Compton Street, Soho quickly established a significant presence on the wider fringe and alternative theatre landscape. Proud and Bargate's willingness to host visiting companies positioned the theatre within a mutually supportive infrastructure. Many of its productions also spoke

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<sup>100</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Verity Bargate', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* website, accessed 19 December 2013, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/60/101060400/>.

directly to contemporary debates within the theatrical 'avant-garde'. This was particularly true with respect to a continuing critique of the 'society of the spectacle' and the questioning of naturalism as a theatrical strategy. Productions such as the stage adaption of Peter Weiss' *The Tower* also represented a bold interrogation of theatrical form and tested the limits of the place of performance. This practice of adapting radio and television scripts was often given dismissive treatment by critics and became a growing symbol of the perceived dearth of material on the lunchtime scene. And yet, as I will demonstrate, such experiments continued to stimulate creative innovation.

In Chapter One, I discussed the fact that the lunchtime theatres were frequently criticised for their lack of clearly defined artistic policy. I argued there that such criticism failed to take into account other key determinants, such as Arts Council funding criteria. In this chapter, I have also raised the possibility that contemporary commentators, as well as later historians, have placed too much explanatory value on 'coherence'. Proud continues to insist that his choice of plays was made on a case-by-case basis, and, with reference to comments made by Sam Shepard about the Off-Off Broadway scene, I have suggested that fringe and alternative theatre activity might be partly re-imagined in terms of contingency, responsiveness and spontaneity. This is a theme I take forward into my next chapter, which examines the Soho Theatre's time at its second London venue, the King's Head pub in Islington.

## Chapter Three

### The Soho Theatre at The King's Head

The Soho Theatre's ten-month residency at the King's Head pub in Islington began in February 1971. Bolstered by the good critical notices it had received during its time at Le Metro Club, the theatre announced its return with an arresting season of three plays headlined by Michael McClure's *Spider Rabbit* (1969), a surreal and gleefully grotesque black comedy. Although McClure's piece was followed with works by Bertolt Brecht and Joe Orton - more familiar names to the theatre-going public - both represented significant innovations. Brecht's *The Informer* (1938) - a short extract from his full-length play *Fears and Miseries of the Third Reich* (1938) - was brought strikingly up to date. The Orton piece - an adaptation of the writer's television drama *The Good and Faithful Servant* (1967) - was given a multi-stage design that brought the audience into the centre of the action.

By the time it had left the King's Head in December, the theatre had mounted a total of fifteen 'in-house' productions, seven of which were directed by Fred Proud.<sup>1</sup> Seven guest directors were also involved in the unfolding season and it is significant to note that each approached Soho with plays already in mind.<sup>2</sup> Proud no doubt exercised some selection at the level of personnel. However, his willingness to entrust the choice of productions to others suggests there was little desire to impose a rigid house style. This period did, nevertheless, see the theatre's operations cohering around certain aims and ambitions, not least a more decisive commitment to the lunchtime slot itself. Programme notes for the opening production of *Spider Rabbit*, for example, announced that, '[t]his try out season is a deliberate attempt to find a new audience for lunchtime theatre'.<sup>3</sup>

I begin this chapter by examining the impact of the new venue on the Soho Theatre's developing identity. I then select a number of productions, including those mentioned above, in order to pursue two related and overlapping lines of arguments. In the first instance, I set out to explain how the search to find

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<sup>1</sup> There had also been a season at the Edinburgh Festival.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 December 2013. See Appendix A for full listing of productions.

<sup>3</sup> Programme notes for *Spider Rabbit*, Fred Proud's private collection.

material suitable for the lunchtime slot was helping to redefine the boundaries of the 'one-act' play. By experimenting with the use of extracts from longer work, as well as staging adaptations from other media, the unfolding season presented successive challenges to received notions of dramatic unity, theatrical authorship and the intrinsic properties of artistic forms. Secondly, I aim to show how the varied attempts to tailor this material to the demands of the place of performance lead to further creative discoveries.

As suggested in my general introduction, the fact that there have been no previous studies of the Soho Theatre means that many important productions have, themselves, received little or no critical attention. In this context, I close the chapter with an examination of the most formally innovative play of the period, Chris Wilkinson's *Dynamo* (1971). This is a significant 'rediscovery', particularly for the contribution it makes to debates around gender and theatrical metaphor. By engaging with the ideas of Richard Schechner and Charles Marowitz, I also argue that the play's production represented a bold attempt to create a total theatrical 'environment', blurring traditional distinctions between actor and audience and testing the boundaries of the theatrical space.

### **Soho in Exile**

Exile, often the fate of lunch-time groups, has now befallen the Soho Theatre which has withdrawn to the King's Head (115 Upper Street, Islington) while planning a future return to the old site of Middle Earth in Covent Garden.

Irving Wardle, 1971.<sup>4</sup>

Irving Wardle's use of the term 'exile' to refer to the Soho Theatre's new residency was somewhat exaggerated, especially since, as he himself acknowledged, negotiations were already in progress for a 'return' to Covent Garden. The description is a reminder, however, of the precarious nature of many lunchtime theatres' existence. Wardle may have been referencing, for example, attempts made the previous year to evict Ed Berman's Ambiance Lunchtime

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<sup>4</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *Spider Rabbit*', *Times*, 17 February 1971.

Theatre Club from its base at the Green Banana restaurant in Bayswater.<sup>5</sup> His comments also hint at lunchtime theatre's contested status even within the fringe and alternative theatre ecology. Only a few month later, Charles Marowitz was to launch his broadside against 'lunchtime cellars', and a response in *Plays and Players* began with the simple question '[i]s Lunchtime Theatre good or bad?'<sup>6</sup> Finally, of course, it can be noted that Proud and Bargate had been displaced from the area of London which had given their theatre its name, and to which much of their earlier publicity material had been specifically addressed.

Soho's place of 'exile' had only been a theatrical venue for six months. The previous summer, the Islington pub had been secured by the American director Dan Crawford following an opportunistic reconnaissance mission to the area. In a piece for *The Times*, written in 1995, Benedict Nightingale gave the following account of its discovery:

By 1970 Crawford had concluded a) that he wanted his own theatre in London but could never make a living from it, and b) that one way of keeping alive was to run a pub. His genius was to put these propositions together, though not without difficulty. The breweries told him he was mad and the estate agents sent him nothing suitable. So, hearing that Islington was a rising area, he got off one day at the Angel Tube station and walked along Upper Street, dropping into pub after pub in hopes of finding what he wanted.<sup>7</sup>

Proud and Bargate were similarly opportunist. Realising that, as a brand new venue, it was 'up for grabs at lunchtime', they approached Crawford and successfully proposed an initial season to run alongside the theatre's evening work.<sup>8</sup>

The performance space itself, which was in a large back room behind the bar area, was, at least according to Wardle, 'a big improvement over the [Soho

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<sup>5</sup> 'Ambiance Attacked', *Time Out*, 5 April 1970, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Andrews, 'Lunchtime Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, August 1971, 51. I have been unable to locate the original article in which Marowitz makes his comment about 'lunchtime cellars', but these passages are quoted in Jonathan Hammond, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, July 1971, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Pulling Pints and Punters', *Times*, 10 August 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 4 April 2014.

Theatre's] original cramped premises'.<sup>9</sup> But behind the scenes Proud remembers that things were in a state of considerable disrepair:

The dressing rooms regularly let in rain water and opened none too convincingly onto a bare brick wall that separated it from the post office sorting office yard round the back [...] The theatre space itself looked reasonably presentable though this assumption was helped along by the fact that it NEVER saw daylight - always candles and meagre artificial light. When you ventured back stage or into the passageways behind the bar or upstairs to the day-light lit offices it was unquestionably VERY dirty, chaotic and ramshackle.<sup>10</sup>

To an extent, however, such run-down qualities worked to the venue's advantage and they were referenced directly in early promotional material. A press release for the opening season, for example, announced that '[t]he King's Head is an ordinary old English pub. Not smart. Not trendy. No carpet on the floor yet, but warm and friendly'.<sup>11</sup> Such comments were endorsed by *Time Out*'s John Ford, who described the place as 'friendly' and 'un-posh'.<sup>12</sup> This implied informality was then echoed in the inclusive tone adopted by Soho to entice its audience:

The plays are lively, funny in different ways, inexpensive, and always interesting and thought provoking. One or two of the plays, maybe all three, will be for you. Why not come along and give it a try?<sup>13</sup>

Later in the season, Proud and Bargate explained that they were 'hoping to attract building workers, factory workers, office workers, everyone. We want to get people in who've never been to the theatre'.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the premises had so few of the trappings associated with a 'conventional' theatre was also to have important implications for the work produced. As I will show throughout this chapter, directors were quick to exploit the possibilities offered by a place of performance that had its origins in a shared social space.

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<sup>9</sup> Wardle, 'Review of *Spider Rabbit*'.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Proud, in emails to the author, 5 and 13 December and 4 April 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Press release for *Spider Rabbit* [February 1971?], Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>12</sup> John Ford 'The Soho Theatre', *Time Out*, 18 June 1971, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Press release for *Spider Rabbit*.

<sup>14</sup> 'Singer Proby Stars in Pub's Lunchtime Play', *Islington Gazette*, 12 February 1971.

## Pushing the Boundaries of the One-Act Play

The one-act play has indisputably been a major 'item' among the forces which have so radically changed the theatre in this century.

Jim Haynes, 1966.<sup>15</sup>

So begins Jim Haynes' introduction to a collection of plays produced during his time as artistic director of Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre (1964-1966). He continues:

[P]resenting a one-act play with a sense of standard and purpose catches the audience enough off guard for a genuine receptiveness to be achieved. One could cite endless examples of the effectiveness of the one-act play and still be no closer to the distinctive powers of the form itself; for the concept of *la piece bien faite* is alien to the one-act and there are not, so far, any rules for writing one-act plays. In the one-act play, the author works innocently, self-indulgently, and gives loose rein to that lyric vanity which is (or could be) his style.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Haynes' professed desire to resist prescriptive definitions, it is immediately significant that he discusses the 'one-act' play in terms that are exclusively literary ('lyric vanity'). He also assumes single-authorship. Later in his introduction he goes on to reinforce an idea that one-act plays must, in an important sense, stand alone: '[t]he author of a one-act, seldom aware of the plays with which his work will appear, will strive for unity and individuality at all costs'.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that Haynes would have written in quite this way after his experiences as artistic director of the Drury Lane Arts Lab in the later 1960s. There, he encouraged the cross-fertilisation of music, text, visual arts and physical expression, often in the service of collaborative experiment. Well into the early 1970s, however, others continued to underestimate the wider possibilities of the short dramatic form as well as lunchtime theatre's abilities to harness them. Here, for example, is Nigel Andrews writing in *Plays and Players* in June 1971:

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Haynes, Introduction to *Traverse Plays*, ed. Jim Haynes (London: Penguin, 1966), 7.

<sup>16</sup> The anthology in question includes contributions from Samuel Beckett and Saul Bellow, as well as Heathcote Williams' *The Local Stigmatic*.

<sup>17</sup> Haynes, Introduction to *Traverse Plays*, 8.

The traditional split between ‘naturalism’ and ‘expressionism’ in the one-act play - Strindberg and after - is largely a result of production necessities. Given limited space, a handful of actors and modest sets, there are two directions in which the playwright can move: towards the tight, well-defined ‘situation’ play; or else towards a more fluid, surrealistic structure in which the absence of theatrical resources is used as a vacuum to be filled by the imaginations of playwright and audience. Lunchtime theatre in the West End has clearly liberated much new writing talent, but it shows depressing signs of being confined to these rigid extremes. If the one-acter is as limited as its history suggests, new talent must be encouraged [...] to tackle the full-length play.<sup>18</sup>

In what follows, I argue that it was often, in fact, critical opinion that sought to place restrictions on creative innovation. And that, from the start, Soho’s programme at the King’s Head transcended such limited definitions.

### **‘Poems’, Extracts and Adaptations**

The Soho Theatre’s opening production at the King’s Head was a piece by the American writer Michael McClure, one of the original Beat poets, present at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955 when Ginsberg’s first performed his poem *Howl*.<sup>19</sup> In 1966, McClure’s play *The Beard*, which imagined a sexually charged encounter between Jean Harlow and Billy the Kid, became a sensation when the actors, Richard Bright and Billie Dixon, were arrested for violating Californian obscenity laws. When the prosecutions failed, however, the play transferred to the Evergreen Theatre in New York where Bright and Dixon eventually received Off Broadway Theatre Awards.

Having followed the controversy in the States, Proud had written to McClure to ask if he might produce *The Beard* in the UK. McClure replied, mentioning that the play was already preparing to visit the Royal Court.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he offered suggestions for other pieces, whilst stressing that ‘[a]s you probably

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<sup>18</sup> Nigel Andrews, ‘Lunch Line-Up’, *Plays and Players*, June 1971, 50.

<sup>19</sup> John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 104.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Michael McClure to Fred Proud, 12 October 1968, Fred Proud’s private collection. *The Beard* opened at the Royal Court on 4 November 1968 in a production directed by Rip Torn.

know, I am a poet and regard my dramas as poems'.<sup>21</sup> From amongst these, Proud eventually selected *Spider Rabbit*, part of a larger collection of works which came to be known as *Gargoyle Cartoons*.

*Spider Rabbit* begins with its eponymous protagonist repeatedly introducing himself to the audience whilst pulling things out of a duffle bag in a faux-childish fashion. Meanwhile, a hat on the table appears to conceal a human head. As well as carrots and a spoon, Spider Rabbit finds an electric saw in his bag and proceeds to drill through the person's skull. Finally, an unearthly female vision appears. 'Could I have had too much blood?', Spider Rabbit asks the audience in a winking aside, before explaining that, despite being cruel and wicked, he is in possession of a gentle soul.<sup>22</sup>

Proud admits that the primary reason for the choice of material was 'to make a splash' and cause 'a minor sensation'. To this end, he had also recruited the well-known singer P.J. Proby for the title role. Proby was simultaneously appearing as Cassio in *Catch My Soul* (1969), a rock opera based on *Othello* playing at the Round House. Amanda Lear, who had worked as a model for Salvador Dali, was cast as his saviour/accomplice.

The production certainly had Proud's intended impact. Indeed, in an otherwise negative review for *The Times*, Irving Wardle wrote that it could 'only be excused as an attention grabber signalling the management's return to business'.<sup>23</sup> Proby was initially unable to play his part. As far as Wardle was concerned, however, his temporary replacement, Jonathan Kramer, was the production's only redeeming feature. He was less enthusiastic about Kramer's co-star. Referring to her arrival on stage in the guise of 'a rabbit angel, nude under a white fur coat, stroking a dead duck', he commented that 'Miss Lear does not get away with this scene, but who could?'.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere, however, the play was quickly identified as another example of the 'comic-strip' style, now judged by critics such as Frank Marcus as 'the mainstay of the avant-garde'.<sup>24</sup> In *Plays and Players* Jonathan Hammond compared McClure to the British writer Howard Brenton, suggesting that '[b]oth

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Michael McClure, *Spider Rabbit in Gargoyle Cartoons, or, The Chabroiled Chinchilla* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 69-86.

<sup>23</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *Spider Rabbit*'.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Marcus, 'Theatre', *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 February 1971.

make their points through vivid, lurid cartoon-images that jettison the need for narrative and other conventional technical lumber'. Gary O'Connor saw continental influences, commenting that '[a]s a style of writing it could well belong to the Groupe Panique'.<sup>25</sup> And in the *Guardian*, Nicholas de Jongh interpreted the work as a clear critique of American society:

[It] belongs to a genre of play in which offences against the old proprieties are consistent with an underlying seriousness. The "Spider" of the title is an average American surely, with charm and good manners to hand. [...] The grotesque idiom and manners is partly used to emphasise how different substances and surfaces are, how glazed we become by the sight and not the fact. And the whole is achieved with a glowing originality and concentrated power.<sup>26</sup>

The play resonated, then, with Soho's earlier productions at the New Compton Street venue. Here was an American play by a writer with counter-cultural sympathies, rooted in a 'comic-book' style, performed by 'star' or celebrity actors.

*Spider Rabbit* might also be thought to fit Haynes' loose criteria for the successful one-act play. Certainly it had a distinctive 'voice' and exerted a powerful grip on its audience. The fact that the piece was conceived as part of a series, however, has important implications for its presentation. In his introduction to the printed edition of the play, McClure writes that:

*Gargoyle Cartoons* are dream beams to be performed with music and dancing in groups of two-five. They can be put together like a bracelet made of an eagle's claw, a jade chip, a bubble, and a tuft of thistledown.<sup>27</sup>

Since Proud choose to present *Spider Rabbit* alone, he was somewhat out of sympathy with the writer's ambitions for the work.<sup>28</sup> For the suggestion underpinning McClure's comments is that the full impact of any one of his

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<sup>25</sup> Gary O'Connor, 'Review of *Spider Rabbit*', *Financial Times*, 17 February 1971. Here, O'Connor describes the Group Panique as 'a contemporary Paris cult formed by Arrabal, Topor and others to create terror through art'.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Review of *Spider Rabbit*', *Guardian*, 20 February 1971.

<sup>27</sup> Michael McClure, Introduction to *Gargoyle Cartoons, or, The Chabroiled Chinchilla* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), not paginated.

<sup>28</sup> It had been his original intention, however, to pair it with another of the collection, and he often expressed his desire to produce the full set. (See, for example, press release for *Spider Rabbit* [February 1971?], Fred Proud's private collection.)

‘cartoons’ is dependent on its juxtaposition with others. Indeed, to take McClure at his word, the individual pieces behave more like poems in a collection, which can be enjoyed in any order, but develop a cumulative power. To Haynes suggestion, therefore - that the one-act play might be defined by its stand-alone qualities - McClure’s *Spider Rabbit* offers at least a partial challenge, possessing a unity of form, without, however, being self-contained.

The Soho Theatre’s second King’s Head production, Bertolt Brecht’s *The Informer*, also represented a part of larger whole - in this case the writer’s collection of short ‘playlets’ grouped together under the title *Fears and Miseries of the Third Reich*.<sup>29</sup> Set in Nazi Germany, the story follows a couple as they anxiously await their young son’s return from a shopping expedition. As the time passes, and the boy fails to arrive, they become increasingly paranoid, convincing themselves that he has run to the authorities to denounce them. The couple are preparing themselves for what they assume will be their inevitable arrest when the boy finally saunters in, clutching a bag of chocolates.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Nicholas de Jongh commented that the decision to follow *Spider Rabbit* with such a piece represented a ‘daring experiment’.<sup>30</sup> This judgment was a response to the sharp contrast between the counter-cultural style and substance of the former and the more direct political allegory of the latter.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, whilst *Spider Rabbit* may have been interpreted as a general critique of contemporary American/Western values, the production of *The Informer* was given a specific, and provocative, context: a ‘light show’ of projected images which aimed to draw parallels between the horrors of persecution under Nazi Germany and the British government’s response to recent ‘revolutionary’ student activity. In particular, the images made references to the recent deportation of Rudi Dutschke by the Home Secretary, Reginald

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<sup>29</sup> In the original German, the playlet’s title is *Der Spitzel*, often translated as *The Spy*. The full name for the collection of plays is *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches*.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, ‘Review of *The Informer*’, *Guardian*, 3 March 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, de Jongh’s comments recall those made about the opening productions at Le Metro Club in 1970: ‘they [the Soho Theatre] have realised the advantages of presenting plays which contrast with or complement each other’. (Nicholas de Jongh, ‘Lunchtime Successes’, *Guardian*, 27 July 1970.) See Chapter Two.

Maudling.<sup>32</sup> Thompson recalls the reasons for highlighting these events in his production design:

I thought [the play] touched a public nerve. [...] It was at a time when people were very nervous about political activists and the Heath government was excluding entry to people like Rudi Dutschke and Daniel Cohn Bendit. It was a hysterical time and I was probably over-reacting to the over-reaction.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly some critics felt that the 'light show' was too crude. Michael Billington argued, for example, that 'whatever one thinks of the Home Secretary [...] it is a bit hard to see him as the instrument of a Fascist tyranny'.<sup>34</sup>

Billington also remarked that '[a]dmittedly it makes a sharp little aperitif but when are we going to get the complete 24-course Brechtian meal?'<sup>35</sup> His implication is that *The Informer* suffers in isolation. But despite the critical rejection of Thompson's 'thesis' by certain reviewers, an argument can be made that its articulation was made possible precisely because of the director's engagement with a part, rather than the whole, of Brecht's full work. A comparison might be made to the way in which, by enlarging elements of a painting in an exhibition catalogue, close attention can be drawn to particular aspects of the composition. In other words, it was Thompson's decision to scrutinise a 'detail' that allowed him to explore a contemporary debate in a direct, if ultimately contentious, way.

In this respect, *The Informer* also presents a wider challenge to the question of 'authorship' in the theatrical process. The point can be clarified with respect to comments made by the American avant-garde practitioner and theorist

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Frank Marcus, 'Broad Brecht', *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 March 1971. Dutschke, a prominent member of the German Socialist Student Union (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund), had been the victim of an assassination attempt in 1968. Following the attack he had moved with his family to the UK, both to recuperate and complete a degree at Cambridge University. In January 1971, however, Maudling refused to allow Dutschke residency on the grounds of his involvement in radical politics.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Thompson, in an email to the author, 9 December 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Billington, 'Review of *The Informer*', *Times*, 4 March 1971. *The Stage* also referred to 'a precarious connection with the incidents in the play'. (Douglas Blake, 'Brecht Cartoon', *Stage*, 11 March 1971).

<sup>35</sup> Billington, 'Review of *The Informer*'.

Richard Schechner. In a 1968 article for *Drama Review*, Schechner quotes a *Village Voice* review of his free adaptation of Eugène Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*:

'I don't, in short, think this was a good production of *Victims of Duty*. It might be described as a very good happening on the same themes as Ionesco's play [...] The play was there somewhere [...] but it was subservient to, and obscured by, the formal enterprise of the production'.<sup>36</sup>

In response to this description, which he accepts as 'correct' and 'understandable', Schechner notes simply that '[w]e did not "do" Ionesco's play; we "did with it."'.<sup>37</sup>

I do not wish to suggest that Thompson's production was radically form-breaking in the manner of Schechner's 'happening'.<sup>38</sup> However, as Schechner writes: '[t]he text is a map with many possible routes. You push, pull, explore, exploit. You decide where you want to go. Rehearsals may take you elsewhere. Almost surely you will not go where the playwright intended'. There is a sense, then, in which the production of *The Informer*, re-imagined in order to make a specific political argument, was as much Thompson's as Brecht's. In this context, aligning the one-act play (or any play) solely with the playwright comes to be seen as unnecessarily restrictive.

The third Soho Theatre production, in March 1971, was Joe Orton's *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Originally written for television in 1964, it was first broadcast by Rediffusion in 1967.<sup>39</sup> Given the dates of Soho's production, it is possible that it was one of the examples Charles Marowitz was referring to when he lambasted the lunchtime theatres for presenting 'slivers of old telly plays'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Smith, 'Review of *Victims*', quoted in Richard Schechner, '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre', *The Drama Review* 12, no. 3 (Spring, 1968): 41-64. Schechner directed *Victims* for the New Orleans Group in 1967.

<sup>37</sup> Schechner, '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre', 64.

<sup>38</sup> Marvin Carlson gives this brief description: '[t]he entire theatre was converted into the Choubert living room, with the audience scattered about the setting, sometimes directly addressed by the actors and never able to see and hear the entire production because of sight lines and overlapping scenes.' (Marvin Carlson, 'Alternative Theatre', in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre: Volume 3. Post-World War II to the 1990s*, eds. Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 272).

<sup>39</sup> 'The Plays: The Good and Faithful Servant', *Joe Orton Online* website, accessed 21 December 2013, [http://www.joeorton.org/Pages/Joe\\_Orton\\_Plays5.html](http://www.joeorton.org/Pages/Joe_Orton_Plays5.html)

<sup>40</sup> Charles Marowitz, quoted in Jonathan Hammond, 'Lunch and Late Night Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, July 1971, 50.

Such comments, as I have already begun to argue, failed to give appropriate acknowledgment to the creative discoveries that could result from such 'translations'. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated how Peter Weiss' radio play *The Tower* (1950) forced Fred Proud into a deep engagement with questions of dramaturgical and theatrical form. In the case of *The Good and Faithful Servant*, both the material and its place of performance demanded a similarly innovative approach. The primary challenge, here, lay in the fact that the script contained nineteen scenes, spread across multiple locations. Any attempt to contain the action within an end-on staging would, therefore, have required some form of set change every three or four minutes. Proud's elegant response was to direct the piece across a number of separate playing areas linking two raised stages. The decision was to have a substantial impact on the success of the production.

*The Good and Faithful Servant* follows the last days of an old man, Buchanan, who has lived a life of drudgery working for a faceless corporation. On the verge of retirement he encounters an old woman, Edith, scrubbing the corridor floor. The two dimly recognise each other, and it transpires that Buchanan is the father of Edith's twin sons, both lost in the war. One of them has, however, fathered a son of his own, Ray, who now lives with Edith. Buchanan resolves to move in at once and assume a patriarchal role, but he clashes with Ray, who is evidently living in sin with girlfriend Debbie. Meanwhile, at work, Head of Personnel, Mrs Vealfoy, organises Buchanan's perfunctory leaving celebrations. She also takes him to visit the company's 'recreation centre', a social club for ex-employees. Here, Buchanan finds a decrepit congregation clustered around a piano singing the bitterly ironic 'We'll All Go Riding on a Rainbow to a New Land Far Away'. In despair, Buchanan returns to his new home and violently smashes up his retirement gifts - a clock and a toaster. The next morning, Edith discovers him dead in the bed beside her.

Orton's play is full of mordant humour and, like all his work, delights in exposing social pretensions and sexual hypocrisy. But it is also sadder and more personal than many of his better-known pieces, with the character of Buchanan going proxy for Orton's own father.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it was precisely these more humane qualities that Proud's production brought to the surface, provoking, for

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<sup>41</sup> Maurice Charney, 'Joe Orton's Laodicean Tragedy', *Connotations* 18, nos. 1-3 (2008/2009): 146.

many critics, a dramatic reassessment of the writer himself. Nicholas de Jongh, for example, found the play ‘a revelation’ and commented that, ‘nowhere else does his writing have such serious and compassionate reverberations’.<sup>42</sup> Harold Hobson, too, noted a ‘compassion rare in his work’.<sup>43</sup> Benedict Nightingale asked simply, ‘[w]ho would have thought Orton had anything so serious in him?’.<sup>44</sup>

Sensitive acting and directing certainly played their part in revealing these elements of the writing. As suggested above, however, Proud’s early staging decisions also had a significant impact. Irving Wardle’s review, for example, drew attention to the almost immersive qualities of certain scenes:

[The play] translates extremely well to the theatre; partly by cross-cutting between two stages, and partly by using a central playing area to bring episodes like the presentation ceremony and the ghastly scene at the old folk’s club out into the midst of the audience.<sup>45</sup>

The ability to blur conventional divisions between playing and viewing areas was a consequence of the physical character of many fringe spaces, few of which had raked stages or fixed auditoria. In the case of *The Good and Faithful Servant*, however, the intermingling of actors and audience was dramatically enhanced. Proud describes the effect as follows:

One over-riding factor was the shocking closeness, as audience, you had with the actors. This was the outstanding novelty at the time and ensured that you [...] felt an intimacy with the actors as perhaps never experienced before. It would have added to the sense of it being personal and ‘natural’ rather than artificial and ‘staged’.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout this study, I hope to show that theatrical innovation during this period was not merely a question of artistic ‘intention’, but was often the result of a dynamic relationship between practitioners’ ambitions, the work itself, and the material circumstances of its discovery and production. Perhaps, more than any other Soho Theatre production, *The Good and Faithful Servant* is

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, ‘Orton play’, *Guardian*, 19 March 1971.

<sup>43</sup> Harold Hobson, ‘The Pleasure of their Company’, *Sunday Times*, 21 March 1971.

<sup>44</sup> Benedict Nightingale, ‘School for Love’, *New Statesman*, 2 April 1971.

<sup>45</sup> Irving Wardle, ‘Good New Writer’, *Times*, 19 March 1971.

<sup>46</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 13 April 2014.

representative of such interaction. The choice of play had been guided by the requirement to find short work suitable for the lunchtime slot. Once chosen, the need to respond to certain properties of the television script (specifically the ‘problem’ of multiple locations), combined with the possibilities offered by an unconventional theatre space, resulted in an experimental staging design that worked in sympathy with the demands of the playwright’s work.

In Autumn 2013, I invited Proud to come with me to the archives of the British Film Institute to re-watch the original TV film of Orton’s play.<sup>47</sup> Commenting on the director’s decision to shoot on location, Proud offered the following analysis:

[The director attempted] to use the dubious, assumed authority of the medium. This is television and here is the real world of large companies, the multi-nationals and their terrible power to dehumanize and deny people self-fulfillment. But this premise is faulty. The play, though written for television, is an artificial masquerade with multiple inspired, satirical distortions of normalcy - yet it does, through various kinds of artifice, tell a series of truths - and could have done [so] with some triumph and glory if allowed to be wholly itself. Just putting it in front of a live audience (in the back-room of a pub!) seems to have ensured the basic dimension of artifice (though I wouldn’t have understood that then!) and from there it was in a much better position to become itself.<sup>48</sup>

I have already suggested that the presentation of work intended for one dramatic medium amidst the conditions of another could release creative energy. Proud’s remarks here, however, offer a different challenge to the argument that the theatrical use of television or radio scripts was an act of artistic compromise. For there also exists the possibility that Orton’s play was never best suited to the location-driven TV film. In other words, it may be the case that the staged production of *The Good and Faithful Servant* represented a return of this work to its more natural home, rather than any kind of awkward displacement.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The 35mm film of *The Good and Faithful Servant*, directed by James Ormerod, broadcast by Rediffusion Television on 6 April 1967, is held at the BFI National Archive, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections>.

<sup>48</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 10 September 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Later in the season, Proud was to take the discoveries made in the production of Orton’s play into his work on Harold Pinter’s *Night School* (1960). This, too, was a television play and again Proud opted for a multi-stage design.

## Reimagining the Space

Although the creative choices made in the process of directing *The Good and Faithful Servant* had brought the audience closer to the action, there was still a clear sense of separation between actors - for the most part performing on raised platforms - and spectators. Several other King's Head productions went further in their attempts to dissolve such boundaries. In June, for example, Paul Alexander directed an adaptation of a different sort. The source material in this case was Mervyn Peake's short story *Boy in Darkness* (1956), an accompaniment to his *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946-1959). The story follows the boy of the title, Titus Groan, into a nightmare world beyond the walls of Castle Gormenghast. Here he encounters the sinister Goat and Hyena, who capture him and bring him into a dangerous encounter with the master of this realm: Lamb.<sup>50</sup>

Opinions on the production were divided, with some critics announcing themselves mystified whilst others were entranced by a sense of otherworldliness. Irving Wardle's review was particularly revealing:

Possibly the fault lies in the simple fact of trying to stage his work at all. [...] [I]t is doubtful whether Gothic drama of any kind meets the requirements of the modern stage; being, by definition, cut off from all worlds but its own. [...] In fiction, if this action exerted a spell, it would not matter if it were self contained: in performance it does matter, and some link is needed to attach Titus's ordeal to the common experience of being captured in childhood and deformed to fit a social pattern.<sup>51</sup>

Wardle's desire to propose formal restrictions on what constitutes 'appropriate' theatrical material recalls similar arguments against the stage's co-option of television and radio work. And yet, here, again, an apparent lack of fit between storytelling modes proved to be creatively productive. Responding, in fact, to precisely those 'cut off' qualities that Wardle's comments refer to, Alexander's designer, John Hallé, worked to create an immersive, multi-sensory set design. *Time Out* theatre critic John Ford's response to the production gives an evocative sense of the final results:

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<sup>50</sup> See Garry O'Connor, 'Review of *Boy in Darkness*', *Stage*, 24 June 1971.

<sup>51</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *Boy in Darkness*', *Times*, 16 June 1971.

Ducking in out of the pouring rain, I limped damply into the theatre - and what did I find but an underground cave, with the amplified sound of water dripping everywhere. John Halle's [sic] gauzy, mucky design is superbly lit by Howard Panton [sic], and the whole thing's particularly effective if you're sitting in your own puddle.<sup>52</sup>

Alexander himself remembers that Hallé 'designed the whole floor with sections of hardboard upon which he had got different surfaces, so they made different noises [...] when you trod on them'. And in *Plays and Players*, Nigel Andrews wrote that,

John Halle's [sic] subterranean decor - sacking strewn on the floor to suggest rough earth, bathed in dim green light, and rags of gauze dangling from the ceiling - is a small triumph of imagination over budget.<sup>53</sup>

Two other plays from this period also sought to create immersive environments, placing, however, a greater emphasis on audience/spectator interaction in the shared space. John Kane's *Plastic Birthday* (1971), also directed by Paul Alexander, generated a cabaret style atmosphere in order to tell a blackly comic story of a woman who has killed her baby whilst in the grip of post-natal depression. The setting for the play was a child's birthday party and the back room of the King's Head was dressed accordingly. The play then began with the audience being encouraged to take part in a game of pass the parcel. Alexander recalls the reasons for his decisions as follows:

I was interested in breaking the barrier [...] the proscenium arch [...] but more of real contact with the audience [...] We had a bicycle coming through the audience. Peter sort of playing with the audience [...] in order to bring people right in to the production [...] Unlike the Brechtian idea of breaking the reality [...] this was very much drawing the audience in as closely as we possibly could to a really difficult story.<sup>54</sup>

The boldest experiment in this direction, however, was the Soho Theatre's production of Chris Wilkinson's *Dynamo*. By further exploiting the possibilities offered by an immersive theatrical environment, this play questioned the extent

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<sup>52</sup> John Ford, 'Review of *Boy in Darkness*', *Time Out*, 18 June 1971, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Nigel Andrews, 'Lunch Line Up', *Plays and Players*, August 1971, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Alexander, in an interview with the author, 29 November 2013.

to which an audience might be involved, or implicated, in the action of the play. The production was the hit of the season. Indeed, writing a retrospective piece about the King's Head residency in March 1972, John Ford commented that it had 'probably been the most successful ever lunchtime play'.<sup>55</sup>

## Dynamo

The play [...] combines two images - the torture of an Algerian by a special branch of the Paris police in 1958 and turns into a Soho strip club. There is abundant nudity, some brutal explicit violence, and an almost complete vocabulary of four-letter words. The play is both shocking and moving.

*Islington Gazette*, 1971.<sup>56</sup>

*Dynamo* opened on 30 June 1971. A preview printed in the *Islington Gazette* had promised that the piece would be 'as daring and controversial as anything produced on the English Stage'. Verity Bargate was also quoted directly, declaring that '[t]he play has never been performed before because nobody had the guts to put it on'.<sup>57</sup> The Soho Theatre certainly had a gift for self-promotion. Bargate's comments encouraged the idea that *Dynamo*'s content had prevented previous production when, in fact, it was simply a new play.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, as the *Gazette*'s subsequent review (quoted above) suggests, there were those who felt that expectations had not been raised entirely unreasonably.

The play follows the episodic structure of a striptease show. There are a series of standard routines followed by a fourth act that morphs into a scene of

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<sup>55</sup> John Ford, 'The New Soho Poly', *Time Out*, 3 March 1972, 29. The same claim was made in hindsight by many of the production's cast and crew. See, for example, an interview for the British Library's Theatre Archive Project with Derek Paget, a stage manager on the show: *British Library* website, accessed 9 September 2013, <http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Theatre-Archive-Project/024M-C1142X000196-0100V0>.

<sup>56</sup> 'Serious Art... or Best Strip Show in Town?' *Islington Gazette*, 9 July 1971.

<sup>57</sup> 'Nude Shocker gets Kings Cross Premiere', *Islington Gazette*, 25 June 1971.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

political interrogation by an ‘expert in psychological warfare’.<sup>59</sup> Wilkinson describes his impulse to combine these ideas as follows:

Seeing a strip show in Soho I was confronted with [...] a cast of disparate performers [who] displayed indifference to, or open contempt of, an audience who sat in silence with collars turned up to hide their faces, ashamed to be there. Fantastic! And this linked up in a curious lopsided way with the book I’d just been reading, ‘Gangrene’, where events had been so ghastly the telling of them was shorn [...] of anything sensational or dressy. And both events in different ways had me questioning my own role of Peeping Tom. In ‘Dynamo’ I tried to combine the two events.<sup>60</sup>

Exactly how these images, or events, interact with each other is best explained with reference to Wilkinson’s unpublished ‘script’, a dense and complex document, much of which takes the form of explanatory material and research. It includes, for example, thirteen ‘notes on strip’ that both describe the qualities of an actual strip show and offers design and directorial advice. The following examples give a sense of this dual function:

[1] Outside - neon, shots of tits, canned music. The usual schizoid facade surrounds the cash-desk. A Rank foyer in miniature. An Italian suit courteously takes your pound. Inside - narrow staircase leading to a tiny basement theatre. The size of an average railway waiting-room, with something of the same nightmare confusion of time and space.<sup>61</sup>

[13] The whole act is punctuated by acts of indifference. [...] Examples - scratching, yawning, fluff wiped out of the mouth, grit from the corner of the eye, a close scrutiny of an elbow, or even a quick nail inspection and manicure.<sup>62</sup>

The second of Wilkinson’s key ‘images’ - the abuse of a political prisoner - is established by means of a sizeable extract of *Gangrene* (mentioned above). In the excerpted chapter, an Algerian man, Pascal, describes his torture at the hands of the French secret police. The writing is explicit and shocking and makes very

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<sup>59</sup> Chris Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, unpublished manuscript, Chris Wilkinson’s private collection, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013. *Gangrene* was a collection of documentary accounts of political imprisonment, introduced by Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International. (Peter Benenson, ed., *Gangrene* (London: John Calder, 1959).)

<sup>61</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 8.

clear reference to the relationship between mental and physical humiliation. ‘We’re going to take your voltage before bugging you’, says one of Pascal’s torturers having attached electrodes to his naked body.<sup>63</sup>

Having established the play’s twin themes, Wilkinson’s script now describes the scenes, named after the strippers themselves: Amy, Belladonna, Celia and Daphne. Amy’s act is given the least additional information, described merely as a ‘[d]ull, standard routine’. Belladonna, however, should be ‘[a]ggressive. E.g. leg work on chair near front of the stage, nipples fired like guns, underwear waved in the face of audience’. Next up, Celia makes, ‘[t]he first stumbling attempts at drama’. The act includes a brief telephone exchange with her boyfriend, Paul, for which Wilkinson provides a ‘possible’ text:

MAN:	Celia?
CELIA:	Paul, is that you, honey, are you coming over?
MAN:	No, I can’t, I’m sorry. I have to work late tonight.
CELIA:	But I’ve cooked, honey, specially for you, it’s hot and waiting for you.
MAN:	I know, I know, Celia but... I just can’t make it tonight, I’m tied up.
CELIA:	Shall I see you later, Paul, I can keep it simmering for a couple of hours.
MAN:	No, listen honey, I can’t get round tonight. You’ll have to make do on your own.
CELIA:	But, Paul, you promised –
MAN:	I know, I know, can’t be helped, another time, eh? See you tomorrow, chow (phone down)
CELIA:	Tomorrow! (Phone down) <sup>64</sup>

The conversation is intentionally bland to the point of banality, despite being peppered with sexual innuendo (‘it’s hot and waiting for you’, ‘I’m tied up’, ‘I can keep it simmering for a couple of hours’). Then, with the arrival of ‘Daphne’, we are finally brought to the heart of the play. Her act breaks down into five sections – ‘The Search’, ‘The Inspector’s Interrogation’, ‘The Kicking’, ‘The Psychological Warfare Expert’, ‘Dynamo’ - and each is described by means of two distinct sets of imagery. Here, for example, are Wilkinson’s instructions for ‘The Search’:

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 11.

- A. The prisoner enters to find his room occupied by the police. He is frisked, asked to turn out his pockets, and blindfolded.
- B. A dance where Daphne is pawed by the boys. At this stage she is unattainable and offers, by way of compensation, wining looks and 'gifts'. These are inspected and rejected by the boys. Her headscarf is used as a blindfold.<sup>65</sup>

Crucially, these two images are not presented separately. Instead, 'A' offers a kind of alternative 'text' for 'B', which is closer to a description of what the audience should actually see. Or, as Wilkinson himself puts it, 'B is a strip interpretation of A'.<sup>66</sup>

Following the story through, we begin with Daphne, 'unattainable', and thereby in a position of apparent control. In the 'The Inspector's Interrogation', however, disembodied voices fire questions at her as her clothes are torn off.<sup>67</sup> The third section, 'The Kicking', makes more explicit reference to the story told in *Gangrene*. As Daphne is physically assaulted, the actors mouth pre-recorded text including one line - '[w]e're going to make you piss blood' - which is lifted directly from Pascal's testimony.<sup>68</sup> In section four, 'The Psychological Warfare Experiment,' 'A' and 'B' images are also directly paralleled:

- A. The prisoner is now in a poor physical state. At this point a policeman, posing as a friend, in conspiratorial whispers, tries to extract a confession, by offering sympathy and a means of escape.
- B. The trapped girl is approached in private by a 'friend'. He despises the boys' brutality and suggests that everything can be achieved without violence, hoping to seduce her himself.<sup>69</sup>

An electrical dynamo is brought on stage and, in the final section of her act, Daphne is bound up, suspended over two tables and electrocuted - an effect that was achieved in performance with lit sparklers.<sup>70</sup> This act of brutality successfully forces Daphne to talk and, in a long, lip-sync-ed, monologue she chats lightly about her friends, her parents and the people she works with:

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<sup>65</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 17; 4.

<sup>69</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

And then there's the boys, well, I don't really know them, but they've always been friendly, never bothered me, you know, and they're good for a laugh....And that's it, I think....Is that what you wanted?....(laugh)....<sup>71</sup>

A last stage direction decisively conflates the political and sexual narratives: 'Daphne standing facing front reveals all. She is surrounded by the police each holding an electrode out towards her'.<sup>72</sup> Then Amy returns to the stage, and everything begins all over again.

### Gender and Political Metaphor

As indicated in my introduction, *Dynamo* is particularly interesting for the way it plays into the debates around gender politics and theatrical metaphor that arose after the abolition of censorship in 1968. In her book *Look Back in Gender*, for example, Michelene Wandor draws attention to a new 'freedom to represent the taboo'.<sup>73</sup> Such taboo subjects included women's bodies, and the violence and degradation to which they might be subjected. These were now available to perform an explicitly metaphorical function and became frequent sites of theatrical enquiry.<sup>74</sup> Wandor critiques a number of plays, two of which - *Occupations* and *Lay By* - were written by members of the Portable Theatre Group to which Wilkinson himself became associated.<sup>75</sup> A brief mention of the first will clarify her argument.

Trevor Griffiths' *Occupations* tells the story of the Communist politician and writer Antonio Gramsci and the workers' protests mounted in Turin during the 1920s. It explores the breakdown of trust between Gramsci and a member of the Comintern sent to investigate the agitation. In the play, Gramsci is also caring for a dying Russian woman, Angelica, a remnant of the old order. In her

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<sup>71</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London / New York: Methuen, 1987), 106.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *Occupations* (Faber and Faber, 1980); Howard Brenton and others, *Lay By* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972). *Lay By* was jointly written by Trevor Griffiths, Howard Brenton, David Hare, Snoo Wilson, Brain Clark, Hugh Stoddart and Stephen Poliakoff.

suffering, Wandor argues, Griffiths clearly and deliberately dramatises the decay of a particular political ideology:

Politics in the most publicly power-struggling way is very explicitly the subject matter, with the most powerful metaphorical and emotional images carried by the women and by the very strength of the focus of the 'disease' being her womb, as if political disease can only be represented by the decay of motherhood. [...] Her dying screams trigger the progress of history in full view of the audience, as if the body which she represents, the rotting remains of the bourgeoisie, enables socialism to give birth to a new kind of history.<sup>76</sup>

The analysis provides a useful context for *Dynamo*, since in this play, too, it might be argued that women, and the situations in which they are placed, contribute to the expression of an intellectual idea. Wilkinson's own recollections of the play appear to support such a reading:

[...] It's hard to find anyone who'll condone torture, yet it carries on, as more recent disclosures have shown. I wondered if there wasn't a secret part of us that sees it as necessary - after all, if so many people object why and how does it manage to persist? [...] I hope there isn't a buried part of us that finds it exciting. By introducing references to torture in the context of a strip club I hoped to raise the issue in an underhand surreptitious way and rock, or at least dislodge preconceptions.<sup>77</sup>

The implication is that the horrors of political torture might be brought home to the audience by means of a metaphor of sexual objectification.

It is also possible, however, that the unmediated juxtaposition of images in *Dynamo* allows metaphorical relationships to read more freely back and forth. The section of the play titled 'The Psychological Warfare Experiment' (described above) provides the clearest example of this two-way relationship. Here, the policeman's psychological mind-games offer a clear critique of a particular form of sexual power play - the false friend who disguises his desire for sexual conquest behind a compassionate front. When, at the end of the scene, the 'friend' is rebuffed, he resorts to infantile outbursts of aggression: '[y]ou crud....you....meany crud!....Meanly little crud.....you.... fat turd, you....you,you,you,you.... you cocky little....cockbaiter!' A final threat to fry

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<sup>76</sup> Wandor, *Look Back in Gender*, 105-6.

<sup>77</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

Daphne ‘till the truth comes spilling out’ clearly references the events of the ‘A’ track. But it also speaks directly to the possibility of oblitative male violence in response to sexual rejection. There may be, indeed, a wider argument that the play encourages the viewing of the ‘A’ track as vehicle and the ‘B’ track as tenor. The suggestion that the objectification of women echoes violent political oppression would have presented a vigorous and immediate challenge, especially given that some audience members would surely have been enticed to the King’s Head on the promise of nudity and sexual content.<sup>78</sup>

It is important to acknowledge, however, that Wilkinson’s intention was not to prove a dialectical argument, or solve one half of the equation in the terms of the other:

I didn’t want the play to ‘say’ anything. I was fed up with critics like Irving Wardle and Billington who at their worst seemed to see plays as dramatised arguments, judging them on their ability to express a point of view - a point of view often belonging to the critic rather than the writer. I didn’t have a point of view. Principally I wanted to ‘provoke’. [...] The play didn’t ‘mean’ anything. The hope was that by combining two very disparate images new thoughts and feelings might spontaneously erupt.<sup>79</sup>

The playwright would not have been surprised, therefore, at Wardle’s final assessment of the piece as ‘another act of non-writing shock tactics’.<sup>80</sup>

## **Dissolving Boundaries**

As well as exploring connections between sexual and political violence, *Dynamo* interrogates a number of other paired-concepts, specifically ideas of public and private space and the transactional relationships between (and amongst) audience and spectators.<sup>81</sup>

The first of these ‘pairings’ was made explicit in a production design that transformed the theatre into a strip club, complete with box office, bouncers and

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<sup>78</sup> Linda Marlowe, the actor who played Daphne, herself acknowledges this possibility. (Linda Marlowe, in an interview with the author, 22 July 2013.)

<sup>79</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Irving Wardle, ‘Review of *Dynamo*’, *Times*, 1 July 1971.

<sup>81</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 16-17.

‘stage managers’. Howard Panter, who co-directed with Fred Proud, remembers that this immersive setting reached beyond the auditorium into the bar area itself. Since such entertainments were often to be found in the back rooms of pubs, the effect was easily and convincingly achieved.<sup>82</sup>

The set was not, however, intended to be entirely naturalistic, and Wilkinson’s script stresses the need for a distinction between a public and a private area. The public area was ‘at one and the same time [...] the “stage” where the strip is performed, and the room where the prisoner is tortured’.<sup>83</sup> The private area doubled as the strippers’ dressing room and the place ‘where the police retire while the expert in psychological warfare “woos” the prisoner’.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, both these spaces ‘are totally visible to the audience’ creating in production what Gary O’Connor referred to as ‘a double voyeur’s vision’.<sup>85</sup> Wilkinson’s apparently distinct notions of public and private space are therefore, in fact, conflated.

The play performs a similar manoeuvre with respect to its two ‘levels’ of audience: that which is internal to the play (the implied strip club audience, described by Wilkinson as sitting ‘in silence with collars turned up to hide their faces, ashamed to be there’) and that which is external (the theatrical audience).<sup>86</sup> As far as the latter was concerned, whilst their presence was ‘legitimised’ by the theatrical context, it is quite possible that the actions of the play might also have provoked for them feelings of embarrassment, sexual excitement, and even shame. After all, as already suggested, some people may well have been encouraged to attend by the promise of stage nudity. Revealingly, Wilkinson’s script, itself, expresses the extent to which the different audiences collapse into each other. In his introductory notes, for example, he writes:

The disinterest from the actors rarely erupts into active contempt. The performers, as well as the audience, are the victims of a dead routine. They must both contribute to this stale ritual without conviction.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Howard Panter, in an interview with the author, 31 July 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Garry O’Connor, ‘Review of *Dynamo*’, Financial Times, 1 July 1971.

<sup>86</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkinson, *Dynamo*, 2.

It is difficult to be sure, in this extract, which ‘audience’ is being referred to (quite possibly both) and the extent to which the terms ‘actor’ and ‘performer’ have different referents. Whether intentionally or not, an ambiguity over the theatrical audience’s complicity in such (double) acts of voyeurism is encoded within the text. Furthermore, as I suggest below, this voyeurism, which paradoxically takes the form of participation in the context of a strip show, helps identify the play as a significant example of ‘environmental theatre’, one of the most innovative theatrical practices of the period.

### **Total Theatre Environments**

During the late 1960s, the expression ‘environmental theatre’ was increasingly used to refer to productions which sought to develop the relationship between dramatic material and its place of performance. In London, such experiments had become closely associated with Charles Marowitz. For his 1968 Open Space production of John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1967), for example, the director had attempted to mimic the play’s prison setting in a fully-immersive design. On entering the theatre - by way of the fire exits - audience members were ordered towards a ‘guarded’ door as if they were inmates themselves. They then had their fingerprints taken before being aggressively marched towards the auditorium.<sup>88</sup> Writing in his 1978 book *The Act of Being*, Marowitz quipped that ‘an environment inside a theatre is only a fancy name for stage setting even if the setting happens to overflow into the house’.<sup>89</sup> According to such a description, *Boy in Darkness* could also be described as environmental. A decade earlier, however, a more complex set of criteria had been proposed by the American theatre practitioner Richard Schechner.

At the heart of Schechner’s approach was a desire to explore and exploit the ‘transactional’ relationship - what Baz Kershaw calls ‘a continuous

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<sup>88</sup> Jinnie Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages: Fringe Theatres at the Open Space and the Round House 1968 - 1983* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), 42-43. This was the play, in fact, that Soho’s own inaugural production, *One Autumn Evening*, had followed in the late-night slot.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, 42.

negotiation' - between performers and spectators.<sup>90</sup> For this to be effective, Schechner argued, the physical boundaries between equal participants needed to be dissolved. In a 1968 article for *Drama Review* entitled '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre', he ordered his ideas under the following headings:

- One. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions
- Two. All the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience
- Three. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in 'found space'
- Four. Focus is flexible and variable
- Five. All production elements speak in their own language
- Six. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no text at all.<sup>91</sup>

Schechner's own 'environmental' experiments involved direct interaction between actors and audience, with the former slipping into and out of roles. Participatory rituals were encouraged, often including nudity. Indeed, as Arnold Aronson notes, '[s]ome of the spectators assumed that [Schechner's] Performance Group was a kind of cult and wanted to join'.<sup>92</sup>

Certainly Chris Wilkinson's experiment at the King's Head was far removed from, for example, Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* (1968), which concluded with a procession through the streets.<sup>93</sup> Nor was the acting company committed to any particular set of techniques, an important part of Schechner's work. Nevertheless, in working briefly through his six conditions, it is possible to see that the production of *Dynamo* exhibited a striking degree of fit.

To begin with, as I have already shown, the play foregrounds a complex and problematic set of dynamic theatrical 'transactions' - continually foregrounding the blurred lines between actor/performer and spectator (implied and actual). For the production, the King's Head pub was then 'transformed' into a strip club, although a powerful sense of artifice was also preserved through its 'double voyeurism' - the ability to watch both the live strip show, and see behind the 'fourth wall' to the strippers' dressing room. Focus was flexible in so far as

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<sup>90</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 16-17.

<sup>91</sup> See Schechner, '6 Axioms', 41-64.

<sup>92</sup> Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 99-101.

<sup>93</sup> Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 99.

the infrastructure of the strip club (bouncers, etc.) were as much a part of the performance as the acts on the stage. Attention would also be frequently divided between on-stage and back-stage activity. Throughout the play, the use of recorded voice made a critical contribution to the theatrical language of the piece and, finally, the 'text' was self-consciously conceived as a guide rather than a final authority. With reference to his wider body of work, Wilkinson writes:

With all three plays I was hoping to pass on much of their actual construction to those involved, providing what I hoped was an impetus to create, suggestions rather than a blueprint, a method rather than a manuscript. I thought of them as being 'half' written. 'Dynamo' purposely kept the 'suggested' dialogue on the bottom rung.<sup>94</sup>

Most significant of all is the fact that the audience for *Dynamo* were held, throughout, in a continual state of engagement. As Aronson notes, Schechner had wanted to move beyond the situation where limited participation was offered at the beginning of a production, only to have boundaries quickly re-established.<sup>95</sup> What is so striking about *Dynamo* is that the audience's shifting, problematic, but ultimately participatory, relationship with the play's 'environment' would have been maintained throughout the production. In simple terms, there is no point at which they would have ceased being witnesses to actual acts of striptease, no matter what the additional layers of significance may have been.

This sustained encounter with the 'real' was the final goal of Schechner's artistic project and is precisely articulated in his definition of a theatre in which 'traditional distinctions between art and life no longer function at the root of aesthetics'.<sup>96</sup> The political implications of this position are simply summarised by Ryan Claycomb who writes that environmental performances 'create a sense that the performance matters in the real world by emphasizing the rootedness of

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<sup>94</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 98. Based on Schiele's summary of *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, this was a criticism that might have been levelled at Marowitz's production. She records that, following a final blast from the loudspeakers, 'the guards silently disappeared and the play opened with the sound of a shower and the appearance of the characters who make up the play'. (Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, 43.)

<sup>96</sup> Schechner, '6 Axioms', 41.

the performance in real-world transaction'.<sup>97</sup> It is relevant to note, then, that Wilkinson's stated ambition was not to provoke debate, but rather to effect transformation in the moment:

I wasn't interested in people leaving the theatre discussing ideas. My ideal was that their lives, in however slight or unseen a way, might be changed.<sup>98</sup>

Claycomb also draws attention to Schechner's belief that such participation 'is incompatible with the idea of a self-contained, autonomous, beginning-middle-end artwork'.<sup>99</sup> In this context it can be remembered that, although in practice the production of *Dynamo* ended when the last person left the 'auditorium', the play was conceived cyclically, as an endlessly repeating performance.

## Conclusions

Writing in 1971, the critic Nigel Andrews divided one-act drama into either 'the tight, well-defined "situation" play' or 'a more fluid, surrealistic structure'.<sup>100</sup> During its time at the King's Head, the Soho Theatre certainly produced work that could be placed in one or other of these general categories.<sup>101</sup> Andrews' further suggestion, however, that lunchtime theatre showed 'depressing signs of being confined to these rigid extremes', seriously underestimated the variety of work on offer. To recap, during the Soho Theatre's Islington residency, this work included theatre poems by Michael McClure, a Brecht miniature, a revelatory production of Orton's television play *The Good and Faithful Servant*, an immersive reimagining of a Mervyn Peake short story, and two new plays given bold, participatory productions - John Kane's *Plastic Birthday* and Chris

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<sup>97</sup> Ryan Claycomb, 'Curtain Up? Disrupted, Disguised, and Delayed Beginnings in Theatre and Drama', in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln, Neb.; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 169.

<sup>98</sup> Chris Wilkinson, in an email to the author, 7 May 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Claycomb, 'Curtain Up?', 170.

<sup>100</sup> Andrews, 'Lunch Line-Up', June 1971, 50.

<sup>101</sup> Tom Mallin's *As Is Proper* to the first, perhaps. Olwen Wymark's *Neither Here Nor There* and John Grillo's *Blubber* to the latter. See Appendix A for the full production history of this period.

Wilkinson's *Dynamo*. Not only were such experiments frequently under-valued, however, but such programming eclecticism was, itself, a source of critical anxiety. In September 1971, for example, Jonathan Hammond argued that, without clearly defined artistic policies, 'the lunchtime theatres have really got to ask themselves about the reason for their existence'.<sup>102</sup>

A coherently expressed artistic policy is, however, only one possible driver of innovation. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the apparent constraints of the lunchtime slot and the place of performance also demanded creative responses. With regard to the first of these - the requirement for short work - the lunchtime theatres had been faced with an immediate difficulty. Precisely because there had been little previous demand, there was a lack of obviously suitable material. One solution was to poach from other forms, including radio, television and short fiction. Critics, however, were often resistant to such practices and relied on pre-existing aesthetic judgements to support their arguments. As noted above, Irving Wardle believed that the formal properties of Gothic literature might exclude it entirely from theatrical presentation. Nigel Andrews saw one-act plays in terms of a narrow choice between naturalism and expressionism. There was also perhaps, as Chris Wilkinson has suggested, a critical preference for plays that presented clear dialectical arguments. The work produced at the King's Head exhibited a liberating lack of regard for such received ideas, problematising, variously, the need for unity, the final authority of playwright and the inherent properties of 'literary' forms.

In many cases, creative discoveries were also a result of a direct engagement with the playing space itself. *The Good and Faithful Servant* brought the audience into an intimate relationship with the play and revealed a new dimension to Joe Orton's work. For *Boy in Darkness*, Paul Alexander and John Hallé embraced the detail of Mervin Peake's fantasy world to create an immersive theatrical experience. *Dynamo* exploited the existing fabric of the building in the service of a far-reaching investigation into the relationship between audience and spectators.

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<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Hammond, 'Lunch Line-Up', *Plays and Players*, September 1971, 70. Hammond does, however, acknowledge the deliberate decision to present plays at lunchtime, at least in the case of Ed Berman's *Inter-Action*.

In October 1971, a *Time Out* article on recent fringe activity made the following prediction:

Yet already some things are clear - it is quite possible, for example, that we will do away with the 2/3 hour play. We may find ourselves watching batches of plays of various lengths like the tracks on an LP, which the playwright has 'produced' in close co-operation with the actors.<sup>103</sup>

The author's final remarks make particular reference to collaborative work. And indeed, Proud was later to pursue his own experiments in this direction (see Chapter Five). More generally, however, it is my contention that the Soho Theatre was amongst those making a key contribution to such changing definitions of what a play could be.

Although the residency at the King's Head had been creatively productive and critically successful, Proud and Bargate were becoming increasingly frustrated by the need to work around the pub theatre's own evening productions. The final straw, Proud remembers, was when he arrived one morning in November 1971 to discover a massive, unmoveable steel safe positioned in the centre of the stage, a prop for Snoo Wilson's heist play *Blow-Job* (1971).<sup>104</sup> It was clear that the Soho Theatre now needed a space of its own.

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<sup>103</sup> 'Fringe Faced', *Time Out*, 17 October 1970, 58.

<sup>104</sup> Fred Proud, in an interview with the author, 5 December 2013. Snoo Wilson's *Blow-Job* was produced at the 1971 Edinburgh festival, and then transferred to the King's Head in November that year.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Soho Poly, 1972: New Beginnings**

In March 1972, Fred Proud and Verity Bargate moved their theatre into new premises on Riding House Street - a former basement garage, owned by the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL). Within only a few months the Soho Poly, as it quickly became known, had established itself as the leading producer of lunchtime work. In October, John Grillo, tasked by the Experimental Drama Committee (EDC) to report on the current state of lunchtime activity, wrote the following in a letter to Assistant Drama Director Nicholas Barter:

Of the places I have been to the only one that is impressive is the Soho Poly and it is very impressive indeed. It has achieved an amazingly high standard in all aspects and that is, I feel, a standard by which one should judge other lunchtime ventures. [...] The very high performance standards, the well designed and set shows, the flexibility of the auditorium, the sheer comfort of the place that encourages one to return, the interesting choice of material, the decor of the theatre, the attractive provision of food all show money well spent.<sup>1</sup>

Grillo's suggestion that the Soho Poly was to be a benchmark for other venues was reiterated in a joint meeting of the New Drama Committee (NDC) and the EDC the following February. Here he was minuted as having proposed an increase in the allocation for the Richmond Fringe Theatre Group on the grounds that 'although they were not up to the standard of the Soho Poly, they were unique in catering for an out-of-London audience'.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the quick consolidation of Soho's position, the early years at Riding House Street can be characterised by a series of complex oppositions. For the first time, the company had its own, rent-free, premises, allowing for greater flexibility of programming and the reduction, though not removal, of financial

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from John Grillo to Nicholas Barter, received 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/43/12. My intention here is not endorse Grillo's comments on other lunchtime groups, but to draw attention to the growing perception of Soho as leading the pack at this point.

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Experimental Drama Committee and the New Drama Committee, 7 February 1973, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, ACGB 43/36/2. Richmond was subsequently granted money from the EDC as well as £1,400 from the New Drama Committee, 'a sum equal to that apportioned to the Soho Poly - a sign of their confidence in the company'. (See Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 12/13 February 1973, ACGB 43/36/2.)

pressures. The Soho Poly also provided a hub for the wider lunchtime movement, with important consequences for its organisation, representation and, ultimately, survival. At the same time, Fred Proud was becoming increasingly restless for new opportunities. 1973 saw him accepting directing work at the Greenwich Theatre, openly discussing the possibility of relocating away from the city centre, and applying for a large Arts Council grant to pursue community-based and touring work. Furthermore, the Soho Poly's consistently well-received output disguised the fact that an increasing number of other voices were involved in programming decisions. During 1973 and 1975, full seasons were presided over by associate directors, and 1974 was dominated by collaborations with other lunchtime groups. Soho's developing status also coincided with mounting critical anxiety about the merits of lunchtime theatre, both in terms of the quality of its productions and coherent artistic policy.

In this chapter, the first of two in which I document and critique Soho's operations between 1972 and 1975, I begin by setting out the processes by which the space itself came into being. I also discuss some of its functional and aesthetic properties, the significance of which to Soho's growing reputation will become a recurring theme. I then examine the new venue's opening show, Colin Spencer's *The Trial of St George* (1972), which played in an evening slot. This was a rare example of a Soho production that engaged directly with a specific cultural event - the 1971 prosecution of the editors of *Oz* magazine for allegedly 'corrupting the morals of young people'. Spencer's (unpublished) play has much to say about the contradictory impulses of an Establishment faced with an active counter-ideology. By examining it in some detail here, I move beyond its significance as the venue's opening production and demonstrate its further value as a repository of cultural history and commentary. Finally, I offer a brief survey of the first full season of lunchtime work (March - June 1972). In doing so, I consider whether, rather than minimising the theatre's contribution to the more radical/experimental energies of the time, as some of lunchtime theatre's contemporary detractors argued, Proud and Bargate's less-prescriptive artistic policies allowed the Soho Poly to express many different strands of the new theatrical activity at once.

## The New Space

[S]tone steps enclosed by some bright red wrought-iron railings [led] down to below street level. As you turned on the sixth step towards the red front door on your left you would probably automatically duck your head as there was a particularly low concrete beam supporting the floor above. Five more steps down through that door, then another step down and you would have found yourself in the bright, warm, cork-lined foyer. From your immediate right you would probably have been greeted by Verity herself at the 'box-office' table. If the show was busy, and many of them were, you might have spent several minutes queuing on those stairs wondering what you had let yourself in for.

Fred Proud, n.d.<sup>3</sup>

It was a tiny, grubby, low ceilinged space with virtually no back stage area and grotty toilets. But there was a wonderful ambiance and magic to it and nobody seemed to care about the drawbacks, not even the audience members who could easily bump their heads if they sat on the risers.

Shirley Barrie, 2013.<sup>4</sup>

John Hallé, a designer for several of Soho earliest productions, is credited with 'discovering' the Riding House Street basement that belonged to the estate of the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) where he taught. Seeing its potential, he immediately recommended it to Proud. With the help of the Head of the Extra-mural Department, Michael Chatterton, they then set about persuading the institution to lease them the premises.

Some of the initial obstacles to the idea are revealed in an exchange of memos between the Polytechnic's Buildings Officer, R. Fagg, its Secretary, H. G. Jelf, and Chatterton himself. In autumn 1971, for example, Fagg expressed his view that Soho's proposals were untenable:

Mr. Chatterton called to see me with regards to the above premises. I understand that he will be taking over the basement workshop for theatricals, and that he plans to invite the public. I think you should know that this is not permitted on these premises. [...] If approved (which I

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Proud, 'Minor Miracles', unpublished written piece, n.d., Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley Barrie, in an email to the author, 14 September 2013.

very much doubt), further alterations would have to be made and at present there is no finance for such work.<sup>5</sup>

Of particular concern was the suggestion that a ‘panic bolt’ would be required to comply with fire regulations, but that this would compromise the security of tenants occupying upper floors of the building. Jelf duly wrote to Chatterton, asking for a fuller summary of his intentions.<sup>6</sup> On 4 January 1972 Chatterton replied, neatly sidestepping the question of fire risk, and drawing attention instead to the endorsement of the Arts Council, Fred Proud’s experience and the support of the student body:

Mr. Frederick Proud [...] has agreed to undertake the initial establishment of the theatre. This would ensure the co-operation of the Arts Council [...] [Fred Proud] is known to the Arts Council and they are fully prepared to do business with him as co-director. Mr. Proud would want no salary from us. John Halle [sic] would be the other co-director with myself holding final responsibility. [...] I naturally approached the students first in this enterprise and they seemed happy to go ahead.<sup>7</sup>

The next day, Fagg wrote to Proud to confirm that, subject to full compliance with building regulations, the Polytechnic would agree to the use of 16 Riding House Street ‘for private theatrical purposes [...] for one year with effect from the date of the first opening performance’.<sup>8</sup> In order to satisfy an Arts Council request for formal evidence of co-operation, an agreement was then drawn up between representatives of the Polytechnic, the Students’ Union and the Soho Theatre itself - now to be known as the Soho-Poly Theatre Club in recognition of its new affiliation.<sup>9</sup> This agreement established certain key rights and responsibilities, summarised below:

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<sup>5</sup> Memorandum from R. Fagg to H. G. Jelf, 26 November 1971, University of Westminster Archive (UWA), PCL/2/2/2/10.

<sup>6</sup> Memorandum from H. G. Jelf to Michael Chatterton, 1 December 1971, UWA, PCL/2/2/2/10.

<sup>7</sup> Memorandum from Michael Chatterton to H. G. Jelf, 4 January 1972, UWA, PCL/2/2/2/10. The Arts Council was currently funding the Soho Poly by way of an annual grant administered by its Experimental Drama Committee. See Chapter One.

<sup>8</sup> Copy letter from R. Fagg to Fred Proud, 5 January 1972, UWA, PCL/2/2/2/10.

<sup>9</sup> See Memorandum, unsigned, n.d., UWA, PCL/2/2/2/10; Agreement for Use of Basement Situate at 16, Riding House Street, London, W1, 23 May 1972, UWA, PCL/2/2/2/10.

- The theatre was understood to hold a licence, but not a tenancy. The licence was to be for one year only, commencing from the date of the first performance.
- The theatre was to operate as a ‘club’, requiring membership at an annual subscription of 25p. Students of the Polytechnic were to be given automatic membership.
- The premises was to be shared by the Polytechnic’s Students’ Union and the theatre along the following lines:
  - during student vacations, the Soho Poly was to have full access, 9.30am - 11.30pm;
  - during term time, the theatre was to have access between 9.30am and 4.30pm;
  - during term time, the theatre and the Students’ Union would each have access for alternating three-week stints, between the hours of 4.30pm and 11.30pm. The Students’ Union would always have right of access for the last three-week period of any term;
  - other ad-hoc arrangements might be made between the respective parties, with the Secretary of the Polytechnic having final say should any disputes arise.
- The Soho Poly Theatre Club would not pay any rent. The Polytechnic would continue to be responsible for water rates and electricity charges.
- The Polytechnic agreed to pay the theatre £50 as ‘consideration for the formation of the Club’ and £200 towards alteration and installation work.<sup>10</sup>

In the event, there was little actual involvement from the Students’ Union, a fact that greatly augmented the theatre’s new-found freedoms. Proud remembers that ‘[s]tudents at the time seemed not to be interested in the work we were doing - perhaps they found the “professional set-up” not to their taste. And we were too busy to be chasing them to support us’.<sup>11</sup>

As soon as Proud and Hallé had the go-ahead from Chatterton, they began the task of making the tiny basement fit for purpose. With a hatred of black drapes, Hallé elected instead to cover the walls in brown cork which, he argued, created a warm and inviting atmosphere.<sup>12</sup> The tops of old classroom desks were used to build the raised rostra of the auditorium and a dark-brown woollen curtain was used to separate a tiny foyer from the acting area (roughly

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<sup>10</sup> See Agreement for Use of Basement Situate at 16, Riding House Street, London, W1, 23 May 1972, UWA, PCL/2/2/10.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 4 January 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Proud, in an interview with the author, 19 July 2010.

19ft x 12ft).<sup>13</sup> Most remarkably of all, a hydraulic lift shaft, which had been used to lower engines into the basement for repair, was locked in the 'up' position, creating a tiny backstage area for costume changes.<sup>14</sup>

The aesthetic properties of the new venue were to have a significant impact on the Soho Poly's developing success, creating, in John Grillo's words, a 'place that encourages one to return'.<sup>15</sup> John Ford's description of the venue is a testament to the positive response it drew when first unveiled:

The theatre is low, warm, cosy and compact, fully-carpeted with cork-faced walls. It seats around 60 people facing a natural pros arch - but it will be possible to use different forms of staging since the audience seating can be placed anywhere on moveable rostra. They've also managed to find room for a foyer/exhibition area where people can sit down and eat in comfort. And the food's going to be good, too. 5p for real coffee in a pottery mug makes a change from the price you usually have to pay for anonymous brown liquid served in scalding plastic. Verity's also making home-made soup, pate, cottage cheese and muesli, all at reasonable prices.<sup>16</sup>

Proud remembers that this food and drink would have been served from a tiny hatch in a closed-in area that also doubled as the lighting box. Echoing Ford's approval of the pottery mugs, Proud also recalls that 'all of the fare would have been presented to you on some very attractive stoneware plates, bowls and mugs. It was my fervent conviction that Front of House should be to the highest standard possible and Verity's that the food should match'.<sup>17</sup> Other early visitors deployed adjectives such as 'pleasant', and 'intimate'.<sup>18</sup> When Shirley Barrie, co-founder of the Wakefield Tricycle Compay (WTC), came to work at the theatre in 1974, some of the sheen had evidently worn off, as the quotation that prefaces this chapter reveals. Nevertheless, she still comments on its 'ambiance and magic'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fred Proud, 'Minor Miracles'.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Proud, in an interview with the author, 19 July 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from John Grillo to Nicholas Barter, received 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/43/12.

<sup>16</sup> John Ford, 'The New Soho Poly', *Time Out*, 3 March 1972, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Proud, 'Minor Miracles'.

<sup>18</sup> See, respectively: Michael Coveney, 'Review of *The Trial of St George*', *Financial Times*, 10 March 1972; Douglas Blake, 'Review of *Childhood and Infancy*', *Stage*, 23 March 1972.

<sup>19</sup> Shirley Barrie, in an email to the author, 14 September 2013.

Despite the obvious care and attention to detail which had gone into preparing the new venue, however, it is important to remember that the agreement quoted from above only offered Soho these premises for the period of one year. In the event it remained for eighteen, but no further written contracts were signed and the threat of eviction at any point after the first twelve months was a real one. This fact helps explain, perhaps, why Proud and Bargate continued to keep their eye out for theatrical opportunities elsewhere.

### **The Trial of St George**

MAO The stars like golden fruit upon a tree all out of reach.

JUDGE (Banging his gavel angrily) Mr Chow... Mao, a courtroom is no place for poetic utterances. Mr Whistler, please control your witness. A generation gap is one thing, but this appears to be a bottomless pit.

Colin Spencer, *The Trial of St George*.<sup>20</sup>

Soho began largely as it had left off when, in March 1972, it launched a programme of work demonstrating the growing range of options available to the lunchtime producer: 'one-act' plays, monologues, collections of shorter works and scripts poached from other media. Although, as ever, there was little thematic coherence, there was some attempt to promote distinct American and European seasons. The first of these was represented by Thornton Wilder, Conrad Bromberg, Arthur Kopit and Michael McClure; the latter by Loula Anagnostaki and Monique Wittig (Greek and French, respectively). Before these lunchtime offerings commenced, however, the new Soho Poly introduced itself with an evening production: *The Trial of St George*, written by Colin Spencer and directed by Fred Proud.

Spencer's earliest dramatic work, *The Ballad of the False Barman*, had premiered at the Hampstead Theatre club in 1966 and featured Penelope Keith and Michael Pennington. A memorable moment involved a character called Big Bill Mountain baring his buttocks to display a mole in a critical piece of plot

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<sup>20</sup> Colin Spencer, *The Trial of St George*, unpublished manuscript, Colin Spencer's private collection, 21.

exposition. But despite such lightly risqué elements, there was little to trouble the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>21</sup> It is more questionable whether Spencer's next Hampstead play, *Spitting Image*, about two gay men who decide to have a baby, would have been produced before the abolition of theatre censorship in 1968. Opening, instead, in September of that year, the play quickly became a commercial hit, transferring to The West End, Off-Broadway and out into the wider world, enjoying particular success in Vienna and Brazil.<sup>22</sup> Spencer's next move was a basement in Riding House Street, W1.

Proud remembers the new play as 'a perfect opener' that 'came as a package'.<sup>23</sup> The package included a 'star' actor, Nigel Hawthorne, whom Fred had seen and been impressed by in a number of productions at the Royal Court. The script was also of topical interest, inspired by the *Oz* obscenity trial of 1971. This was a bitter and blackly-comic legal debacle usually framed as a battle between the Establishment and the Underground, with the concomitant associations of the old versus the new / age versus youth.

*Oz* was a satirical magazine founded in Australia in 1963 by Richard Neville. Three years later, Neville moved to London to launch its UK counterpart. By 1970 another Australian, Jim Anderson, had joined the editorial team along with a young Brit, Felix Dennis.<sup>24</sup> Already notorious for its psychedelic covers and counter-cultural content, its 28<sup>th</sup> edition, dubbed the 'School Kids' issue (May 1970), was to become a cause célèbre. Two months after its publication, complaints passed to Scotland Yard's Obscene Publications Department led to Neville, Anderson and Dennis facing charges of 'corrupting the morals of children and young persons'.<sup>25</sup>

The 'School Kids' issue was so-called because it was guest-edited by a group of teenagers. In a 2001 piece for the *Guardian*, one of their number, Charles Shaar Murray, remembers the circumstances of his involvement:

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<sup>21</sup>Not that the play entirely avoided censure: 'fucks went out, you know, that kind of thing'. (Colin Spencer, in an interview with the author, 16 January 2013.)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 18 March 2013.

<sup>24</sup> For a good sense of the magazine's content, see Felix Dennis, 'Oz Magazine Covers', *Felix Dennis* website, accessed 3 March 2014, <http://www.felixdennis.com/gallery/oz-covers/>. Here he has posted a gallery of all the magazine's front pages from its first British edition in 1967 to its last in 1973.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Palmer, *The Trials of Oz* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1971), 14.

‘Some of us are feeling old and boring,’ began the ad in *Oz* 26. ‘We invite our readers who are under 18 to come and edit the April issue.’ [...] *Oz*, it concluded, ‘belongs to you’. [...] As actual (rather than notional) kids, we were interrogated for our opinions on education, politics and society as well as on sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. Given access to the magazine, what would we want to say? Over the next few weekends, crammed into Jim [Anderson]’s flat, we found out through the process of saying it.<sup>26</sup>

The final content was a mixture of intelligently argued pieces and adolescent smut. Belonging to the latter category was a doctored version of a cartoon by the American artist Robert Crumb. In the original - a sequence of six images - a man rapes a character called Grandma Gypsy. In the *Oz* reproduction one of the student contributors, Vivian Berger, had superimposed the cartoon character Rupert Bear’s head over the perpetrator’s. In the ensuing obscenity trial - the longest in British legal history at the time - the Rupert cartoon came to stand as a symbol of the degenerate nature of the magazine and its editors.<sup>27</sup> The proceedings, however, were to become at least as notorious for the frequently surreal testimony of its witnesses and the inept and disreputable interventions of the presiding judge.

The magazine’s clash with authority had also been escalated at the end of 1970 when a raid at the *Oz* offices turned up a small amount of cannabis. As a result, Neville had spent Christmas in jail. Writing in response to this in the January 1971 edition of the magazine, Germaine Greer drew attention to the politicised and performative nature of the police actions: ‘[t]he public-relations value of appearing to send all the pot-smoking, cunt-lapping, ad-men for the revolution to Brixton, or even Parkhurst, is enormous’.<sup>28</sup> But she also suggested that such events were re-energising the Underground, which ‘was beginning to feel (until recently) as if it was operating in a vacuum’.<sup>29</sup> ‘The backlash against permissiveness is about to provoke its own backlash’, she wrote, before

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, ‘I Was an Oz Schoolkid’, *Guardian*, 2 August 2001, accessed 15 April 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2001/aug/02/pressandpublishing.g2>.

<sup>27</sup> Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 9. The trial took place over six weeks in the summer of 1971.

<sup>28</sup> Germaine Greer, ‘Welcome the Shit-Storm’, in *The Madwoman’s Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings 1968-85* (London: Picador, 1986), 45.

<sup>29</sup> Greer, ‘Welcome the Shit-Storm’, 46

parodying the government as ‘the virgin Prime Minister and his ten thousand sainted followers’.<sup>30</sup>

The trial began in June. For the defence was John Mortimer QC, already moonlighting as a successful author and playwright. In his opening remarks, he defined the terms of debate as follows:

Members of the Jury, we are all of us, totally entitled to disagree with their [Neville’s, etc.] views; but this is a case about whether or not they are also entitled to disagree with us.<sup>31</sup>

In response, the prosecution made the case that children exposed to the magazine were being knowingly led down the paths of drug experimentation and sexual deviancy that the content was said to depict. Somewhat ironically, the proceedings themselves became increasingly prurient. The way in which the Counsel for the Prosecution, Brian Leary, outlined the danger posed by the Rupert Bear cartoon, for example, is hard to satirise:

It’s no good a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists coming along and telling us what they think; we’re concerned with the effect which this magazine might have upon young people of Vivian Berger’s own age. But is the deflowering of a virgin as depicted in the Rupert cartoon, or the equipping of Rupert with an organ of heroic dimensions, is that what life is all about? What I ask you to do, Members of the Jury, is to contemplate the effect of seeing that sort of thing upon little girls, seeing the blood pouring out of the vagina as Rupert goes in plonk.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 185-6. There may well be nuanced points to be made about the effects of such violent sexual imagery. Leary’s lurid description (‘Rupert goes in plonk’) suggests he’s not the man to make them. With regard to Leary’s first sentence, it might also be noted that many of Berger’s fellow ‘editors’ went on to carve out excellent careers, despite any degradation they may have suffered at the hands of their own imaginations: as Charles Sharr Murray records: ‘[t]he company of schoolkid editors included Peter Popham, subsequently a respected foreign correspondent for the Independent, Deyan Sudjic - the posse’s sole skinhead - founder of Blueprint, editor of Architectural Digest and a front-rank commentator on architectural issues; Colin Thomas, a successful photographer; Trudi Braun, who became a senior editor at Harper’s; Steve Havers, cultural commentator turned web designer’. (Murray, ‘I Was an Oz Schoolkid’, *Guardian*.) Charles Shaar Murray is himself a successful music journalist.

Such contempt for expert opinion became a theme of the trial, with Judge Argyle prone to dismiss anyone who contradicted his own entrenched prejudices:

There was Dr. Haward and his qualifications. You may think them very important. But, like many experts, he didn't know what 'Jail-Bait' meant - he had to have it explained to him.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of a gruelling six weeks, Neville, Anderson and Dennis were found not guilty of conspiracy but convicted on several lesser charges: publishing an obscene article; sending such an article through the post; and producing it for profit and gain. Neville was sentenced to fifteen months, Anderson to twelve, and Dennis to nine.<sup>34</sup> The convictions were overturned on appeal, however, and Judge Argyle was later ruled to have seriously misdirected the jury.<sup>35</sup>

Colin Spencer's play is also a surreal courtroom drama, and the playwright's cultural sympathies are made explicit by the name chosen for his most outrageous comic creation, Judge Bakwater (played by Hawthorne). At Bakwater's mercy is the hapless Cyril George, who finds himself in the dock following the discovery of his wife, dead, in their bedroom. Only a few weeks beforehand, we discover, George has been the subject of a miraculous transformation, having awoken one morning to discover a miniature dragon where his penis used to be. Delighted by the metamorphosis of his 'old faithful', he has set about showing it to all and sundry, including American hippy, Chu Chin Mao, who quickly co-opts him into the local commune. But how have these events precipitated Mrs George's death? And where is the blame to be laid for this unlikely tragedy? Counsel for the Prosecution, Mr Maidish, and Counsel for the Defence, Mr Whistler, battle it out before the befuddled gaze of the Judge.

For his part, Maidish would have it that the dragon in question is no more than some kind of strap-on dildo, provided by Mao for the express purposes of terrifying Mrs. George. Another possibility is advanced by a Dr Langton who, '[v]ery attractive in white leather hot-pants', holds the lecherous judge in her

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 250.

<sup>34</sup> Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 262.

<sup>35</sup> Although there were other indignities along the way, not the least the shaving of the heads of the three accused following the initial sentencing. (Tony Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 264.)

thrall.<sup>36</sup> Then, in an eleventh-hour revelation, we learn that Mao has indeed given something to George on the night before the morning in question - an ointment that has caused nothing more mythological than his first ever erection. Mrs. George's exposure to his sudden tumescence has caused her heart to stop. The barristers present their closing speeches before the judge sums up, extracting only the most irrelevant and inconsequential details of the case. George is duly sent down for seven years.

This brief synopsis may seem, at first, far removed from the events of summer 1971. But in fact the play owes a considerable (acknowledged) debt to a contemporary account of the trial by the journalist Tony Palmer.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the script, descriptions, riffs and exchanges from the actual proceedings, as recorded by Palmer, are imported almost verbatim into the action. Note, for example, the similarity between these extracts:

MAIDISH Oral sex is defined as having the male penis in your mouth.

JUDGE I'm sorry to interrupt again, but is there anything else other than a male penis?

Colin Spencer, *The Trial of St George*.<sup>38</sup>

'Have you ever seen a Penthouse or Playboy cover with a [...] girl wearing an artificial male penis?' As opposed to a female penis, I suppose he meant.

Tony Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*.<sup>39</sup>

Spencer also draws generally on the absurdities of the trial to parody the idea that England was in mortal danger from 'progressive' ideas. A dream sequence in the middle of the play neatly summarises the play's 'critique':

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<sup>36</sup> Spencer, *The Trial of St George*, 136. In his review for the *Financial Times*, Michael Coveney commented that '[t]he tone is exactly that of the event itself. A sexy doctor brings (as did Caroline Coon) a breath of fresh air to the proceedings; the Judge distorts as he attempt to clarify sentences as he sums up, condemns as he breathes. But this plunder is totally justified by the very skilful reworking of the legend of that case'. (Michael Coveney, 'Review of *The Trial of St George*', 10 March 1972)

<sup>37</sup> Colin Spencer, in an email to the author, 19 March 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Spencer, *The Trial of St George*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 92-93.

The JUDGE has dozed off as MR WHISTLER has been speaking. Lights change. Music. Mime for JUDGE'S fantasy. DR LANGTON in diaphanous robe dances in and she and the JUDGE embrace. CHU CHIN MAO in mask and dragon costume prances on and challenges JUDGE, eventually pulling Dr LANGTON away and chaining her to the witness stand. JUDGE appears charging upon a horse to the rescue and succeeds in killing the dragon. Music fade. Mime ends.<sup>40</sup>

Here, then, is the national myth gleefully debunked. The judge, uninterested in, or unable to comprehend, principles of argument, reason or proof, drifts into a fairytale fantasy in which he casts himself as brave St George. Under this guise, he rescues the damsel in distress (her professional status irrelevant besides the facts of her vulnerability and sexual allure) and defeats the (foreign) dragon, a symbol of threatening counter-cultural ideology. By such actions, the status quo is gloriously restored.

In foregrounding this apparent threat to England and Englishness, Spencer perceptively identifies the root of the prosecution's appeal to the jury during the original trial. Throughout, both Leary and Argyle were at pains to imply that, without salacious publications like *Oz*, children might remain in blissful ignorance of darker sexual perversions (like masturbation and oral sex). But they were also explicit in their conflation of such protections with a wider sense of national identity. In Leary's own summing up he argued that '[i]t is for *you*, ladies and gentlemen of this Jury [...] to set the standard by which we will continue to live in this country'.<sup>41</sup> Nor is this vision of innocence confined to the realm of childhood. In his account of the trial, Palmer notes a 'scandalised' Argyle's concern over the courtroom being exposed to terms such as cunnilingus, and contrasts that with John Peel's assertion from the witness box that a significant proportion of those present would, in fact, have suffered from venereal disease.<sup>42</sup> The Argyle / Leary axis cast themselves as the protectors of the nation's purity and propriety. At the same time, their mock ignorance about its actual sexual character must bring such a strategy into question.

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<sup>40</sup> Spencer, *The Trial of St George*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 184. Judge Bakwater expresses similar sentiments: 'I am sure you are aware that the English character is alone in the world for being remarkably restrained, for having indeed, a stability and serenity in its nature which is not liable to decline into hysterical exhibitionism'. (Colin Spencer, *The Trial of St George*, 45.)

<sup>42</sup> Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 162; 249.

As noted above, the *Oz* trial has come to stand for a moment of generational conflict. On one side were the voices of permissiveness, strongly, if simplistically, identified with young adults like the magazine's editors. Opposite them stood the bastions of reaction/conservatism identified with (older) figures of authority. Palmer quotes Neville as follows:

I emerge from the trial, he [Neville] concluded, confirmed in my views about the lack of communication and understanding between myself, as a young person, and you as a Judge.<sup>43</sup>

Leary is also quoted as stating that Vivian Berger's aim 'was to shock our generation and show that his generation was different in moral outlook'.<sup>44</sup> When the events of the *Oz* trial are reflected in the mirror of Colin Spencer's play, however, a more complex picture emerges. The final scene, for instance, finds Spencer's fictionalised legal triumvirate preparing to share a convivial drink.<sup>45</sup> For all the sound and fury of the courtroom, the passions expressed there by the judge and his two counsels are, therefore, revealed as a performance. Spencer's final image recalls Germaine Greer's suggestion, in an article written after the trial (unpublished at the time), that the heavy-handedness with which Neville and his associates were treated was possible precisely because they were *not* a significant threat. The trial could not have been conducted in the way that it was, she argued, if the magazine had had a 'large minority following, or particularly militant supporters. [...] Part of the point of the trial was to show that *Oz* was of little consequence'.<sup>46</sup> She continued:

The *Oz* trial was a public relations exercise for the Tories. The public chastisement of *Oz*, however gratuitous and fanatical to the liberal mind, would persuade those voters who read the *News of the World* that this is the government to clean up Piccadilly Circus and smash strikes.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 274.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 185.

<sup>45</sup> In the easy manner with which they cast off their professional roles, there is an echo of Palmer's own withering conclusion: [a]nd so the prosecuting Counsel had returned to his herb garden and his holidays in Acapulco, content with a job well done, as he put it; Mr. Mortimer to his plays and theatre in another place; the Judge to his chambers to hopefully study the efficacy of the law. (Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 270).

<sup>46</sup> Germaine Greer, 'Oz Trial Post-Mortem', in *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings 1968-85* (London: Picador, 1986), 60.

<sup>47</sup> Germaine Greer, 'Oz Trial Post-Mortem', 61.

In other words, crushing an apparently dangerous, but actually relatively tame, instance of counter-cultural activity would act as warning or deterrent, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the Establishment's might. (Just as, in Bakwater's fantasy, the dragon is both seemingly terrifying and easily vanquished.) Hypocrisy thereby becomes inevitable as the guardians of the status quo are forced to perform a sense of outrage in response to an exaggerated threat.<sup>48</sup> Under such an analysis, the idea of a generational divide is revealed as a powerful tool of wider social control.

Given its topicality and 'star' casting, *The Trial of St George* had seemed like the perfect way to christen the Soho Poly. And in the event, the play proved a qualified critical success. The *Observer* asserted that the venue had made a 'good start', while *Time Out* offered more fulsome praise: '[t]he cast is probably the wittiest in London at present, and Nigel Hawthorne as the judge is a magnificent parody of all the judges you have ever known'.<sup>49</sup> Irving Wardle, in a *Times* review entitled 'Scoop for a Midget House', remarked on a production 'well-judged for these conditions [and] from its honky-tonk National Anthem to sardonic ballet, it is very well played'.<sup>50</sup> Writing in the *Guardian*, Nicholas De Jongh complimented the play's 'atmospherics and observations' and revelled in the 'glorious humour' stemming from the juxtapositions of 'farcical sexual catastrophe' with the conventions of the courtroom.<sup>51</sup> However, his review only touches lightly on the play's inspiration ('the occasional sexual inanities of the OZ trial'), and there is no sense in the wider critical commentary that the production stirred up controversy.<sup>52</sup> Despite a strong sense of polemic encoded in the play's dramaturgy, it was received largely on face value: as riotous farce.

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<sup>48</sup> Actually, Germaine Greer's comments, quoted from above, are slightly contradictory. Taken in context, it is clear that she believes the charges were trumped up and the degree of outrage manufactured. However, when she writes that, '[t]he point of the trial was to show that *Oz* was of little consequence', she seems to undermine this point. Weren't Leary, Argyle et al. anxious to make *exaggerated* claims for the danger the magazine posed? But I take Greer to mean that showing *Oz* to have 'little consequence' actually meant showing *Oz* to have been easily crushed, thereby enhancing the perceived strength of the Establishment.

<sup>49</sup> John Ford, 'Review of *The Trial of St George*', *Time Out*, 17 March 1972, 42.

<sup>50</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Scoop for a Midget House', *Times*, 9 March 1972.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Review of *The Trial of St George*', *Guardian*, 10 March 1972.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

In Chapter One, I referenced the critic Jonathan Hammond's frustration that the lunchtime theatres did not produce more work that engaged with 'the external realities of our political and social situation'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, writing in September 1971, he had mentioned the *Oz* trial directly, with the implication that this was the kind of story that required urgent theatrical treatment. It is interesting to note, therefore, that when Soho did confront specific political or cultural issues, it was hardly given forceful encouragement. Compare, too, the somewhat patronising response to Paul Thompson's production of *The Informer* at the King's Head twelve months before.

In the event, *The Trial of St George* did not herald any change of programming policy for the new Soho Poly. A week after its opening, a series of lunchtime productions was launched, and although there was an attempt to create loose groupings of American and European work, there was little else to bind the season together.<sup>54</sup> Such eclecticism, as already discussed, often provoked critical anxiety. However, the productions discussed in the following summary all have individual points of interest. Rather than attempting, artificially, to draw them into over-arching lines of argument, I aim to create a sense of how the programme of work might have been encountered at the time.

### **Americans at Lunchtime**

In the midst of the *Oz* chaos, Michael Segal, a former probation officer and Head of Children's Programmes for Rediffusion Television, proffered the following explanation for the trial's fixation with Rupert Bear: '[h]e is a kind of fantasy [...] that is presented to children which most children resent. It is the sort of fantasy which many parents like to think relates to their children's experience. It very rarely does, in my view'.<sup>55</sup> Like *The Trial of St George*, the two plays that introduced the Soho Poly's first lunchtime season also engaged, at least tangentially, with the theme of generational disconnection.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Season press release [March 1972?], Fred Proud's private collection.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *The Trials of Oz*, 140.

*Infancy and Childhood* by Thornton Wilder - described by Frank Marcus as 'a doyen of the American avant-garde' - opened on the 14 March 1972 in a double-bill directed by John Link.<sup>56</sup> In the first piece, two babies, Tommy and little Moe, both played by grown men, are wheeled around central park by their mothers. When Moe, enraged by his inability to communicate, pretends to be dead, Officer Avonzino ('a policeman from the Keystone comic movies with a waterfall moustache, thick black eyebrows and a large silver star') rushes to help.<sup>57</sup> 'Like usual', he declares, 'babies acting like grewed-ups; grewed-ups acting like babies'.<sup>58</sup> But Moe has arrived at a different conclusion. 'You know what I think,' he tells Tommy conspiratorially, 'I think people aren't SERIOUS about us'.<sup>59</sup>

The second play, *Childhood*, begins with three children playing in their garden. When their father returns they 'fly into the house like frightened pigeons', leaving him to lament the fact that 'no instrument has yet been discovered that can read what goes on in another's mind'.<sup>60</sup> At which point we are suddenly propelled into a dream sequence, also established (via stage direction) as one of the children's morbid games. It seems that the father has his wish - although he may come to regret it, for we are now at the funeral of both parents, killed in some kind of grim 'accydent'.<sup>61</sup> The children have suitcases in preparation for a journey and a bus pulls up with a conductor who is also an iteration of the father. The children board and the conductor/father delivers a monologue about the perils of the journey ahead - the 'Black Snake Indian territory' and 'the

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Marcus, 'Dr. Miller's Casebook', *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 March 1972. Wilder's plays were written in 1961 and 1960 respectively and both had their first production at the Circle in the Square Theatre in New York in 1962. The two pieces were part of a sequence originally intended to run to seven short plays, following the order of Shakespeare's 'seven ages of man' speech in *As You Like It*. As Michael Billington noted in his review of the Soho production, Wilder was not much in fashion at the time, '[h]owever, the Soho Theatre in Riding House Street, W.1 has had the gumption to revive [them]'. (Michael Billington, 'Review of *Infancy and Childhood*', 23 March 1972.)

<sup>57</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Infancy: A Comedy in One Act* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1961), 5; 19.

<sup>58</sup> Wilder, *Infancy*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Wilder, *Infancy*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Childhood: A Comedy in One Act* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1961), 6; 9.

<sup>61</sup> Wilder, *Childhood*, 10.

Kappikappi River, where all those lions and tigers are'.<sup>62</sup> Casting himself in the role of action hero, his struggles of masculinity are revealed in the way he imagines 'the look on the faces of our wives and children' as the reward for his endeavours.

On the family's return, however, there is no resolution of the differences between them. The generational gulf remains as impassable as the bridge over the flooded river. Earlier, the eldest daughter has told the imagined funeral guests that her mother 'didn't unnerstand [sic] children'.<sup>63</sup> The opposite cry goes up from the conductor, '*children don't understand*, and that's all you can say about it'.<sup>64</sup> In the last moments of the play, we return to the image of the father standing alone in the garden.<sup>65</sup>

In his review of the Soho Poly production, Irving Wardle dismissed Wilder's implication that a permanent state of war exists between children and grown-ups.<sup>66</sup> Michael Billington was also critical, particularly of *Childhood*, which he accused of 'breaking into whimsy'.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, interpreting the meaning of the piece to lie in the father's realisation that 'children can't stand being treated as children', Billington acknowledged this as 'a valid message at a time when there is so much patronising talk about 'the kids''.<sup>68</sup> Given that *The Trial of St George* was running concurrently with the Wilder pieces, it is quite possible that Billington had Spencer's production, and the wider questions of generational conflict posed by the *Oz* trial, in mind when voicing this opinion. Proud recalls that the choice to present the Wilder and Spencer plays alongside each other was a matter of accident rather than design.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that Soho now had its own premises - and therefore greater programming freedoms - meant there were new opportunities for such stimulating (if serendipitous) juxtapositions. Running alongside the dramatic bill, the venue also hosted an exhibition of Spencer's paintings. At a time when so much fringe activity was in flux, the possibility of presenting work across the day, combined

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<sup>62</sup> Wilder, *Childhood*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Wilder, *Childhood*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Wilder, *Childhood*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Wilder, *Childhood*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *Infancy and Childhood*', *Times*, 16 March 1972.

<sup>67</sup> Billington, 'Review of *Infancy and Childhood*'.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Fred Proud, in an interview with the author, 19 July 2010.

with the organisation of auxiliary events, was critical to the launching of a new 'permanent' fixture on the cultural map.<sup>70</sup>

For different reasons, the place of performance was also to prove significant in the reception of Soho's next lunchtime offering, two similarly short pieces by the American writer Conrad Bromberg. In the first, *The Rooming House* (1970), a cruel fantasist affects to seduce a desperately lonely divorcee. In fact, he is merely pursuing his 'philosophy of disappointment', a misogynistic desire to humiliate women by falsely encouraging their hopes for the future.<sup>71</sup> The play is an oppressive and despairing work, which prompted a *Time Out* reviewer to note that 'you feel that Bromberg recognises the destructive impulse within himself, and seeks by his writing to force that recognition in others'.<sup>72</sup>

The same review, however, described the play's companion piece, *Dr Galley* (1970), as 'a staggering antidote for anyone who feels that one-man shows must be a lot of boring old hat'.<sup>73</sup> The success of the production rested partly on Henry Woolf's performance as the eponymous doctor, a psychotherapist delivering a talk at an American University, which dissolves into a painful exposition of the collapse of his marriage.<sup>74</sup> The production was also identified, however, as an example of the type of play that the lunchtime theatres were particularly well-suited to present. In an article for *New Society* in June 1972, Irving Wardle referenced *Dr Galley* in the context of more general comments about the spaces that constituted so much of the London fringe and alternative theatre landscape:

The actor is somebody like you, and you have probably pushed past him on the stairs, or queued behind him for a coffee. Now he is about to perform for you within touching distance. He may detach himself from you, and defend himself with technique: but he cannot pretend to be another kind of creature. The closest analogy for the relationship is that of a Quaker meeting, with the actors as those who testify and offer their own experiences for the benefit of other friends.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ford, 'The New Soho Poly'.

<sup>71</sup> Conrad Bromberg, *The Rooming House*, in *Transfers: Three One-Act Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1970), 21-40.

<sup>72</sup> 'Review of *The Rooming House*', *Time Out*, 31 March 1972, 41.

<sup>73</sup> 'Review of *Dr Galley*', *Time Out*, 31 March 1972, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Conrad Bromberg, *Doctor Galley*, in *Transfers: Three One-Act Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1970), 41-64.

<sup>75</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', *New Society*, 29 June 1972, 686.

Wardle's remarks place an important value on the informality of the 'fringe' experience and the dissolving of the rituals of difference (actor/audience, stage/auditorium) associated with contemporary theatrical convention.

The last double-bill of the American mini-season offered two more examples from the American avant-garde. The first of these, *The Hero* (1957), was written by Arthur Kopit who had come to prominence in 1969 with his play *Indians*, simultaneously a critique of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and American involvement in the Vietnam War. In a review for *The Village Voice*, John Lahr wrote that the play's lack of conventional structure dramatised 'the intangible psychic confusions of modern America'. *The Hero*, however, appears to have no such political overtones. A wordless two-hander, it begins with the arrival of a man into a desert landscape with only an attaché case containing a paint box. Unfolding an eight-foot scroll, collected from off stage, he begins to sketch the image of an oasis. A woman in rags arrives and the two engage in a coy flirtation. He offers her half an inedible sandwich, and finally they sit together under the shade of the painted tree.<sup>76</sup> *The Hero* is slight play, little more than an extended sketch, which is chiefly notable, perhaps, for the rare appearance of Fred Proud in the main role. Proud had initially entered Rose Bruford College on the acting programme and excelled at mime. Here was a rare opportunity to revisit the craft. *The Stage* recorded that he did so with 'uncommon skill'.<sup>77</sup>

Kopit's play was paired with Michael McClure's *The Pansy* (1969), another of his *Gargoyle Cartoons*. This piece begins with three panda bears slumped around a picnic, drifting in and out of sleep. Across the stage crawl two naked fairies, Tina and Nita (described as 'quite lovely'). They sniff each other's bottoms admiringly. A giant frog hops across the stage. Baby Panda spots the frog, and tries to interest his father in the discovery. Instead, Papa reaches into his bag for a bottle of wine and snacks Baby Panda over the head with it. Tina and Nita sniff Baby Panda's bottom: 'YECCH!' Baby Panda is delighted by the fairies and sings a short rhyme about his day. By now he has become convinced that the frog is a princess, but his parents are having none of it. 'That's nothing

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur Kopit, *The Hero*, in *Chamber Music and Other Plays* (London: Methuen 1969), 81.

<sup>77</sup> Douglas Blake, 'Two at Lunchtime', *Stage*, 20 April 1972.

but a dead mosquito, dear!’ says Mama Panda, putting an end to the matter. ‘LITTLE BASTARD!’ exclaims Papa Panda as they all trot off together. ‘CHUGURUM!’ says the giant frog.<sup>78</sup>

It might be foolhardy to attempt a concrete analysis of something the author himself describes as a ‘dream beam’.<sup>79</sup> Some clues are to be found, however, in McClure’s description of the circumstances surrounding the Magic Theatre production of *The Cherub* (1969), another of the *Gargoyle Cartoons* featuring multi-coloured heads, a talking bed, and the voices of Jesus and Camus:

The play opened on May 16th, 1969, during the Siege of Berkeley. The play had the function of preserving the sense of pleasure while tear gas laden helicopters blistered over-head. There were police and National Guard barricades at the street corners. People leaving the theatre on opening night were greeted with bayonets.<sup>80</sup>

This performance history impacts on the other plays in the set by association.<sup>81</sup> Both Kopit and McClure were strongly linked, therefore, to the energies of the American counter-culture. As usual, however, any attempt to attribute specific political motivation to Soho itself is undermined by Proud’s insistence that the criterion for choosing plays was simply the quality of the scripts.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible by this point to begin to get sense of Proud’s own personal tastes. Many of the plays he directed had a strong visual component, often combined with a non-naturalistic, or at least stylised, use of language. Alongside *The Pansy* and *The Hero*, consider, for example, James Leo Herlihy’s *Bad Bad Jo-Jo*, Peter Weiss’ *The Tower*, Fernando Arrabal’s *The Solemn Communion*, John Grillo’s *Number Three*, and Malcolm McClure’s *Spider Rabbit*.

### European ‘Season’

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<sup>78</sup> Michael McClure, *The Pansy*, in *Gargoyle Cartoons, or, The Chabroiled Chinchilla* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 15-33.

<sup>79</sup> Introduction to McClure, *Gargoyle Cartoons*, not paginated.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Although it should be noted that McClure has always rejected claims that his plays are primarily political. See Jane Edwardes, ‘Michael McClure: Interview’, *Time Out*, 18 July 2006, accessed 23 November 2013, <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/michael-mcclure-interview>.

<sup>82</sup> For example, Fred Proud, email to the author 7 October 2013.

The Soho Poly's next lunchtime groupings comprised two works by European writers: Loula Anagnostaki and Monique Wittig. Anagnostaki's *The City* (1965) - originally part of a triptych of plays - revolves around a couple who, having invited a photographer to dinner, proceed to disorientate and humiliate him by means of increasingly disturbing role-plays. At the play's finish, the woman seems to imagine a great fire engulfing the city.<sup>83</sup> In an essay on Anagnostaki's work, Elizabeth Sakellaridou acknowledges the play's absurdist and Pinteresque sensibilities.<sup>84</sup> She also sees the drama as a political allegory for Greece's 'tragic historical legacy' in the post war period.<sup>85</sup> Despite good notices for the acting and directing, such culturally-specific interpretations were missed by reviewers of the Soho production, with Gary O'Connor, for example, remarking on the play's 'inherent emptiness'.<sup>86</sup> The second play, *Ladybird*, was an adaptation of the radio drama *La Récréation* (1972) by the French writer Monique Wittig (1935-2003) who had recently come to wider attention with the publication of her novel *Les Guérillères* (1969).<sup>87</sup> *La Récréation* had been broadcast on 29 January 1971 in a translation by Barbara Wright. It was directed by Sheila Allen, who was also to direct the subsequent stage version, casting Jean Gilpin and Pat Leventon in the two roles - a masseur 'Z' and her client 'U'.

Throughout the play, Z, seems to be inflicting considerable pain on U. U gets her partial revenge by indulging in long flights of fancy centring around two girlfriends, Aubierge and Clarisse, who may well be imaginary. In one tall tale, she discusses a Western she is involved in filming. At another moment she tells a bizarre story about an Emu responsible for splitting the skulls of, variously, a local butcher and butcher's assistant, the milkman and electrician. A story arc is hinted at briefly when Z asks, towards the end, 'what happens when a masseuse

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<sup>83</sup> Loula Anagnostakis, 'The City: A Trilogy of One Act Plays', trans. George Valamvanos and Kenneth MacKinnon, *The Charioteer* 26 (1984): 72.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Sakellaridou, 'Levels of Victimization in the Plays of Loula Anagnostakis', *JMGS* 14, no. 1 (May 1996): 106.

<sup>85</sup> Sakellaridou, 'Levels of Victimization', 107.

<sup>86</sup> Garry O'Connor, 'Review of *The City*', *Financial Times*, 27 April 1972.

<sup>87</sup> This novel, which tells the story of a war between the sexes and the movement towards a female-centred utopian society, has become a landmark text in the development of post-war feminist theory. (Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (London: Women's Press, 1979).)

gets fond of the person she's massaging?'.<sup>88</sup> But the moment is a tease: Z has developed no such attachment herself.

In his chapter 'Radio Drama since 1960' (1981), David Wade makes a somewhat uncharitable reference to the broadcast version of this play in the context of a discussion of new stereophonic radio techniques, developed to spread sound and encourage an audience's awareness of physical space:

I recall a play, a two-hander for a masseuse and her female patient to which we were invited to listen first because for the sake of verisimilitude, the actress playing the patient had done so more or less naked, second because it would be possible for us to tell with some exactitude on what part of the body the masseuse was operating. It was not a very remarkable play, and stereo did nothing to improve its quality. Indeed, it introduced a rather unfortunate element of farce. The length of the patient's body being the same as the distance between the twin loudspeakers, the masseuse appeared to be working on a giantess.<sup>89</sup>

It is unfortunate that such experimentation may have detracted from the play, which is otherwise sensitively attuned to the demands of the radio form. At its core is the juxtaposition between concrete physical description and sudden moments of shape-shifting. A striking example occurs during an exchange in which U threatens to turn into a snake. Z responds:

Z: I wasn't startled because you threatened to turn yourself into a snake later on, but because you really were a snake while I was holding you by the waist. (*U laughs*) Yes, I actually thought you were going to slip through my fingers, a real snake.

U: (*Simply*) Yes, I have that gift. I'm good at mimesis.<sup>90</sup>

In the context of the radio play, and the developing absurdist rhythms of the piece, it is possible that this transformation has, indeed, taken place. Certainly the listener's imagination is activated in a way that would be much harder to achieve

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<sup>88</sup> Monique Wittig, *La Récréation*, trans. Barbara Wright, unpublished radio script, held in the Barbara Wright archive at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, 15.

<sup>89</sup> David Wade, 'Radio Drama since 1960', *British Radio Drama*, ed. John Drakakis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 242-243.

<sup>90</sup> Wittig, *La Récréation*, 8.

with the two actors visible on stage.<sup>91</sup> The addition of the visual dimension must have risked foregrounding the sexual provocations, at the expense of the sense of the body as both a fixed physical reality and a site of imagination, projection and transformation. In a review for the *Telegraph*, Charles Lewsen mentions slides projected against a net curtain, which may have been an attempt to find theatrical equivalent for the more abstract moments that might otherwise have been lost in translation.<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, in the absence of a theatrical script, it is difficult to discover what other changes might have been made. A copy of the radio version does exist in the archives of Wittig's translator Barbara Wright, held by Indiana University's Lilly Library. Since it is filed with a programme for the Soho production, it is possible that the original version was used in largely unmodified form. If so, *Ladybird*, offers a counterpoint to a production like *The Tower* discussed in detail in Chapter Two. There, considerable work was done in order to bring a radio play in line with specific theatrical demands. The Soho Poly production of *Ladybird* hints, perhaps, at the more unsatisfactory results of a 'straight' translation from one medium to another. In such cases, critical anxieties over the artistic merits of this strand of lunchtime work appear better-founded.

Two further productions closed this first chapter in the Soho Poly's history. The first was a collection of five short plays, organised into two distinct sets: *Social Circus* and *Soho Double Act* (1972). The collection included three pieces by Fred Proud himself, a play about the trade unionist Joseph Arch by Paul Thompson, and *Superscum* by Mary O'Malley. This latter was O'Malley's first piece for theatre, and tells the story of a woman who makes a 'career' out of benefit fraud. O'Malley was later to write *Once a Catholic* (1977), a huge success for the Royal Court, and still regularly performed today.<sup>93</sup> No copies of Proud's own plays exist, but a synopsis of one the three, *Chelsea Hates Whores*,

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<sup>91</sup> The radio version is full of other such moments of ambiguity or indeterminacy. For example, contradictory information makes it impossible to determine the true colour or length of U's hair. (Wittig, *La Récréation*, 3.)

<sup>92</sup> Charles Lewsen, 'Review of *Ladybird*', *Times*, 10 May 1972. The *Stage* review also makes reference to the 'prettily feminine' set, another reminder than, on stage, the drama would have had to work harder to fly free of naturalistic moorings. (Douglas Blake, 'Massage Cubicle', *Stage*, 18 May 1972.)

<sup>93</sup> In February 1975 Soho also produced her lunchtime play *Oh, if Ever a Man Suffered* (see Appendix A for full list of productions).

in a review for *The Stage*, suggests the influence of Heathcote Williams' *The Local Stigmatic*: 'two football supporters up West attack a junkie and put the boot in, to the disgust of a prostitute'.<sup>94</sup>

The final lunchtime show before the summer was the provocatively titled *We Are All Niggers Under the Skin* (1972) by the playwright, science fiction author and journalist Robert Ray. The play was inspired by an interview Ray had conducted with the militant African-American activist Hakim Jamel following the publication of *From the Dead Level* (1971), a memoir chronicling Jamel's relationship with his cousin, Malcolm X.<sup>95</sup> The cast of the play included Mona Hammond who had come to attention with her performance as Lady Macbeth at the Roundhouse in 1970. Another of the main parts was played by Jimmy Owens, a member of the Black Panther movement who had recently spent ten months in jail in America on a murder charge.<sup>96</sup>

Although it has not been possible to locate a copy of the unpublished script, its director Roger Christian gives the following description:

We had Jimmy Owens and Sean [Hewitt] on stage in a bunker in South Africa, and Sean is convincing them [that] we should all be mixed race and that would get rid of all the problems. And it was a really a sort of soft white version of racism. And so I planted Mona Hammond in the audience. She stood up and said, you know, this is shit, you really want to talk about what this is all about, let's talk about it. And Jimmy Owens says, 'come on then, come up here', so she came up on stage.<sup>97</sup>

From there, the play developed into an apparently spontaneous, but in fact tightly scripted, debate. Occasionally, members of the audience would attempt to get involved, whereupon the actors would have to steer the conversation back towards the text. At one point, in a carefully rigged special effect, a gun went off, apparently firing a bullet into the back wall. Christian remembers that it was common for a portion of the audience to flee the auditorium at this point. He also

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<sup>94</sup> Douglas Blake, 'A Group of Five', *Stage*, 25 May 1972.

<sup>95</sup> Hakim A. Jamal, *From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me* (London: Deutsch, 1971). In an article for *Time Out*, Ray also explained that he drew heavily on both Jamel's book and the writings of Malcolm X in the script. (Naseem Khan, 'Two Sides to a Nigger', *Time Out*, 26 May 1972, 15.)

<sup>96</sup> Khan, 'Two Sides', 15.

<sup>97</sup> Roger Christian, in an interview with the author, 18 January 2014.

remembers a visit from 'a very obvious secret service policeman', who demanded to have a copy of the script.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusions

From the moment Fred Proud and Verity Bargate secured their new Riding House Street premises, they set out to create an informal and welcoming environment. This was reflected in the décor, the care given to the preparation of the refreshments on offer, and even in the choice of crockery. The first production - a direct response to contemporary cultural events - had also been carefully planned to capture the attention of audience and critics. With a stand-out performance by Nigel Hawthorne in the lead role, and an accompanying exhibition of the playwright's paintings, *The Trial of St George* confidently announced the arrival of the new venue. Proud and Bargate's efforts were well-rewarded, as the positive response of visitors to the space makes clear.

The unfolding programme of lunchtime work was diverse and only loosely structured. In Chapter Two, I explored some of the reasons why histories of the period have tended to push lunchtime theatre's contribution to the margins. I suggested, there, that apparently contingent programming choices encouraged some critics to separate theatres such as the Soho Poly from the general thrust of alternative theatre activity.<sup>99</sup> Certainly, as the survey offered in this chapter demonstrates, anyone looking to identify a consistent artistic policy, at least along radical/political lines would be disappointed. Whilst it is true that the second half of the season included work by three women, one of whom (Monique Wittig) was strongly identified with feminist movements, these productions did not belong to any wider pattern of work or clearly-formulated policy. Robert Ray's play was also something of anomaly, and nor does the work by writers claimed for the American counter-culture, such as Kopit and McClure,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> See Sandy Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future: The Beginnings of the Fringe', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980); Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman, 1975).

allow for any firm conclusions to be drawn about Soho's political or cultural stance.

Proud's insistence that the deciding factor in programming was simply the quality of the scripts does not, however, tell the full story. Of equal importance to an understanding of the Soho Poly's early history was its willingness to welcome other creative input. It is notable, after-all, that the productions that do best reflect contemporary developments in the areas of, for example, women's playwriting and racial politics, were brought to the theatre by outside directors. These voices, combined with Proud and Bargate's personal taste and theatrical nous allowed the theatre to resonate with wider cultural vibrations. And indeed, in terms of output if not process, this period sees it displaying much of the contradictory variety captured, always incompletely, by terms such as 'countercultural', 'experimental', 'radical', 'underground' and 'avant-garde'.

Finally, none of the above is meant to suggest that Proud and Bargate were not, at all times, thinking creatively and strategically about their theatre's output and future. In fact, as I demonstrate in my final chapter, both went to considerable lengths to address questions over the quality and nature of lunchtime work.

## Chapter Five

### The Soho Poly, 1972-1975: New Experiments / Other Voices

[F]ringe theatre is now increasingly having to create its own work. When the movement started, there were plenty of good unperformed scripts, and the theatres did a service by giving them a showing. [...] This work has now been done. And in the words of Dan Crawford, the director of the King's Head, the competition for new scripts has become "like vultures after a bone".

Irving Wardle, *New Society*, 1972.<sup>1</sup>

In order to examine the Soho Poly's unfolding activity during the period 1972-1975, I have divided this chapter into two sections. In the first, 'New Experiments', I show how it sought to address, head on, persistent critical anxieties about a lack of high-quality material. I begin by touching on the theatre's 'neglected classics' season, which spanned August - September 1972. I afford greater space to the 'Bunch of Fives' experiment of autumn 1973, offering a detailed case study of this bold attempt to develop brand new work. Of the plays to emerge from the project, I pay particular attention to Robert Holman's *Coal*, the stage design for which illustrates how the limitations of the Soho Poly basement could be turned to advantage. The 'Bunch of Fives' season is also significant for the way in which it sought to realise some of Proud's earliest ambitions for the theatre, as well as for the continuing challenge it offers to new-writing venues today. Finally, in this first section, I consider another new direction pursued at this time - 'Bread 'n Butter', a subsidiary company established by Proud and Bargate in 1974 to produce touring and community-orientated plays. This discussion will also provide a reminder of how different historical sources can tell contradictory stories.

As I have shown in earlier chapters, Fred Proud and Verity Bargate frequently invited guest directors to work at the theatre. In my second section, 'Other Voices', I show how, from 1973, this policy was dramatically extended. Spring of that year, for example, saw James O'Brien installed as 'acting artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', *New Society*, 29 June 1972, 686.

director'.<sup>2</sup> O'Brien introduced a number of playwrights to the theatre, including David Edgar who offers a revealing critique of the Soho Poly's character at this time. This period also saw an attempt to instigate a 'pay what you can' pricing policy. Much of 1974 was then dominated by collaborations with the Wakefield Tricycle Company (WTC) and the Basement theatre. With reference to the personal recollections of Shirley Barrie, co-founder of the WTC, I examine the potential advantages of such co-operation, as well as the steps that Proud and Bargate took to maintain their theatre's individual identity.<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 1975, another director, Robert Walker, presided over a programme of work that included plays by Howard Brenton and Barrie Keeffe.

This combination of new initiatives from within and new creative energy from without helped the Soho Poly establish itself as the most dynamic of the dedicated lunchtime venues. At the same time, however, Fred Proud was becoming increasingly frustrated by the theatre's limitations. Throughout 1973 and 1974 he was actively on the lookout for opportunities elsewhere and the following year he directed only two Soho productions. The second of these, Christopher Wilkins' *The Late Wife* (1975), was to be his last. In my conclusion, I return to the internal tensions that underpinned the theatre's development at this time and consider the implications of Proud's departure. I also reflect on the importance of the Riding House Street premises to Soho's survival, and, indeed, the survival of other lunchtime companies such as the WTC.

### **New Experiments: Neglected Classics**

Irving Wardle's comments, quoted at the top of this chapter, appeared in the June 1972 edition of *New Society*. Only a few weeks later, Proud responded to such concerns directly in a letter to Nicholas Barter at the Arts Council:

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<sup>2</sup> John Ford, 'New Soho Poly Season', *Time Out*, 16 February 1973, 19. As noted in my introduction, Fred Proud remembers this as a more informal arrangement.

<sup>3</sup> At this point, various theatre histories inevitably intersect, as is evidenced by the fact that certain records of the Soho Poly's early activity are held in the Tricycle Theatre folders at the V&A's Theatre and Performance Archives, Blythe House, London.

I feel it will give lunchtime theatre a shot in the arm generally if we deliberately present a season of six major short neglected plays by great writers. I hope that this will raise the critical and public standing of lunchtime theatre at the same time as widening its [sic] scope. Following this season we aim to present a second extended season of, if necessary commissioned plays, completely new with the conscious aim of searching for a popular entertainment form within lunchtime theatre. By that I mean, presenting a brief to writers to write what they like, but to bring in popular entertainment forms; stand-up comics, pop groups, story telling [sic], ballad representation, pantomime, even strip.<sup>4</sup>

The letter elicited a favourable response, with Drama Officer Susan Tyler replying by return and expressing the Council's interest.<sup>5</sup> The next month, the Soho Poly duly mounted a production of *On the Road*, written in 1885 by Anton Chekhov. This was the first of six 'neglected classics' that were to play until the middle of November. The full programme comprised: *The Cave of Salamanca* (written c1615) by Miguel de Cervantes; *Husbands and Lovers* (published 1924) by Ferenc Molnár; *Lonesome-Like* (1911) by Harold Brighouse; *Overruled* (1912) by George Bernard Shaw; and *St. Patrick's Day, or, The Scheming Lieutenant* (1775) by Richard Sheridan. There was also an evening production of Dürrenmatt's *The Fifth Labour of Hercules* (1954).<sup>6</sup> Proud shared directorial duties with two newly-appointed associates, James O'Brien and Philip Allen-Morgan, as well as James Grout who was responsible for the Chekhov opener.

Accompanying Proud's genuine belief in the merits of these little-known pieces, there was a keen sense of pragmatism:

We knew that Arts Editors would be attracted to those names [-] Chekhov, Cervantes, etc. This would set up more opportunity to do new plays by unknown writers later and perhaps get more coverage for them.<sup>7</sup>

Despite good reviews for the season, however, minutes of the EDC's October 1972 meeting reveal that the experiment had not abated concerns over the value of lunchtime theatre. If anything, it had drawn greater attention to its perceived shortcomings, as a contribution from Roy Kift suggests:

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Fred Proud to Nicholas Barter, 18 July 1972, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, ACGB/40/105/4.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Susan Tyler to Fred Proud, 20 July 1972, ACGB/40/105/4.

<sup>6</sup> This was an evening production and so not strictly speaking a part of the *lunchtime* 'neglected classics' season.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 2 February 2014.

The major lunchtime theatres such as the Soho/Poly were now having to do revivals rather than new material, and it seemed that the only consistent point about lunchtime theatres was that they perform at lunchtime.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until the following autumn that Proud was able to follow up on the second of his two proposals. This was to prove a much more successful response to the crisis in confidence over lunchtime work.

### **‘A Bunch of Fives’**

In conceiving what was to become known as the ‘Bunch of Fives’ season, Proud had been influenced as much by the larger-scale repertory companies as new writing initiatives elsewhere on the fringe. As he recalls:

It was clear to me that sometimes actors clicked together and at other times they didn’t. I had come to the conclusion that the better actors know each other the more relaxed they become and the more prepared to be taken away from their comfort zones. I think the inspiration was Olivier’s National Theatre company.<sup>9</sup>

His plan, therefore, was to pull together a ‘permanent company’ of actors who would work collaboratively with writers and directors in order to generate new work. The process would begin with a week-long workshop in summer 1973 based around structured improvisations. Out of this, writers would develop scripts, to be performed by the company in lunchtime slots throughout the autumn.

The project was promoted as five directors, five actors and five writers. In the event, there were three directors (Fred Proud, Chris Parr and Max Stafford-Clark) and nine actors.<sup>10</sup> There were, however, five playwrights: Robert Holman, Geoffrey Case, Chris Allen, David Mowat and Vicky Ireland. As noted above,

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<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/36/2.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 July 2013.

<sup>10</sup> The actors were: Brian Deacon, Eric Deacon, Stephen Bent, Michael Harbour, Tony Rohr, Peter Turner, Caroline Hunt, Christine Schofield and Illona Linthwaite. However, not all of these were involved in the initial workshop week.

the Arts Council had been impressed by the initiative and the New Drama Committee (NDC) agreed to offer some additional funds - £150 on a 'pound for pound' basis from their 'Attachments' scheme.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst the regular reviewers of lunchtime work, the experiment provoked considerable excitement. In an article for the *Financial Times*, Michael Coveney was full of praise for a 'marvellous tactic' that addressed an urgent need for dynamic new work.<sup>12</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in a *Time Out* piece by Dusty Hughes entitled 'Fred Sticks His Neck Out'. Hughes described the project as a 'superbly idealistic step forward' and 'the most ambitious season that lunchtime theatre has ever presented'.<sup>13</sup> He continued:

In the old days the boom in fringe theatre produced a mini generation of good new playwrights; Howard Brenton, John Grillo, Snoo Wilson, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, David Edgar and Howard Barker. [...] Most of them would agree that they developed their work a lot by being able to work closely with companies in rehearsal. [...] The offices of theatres everywhere are graveyards for thousands of plays every year, and amongst those perhaps ten talented guys will never bother again. Four writers at the Soho Poly, however, have been spared that fate.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Holman was the first to see his contribution mounted on the Soho Poly stage.<sup>15</sup> Today, he claims to have no memory of the writing process. He has, however, spoken wittily about the week of full-company improvisations, recalling actors being asked to represent a tube of toothpaste, or a goat on a mountain ledge.<sup>16</sup> He also remembers that tensions ran high during these initial sessions: 'I mildly remember [them] being a bit embarrassing. I remember the actors rebelling. I think it's the only time an actor's ever hit me'.<sup>17</sup>

For Geoffrey Case, the writer of the second play, *Fun*, the experience proved especially stressful. During a positive first meeting with Proud, an

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<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the New Drama Committee, 21 August 1973, ACGB/40/126/2.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Review of *Fun*', *Financial Times*, 31 October 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Dusty Hughes, 'Fred Sticks His Neck Out', *Time Out*, 26 October 1973, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Hughes excludes the already established David Mowat from the set here, as does Coveney.

<sup>15</sup> Newly arrived in London from Gisborough, Holman was introduced to Proud and Bargate by Chris Parr, then lecturing at Bradford University and busily forming relationships with other up-and-coming writers including David Edgar and Howard Brenton. (Robert Holman, in an interview with the author, 28 February 2012.)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

embryonic pitch - 'a sort of vague idea about a funfair' - was well received. But as soon as the improvisation week began, Case's excitement was replaced by 'quiet concern'. His memory of the sessions is that they often had the feel of group therapy, with the actors being asked to talk at length about themselves. He also remembers tempers flaring:

The improvisations, as such, were not as in-depth or prolonged, if you like, as I thought was necessary. There was a lot of question and answer [...] And we the writers would sit there like some sort of [...] jury [...]. Michael Harbour, I vividly remember, led a revolt in the end. [...] He just said, 'That's it. Now what about you lot? What have you done?'<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps there was an element of positive spin in Proud's contention that this confrontation was the moment when the experiment began to catch.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the improvisation week seems to have had less of a direct impact on the writing than Proud had hoped for. In fact, for Holman at least, it was the Soho basement that contributed most to the creative process:

I think what I must have thought walking in [...] was that when I was about sixteen at school we went out coalmining in County Durham and I had a very vivid memory of it, and still actually do because not only did I remember the mine, [but] for two days after it everything that came out of your nose was black.<sup>20</sup>

The resulting play, *Coal*, follows four miners, Nedd, Jackie, Joss and (Joss' son) Geoff, who have become trapped by falling rubble. Their wives (and in Geoff's case, mother) wait anxiously for news. We see them visiting each other, singing in church, and observing a vigil outside the entrance to the pit. Resisting melodrama, the play is a gentle meditation on life's chances and choices.<sup>21</sup>

The production opened on 22 October 1973 to excellent reviews, several of which singled out Miki van Zwanenberg, the set and costume designer hired

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Case, in an interview with the author, 30 June 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Hughes, 'Fred Sticks His Neck Out', 27.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Holman, speaking at the Soho Poly Festival, 19 June 2012. When organising the forty-year anniversary celebrations of the Soho Poly in 2012, these site-responsive aspects made *Coal* a natural choice for a script in hand 'revival'. (See Appendix C.)

<sup>21</sup> None of the plays were published. However, typed copies of *Coal* and *Grabberwitch* exist in their author's private collections. I have not been able to locate *Fun*, *True-Life* or *Come*. Synopses for these are drawn either from contemporary reviews or interviews with the authors.

for all five shows. *Coal*'s twelve short scenes, spread across multiple locations, lend it a somewhat televisual feel. Whilst a full-length play in a well-equipped theatre can absorb a large number of such transitions, shorter work requires a more imaginative and suggestive approach. In van Zwanenberg's design, solutions were found which both respected the properties of the space and augmented the fluent nature of the storytelling. Black polythene bags were used to create the interior of the mine together with support struts constructed out of sleepers that had been pinched, van Zwanenberg remembers, from a railway yard.<sup>22</sup> Scene changes were then effected through the use of simple props. Umbrellas, for example, instantly signified the world above ground. At another moment, with the action shifting from the mine to the backyard of one of the miners' wives', a piece of string was pulled across the stage to create a washing line. The railway sleepers now took on the impression of a garden fence, as the contact sheet images in Figure 2 illustrates. Figure 3 also shows one of van Zwanenberg's costume designs for the production.



Figure 2: Images from Robert Holman's play *Coal*. (Photographs: Nobby Clark, Miki van Zwanenberg's private collection.)

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<sup>22</sup> Miki van Zwanenberg, in an interview with the author, 22 July 2013.



Figure 3: One of Miki van Zwanenberg's costume designs for Robert Holman's play *Coal*. (Miki van Zwanenberg's private collection.)

Chris Allen, the writer of the fourth play in the series, *True Life* (a comic dissection of emerging experiments in reality TV), also speaks revealingly about the design and directorial choices that were needed to meet the twin demands of a tiny basement theatre and a short lunchtime slot:

We couldn't stop for mighty scene-changes as the play had to flow from setting to setting. Perhaps my early experience of writing for radio gave me a sense of such a flow. Instead of easing from sound to sound as in radio we'd have achieved flow through lighting-changes and whizzing characters on and off as subtly and swiftly as possible. From all directions and cunning hiding-places. The audience were very close to the actors. On - I think - two sides. So it was possible for them to get very involved with the characters and action. Almost to feel part of it all. At the same time, every audience reaction was - for the actors - very much in yer face. They were all really good and sensed just how to pitch a performance. Much more like acting in front of TV cameras than in a proscenium theatre.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Chris Allen, in an email to the author, 25 September 2013. Allen had also been introduced to *Proud and Bargate* by Chris Parr. His play revolves around a couple who have let television cameras into their home, unaware that the programme's producers

Allen's comments are a vivid illustration of cross-pollination between different dramatic media during this period, a running theme throughout this study.

Whilst Holman's *Coal* was perhaps the most critically successful production, the season as a whole was well received. Allen's *True-Life* was judged by Harold Hobson to be 'absolutely first class'.<sup>24</sup> And despite Case's concern that his play might not be 'up to snuff',<sup>25</sup> *Fun* also met with a respectful, if slightly more ambivalent, response. The story follows a couple who run a Punch and Judy show. Somewhat down on their luck, they allow themselves to be tricked by an unscrupulous fairground owner, only to end up as exhibits themselves. In a review for *Time Out*, Jim Hiley referred to '[a] bold little foray into the dangerous reaches of political allegory [...] slowed down by making the rather repressing point about the supposed retractability of the lumpen proletariat over and over again'.<sup>26</sup> But once more van Zwanenberg received compliments, with Michael Coveney noting that 'the sordid little world of coloured lights and Wurlitzer music is deftly reflected in the design and sound effects'.<sup>27</sup>

The season's third playwright, David Mowat, was by far the most the experienced, having enjoyed particular success with *Anna-Luse* and *The Phoenix and Turtle*, performed at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh (1968) and the Open Space (1972) respectively. *Come*, however, was not developed, even nominally, out of the workshop week. It was directed by Max Stafford-Clark, with whom Mowat had collaborated before, and who was absent from the company improvisations.<sup>28</sup> It was nevertheless performed by the newly configured permanent company, and its snappy one-word title helped bind it into the season.<sup>29</sup> Frank Marcus's review provides this useful synopsis:

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have conspired to arrange a visit from the husband's ex-girlfriend. Mayhem ensues, and is finally brought to an end with director shouting 'cut!'.

<sup>24</sup> Harold Hobson, 'Review of *True Life*', *Sunday Times*, November 25, 1973.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Case, in an interview with the author, 30 June 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Jim Hiley, 'Review of *Fun*', *Time Out*, 2 November 1973, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Coveney, 'Review of *Fun*'.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Holman talks of the importance and prevalence during this time of actor/writer relationships - like the one he himself enjoyed with Chris Parr. (Robert Holman, in an interview with the author, 28 February 2012.)

<sup>29</sup> Proud happily admits that the choice of one-word titles was primarily a 'promotional ploy'. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 July 2013.)

The play shows us an anxious man who tells us of his attempts to persuade his estranged daughter to return to him. In the adjoining room a party is in progress. It is a lively party: fierce arguments about physics and logic, aggression caused by drink, and finally an orgy. Singly, guests from the party appear and ignore the distraught father. Only his daughter speaks to him. "Come," he says to her. She returns to the party and, presumably having misunderstood her father's exhortation, soon emits orgasmic moans while the poor man doubles up in pained despair.<sup>30</sup>

Marcus applauded Mowat's distinctive style, but was ultimately lukewarm about the play (it 'came and went').<sup>31</sup> Harold Atkins was more dismissive in his review for the *Daily Telegraph*, writing that '[t]he blend of surrealist nonsense and didactic dialectics in the bar gets nobody anywhere except to a bit of sex'. At the other extreme, Naseem Khan found the piece 'fascinating' and Stafford-Clark's direction 'as carefully balanced as equipment for an experiment'.<sup>32</sup> Illona Linthwaite, one of the acting company, recalls that, even though the audience could not see the party, it was fully acted-out in the tiny backstage area.<sup>33</sup>

The 'Bunch of Fives' season was capped by one final experiment: Vicky Ireland's *Grabberwitch*, the first example of a Soho play written for children.<sup>34</sup> The story follows narcoleptic knight Sir Singalot Sleepyawn and his trusted companions, Cook and Squire, as they battle the titular Grabberwitch 'who grabs everything and everyone'. The play is a high-spirited, if slight, piece which Parr remembers as attended mainly by women and their young children. He describes it as the season's pantomime, although there isn't too much in the way of adult-appealing double entendres, except, perhaps, for a description of Grabberwitch's 'magic evil plants that she grows in her bottom garden'.<sup>35</sup> Parr's reference to pantomime is significant, however, in that it recalls Proud's intentions, as expressed in the July 1972 letter to Nicholas Barter, to create a 'folk' theatre drawing on popular forms. Such aspirations had also been reproduced in the PCL student handbook for 1972/73: '[the plays] will be ostensibly experiments in form using the popular media and types of entertainment; pop music, drag,

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<sup>30</sup> Frank Marcus, 'Dreaming or Speaking', *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 November 1973.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Naseem Khan, 'The Other Theatre', *Evening Standard*, 20 November 1973.

<sup>33</sup> Illona Linthwaite, in an interview with the author, 18 September 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Vicky Ireland remembers that Proud had specifically requested a children's play. (Vicky Ireland, in an email to the author, 22 July 2013.)

<sup>35</sup> Chris Parr, in an interview with the author, 22 March 2013.

westerns, stand-up comics, pantomime, bingo, etc.’.<sup>36</sup> The origins of this idea can be traced back to the Soho Theatre’s very first production, Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *One Autumn Evening*. Then, programme notes had announced that ‘Frederick Proud is planning to establish a permanent home for “The Soho Theatre”, within Soho, in the New Year. [...] Soho is a very rich, cosmopolitan area and deserves its own ‘Folk Theatre’.’<sup>37</sup>

In the event, the ‘Bunch of Fives’ season cannot quite be said to have realised these ambitions. As well as the Christmas pantomime, there were gestures, perhaps, in the direction of circus/fairground (*Fun*), an engagement with the rituals of working-class communities (*Coal*), and a sideways look at popular culture (*True Life*). But it would be stretching a point to claim that such experiments forged a distinctive new aesthetic. It is also difficult to know whether the season succeeded in pulling in a different audience. John Ford thought not. In Arts Council minutes from November 1973, he is recorded as expressing concern that, although ‘a permanent company was a great step forward [...] the audience was still largely made up of people from the profession’.<sup>38</sup>

Where the season did meet its expectations was in the way it gave emerging playwrights the opportunity to develop new work and witness its effect on an audience in the context of a full production. This governing principle poses a continuing challenge to those charged with nurturing new talent today. For many emerging writers, the script-in-hand reading now marks the end point of a theatre’s commitment to new work. But a play-reading is a quite different creature to a play, and without the full physical participation of the actor, a writer can only learn so much. Doubtless, there are greater financial restrictions on today’s theatres’ ability to support work through to full production. But perhaps the case for more ‘smash-and-grab’ productions is not made often enough.<sup>39</sup> Such speedy production also militates against the possibility of substantial dramaturgical intervention, something of a continuing *bête noire* for Robert

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Soho Poly Theatre’, *Gen: The Students’ Handbook*, 1972-73, 26, UWA, PCL/8/1/2/5.

<sup>37</sup> Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud’s private collection.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 19/30 November 1973, ACGB 43/36/2.

<sup>39</sup> Although there are companies that offer writers something of this experience - the Miniaturists, for example: <http://www.miniaturists.co.uk/>.

Holman who argues, provocatively, that the majority of dramaturgs and literary managers have no comprehension of the way in which a play ‘comes out of the writer’s body’.<sup>40</sup>

The circumstances of the season’s ‘work-shopping’ process also make a parallel case for the importance of funding in the development of new work. It may be tempting to point to the ‘Bunch of Fives’ season as an example of fringe theatre’s ability to mount dynamic, affecting work on a shoestring, but the shortcomings of the initial collaborations tell another story. Whilst inexperience or unrealistic ambitions may have played their part, there were also significant limitations of money - notwithstanding the New Drama Committee’s extra contribution - and space. In retrospect, it seems obvious that a single week of group improvisations would be insufficient to meet the project’s aims. But with such limited financial incentives for the participants, and only a single, tiny basement room to work in, any longer workshopping period might have stretched goodwill beyond breaking point.

### **Bread ‘n Butter**

Irving Wardle’s 1972 article for *New Society* made a further reference to the Soho Poly, noting Proud and Bargate’s interest in the possibility of ‘quitting London for the theatreless [sic] territory of Reading or beyond’.<sup>41</sup> And in the Arts Council records for this period, it seems possible to track clear ambitions to expand the theatre’s activities away from the central London basement, if not the capital altogether. For example, when, in early 1973, the theatre submitted its estimates for income and expenditure for the forthcoming financial year, Proud attached a note explaining that ‘[t]his excludes any new developments in the field of touring or performances in the Outer London Boroughs that we might do!’.<sup>42</sup> In November of the same year, EDC minutes record that, ‘Fred Proud now had a

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<sup>40</sup> During his early experiences at the Royal Court, Holman remembers that ‘there was no dramaturgy at all. No one [...] ever suggested that the play might be made better. I can never remember Chris [Parr] saying this bit’s not very good, could you make it better? And I probably couldn’t do it anyway’. (Robert Holman, in an interview with the author, 28 February 2012.)

<sup>41</sup> Wardle, ‘Fringe Theatre’, 686.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Fred Proud to Nicholas Barter, 22 January 1973, ACGB/43/43/6.

house in Greenwich and was hoping to set up a theatre company doing mainly evening productions in the outer London suburbs'.<sup>43</sup> The following month, Proud was minuted anticipating a move as early as the New Year, and expressing his belief that the theatre 'had been at the Soho Poly too long, and [was] in danger of becoming repetitive'.<sup>44</sup> Future policy would now be based on more full-length plays, less new work, and 'a rep type of programme'.<sup>45</sup>

The first actual experiment along these lines was a production of Frank Norman and Lionel Bart's *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* (1959) at the Tramshed in Woolwich, produced in spring 1974. Proud was approached with the offer to direct by Ewan Hooper who had been instrumental in establishing the Greenwich Theatre from which the Tramshed was an off-shoot. The production proved to be a one-off, but a few months later Soho announced the establishment of 'Bread 'n Butter', a new touring and community action wing of the theatre. It was to be headed-up by the young director Gerald Chapman, later to become a founder member of Gay Sweatshop. In a letter to Nicholas Barter, Proud announced that '[t]he Community Theatre group is entirely committed to taking theatre into non-theatre orientated areas in S.E London. [...] Our angle of approach is polarising towards community concerns and problems'.<sup>46</sup>

Although Bread 'n Butter proved to be short-lived, the Arts Council appears to have taken the proclaimed change of direction seriously. Minutes from a November 1974 meeting of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee show that Soho was one of almost thirty companies selected for interview with respect to their funding applications for 1975/76. The committee felt that such a process was necessary for groups 'which had recently undergone extensive changes in policy or members'.<sup>47</sup> In December, the FEDC also discussed the

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<sup>43</sup> Minutes of the Experimental Drama Committee, 19/30 November 1973, ACGB 43/36/2.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Fringe and Experimental Committee and the New Drama Committee, 4 December 1973, ACGB/40/126/2. In an interview for the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* in November 1974, Proud made similar remarks: "If you've got something worth saying", says Proud, "then there's no point in saying it over and over again to the same committed audience". (Yvonne Roberts, 'A Play and a Pint', *Daily Telegraph Magazine* 22 November 1974, 10.)

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Fringe and Experimental Committee and the New Drama Committee, 4 December 1973, ACGB/40/126/2.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Fred Proud to Nicholas Barter, 20 August 1974, ACGB/43/43/10.

<sup>47</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 8 November 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

company's first production - a piece about living conditions on a South London housing estate, performed on-site:

Several members had seen "People Live Here" (a joint effort with the Puppet Tree) and on the whole it was felt to be a well-written piece of documentary with good basic ideas, but which had been badly executed and with an over-indulgent and confused use of puppets. [...] The Committee did, however, agree to make an effort to see Bread 'n Butter's old people's show before making any decisions to reject the application.<sup>48</sup>

A provisional recommendation of £15,000 was made for the Soho Poly whilst a decision on additional funding for Bread 'n Butter was recorded as pending.<sup>49</sup> A fortnight later things came to a head with the dismissal of Chapman and minutes from an FEDC meeting in March 1975 record Soho's intention to abandon the experiment.<sup>50</sup>

It might be expected that the failure of this project would have been a major blow for Proud and Bargate. Some of the evidence presented above, however, needs to be treated with caution. Certainly, the way Proud remembers Bread 'n Butter today stands in sharp contrast to how it was presented in the meetings, interviews, and funding applications of the time:

Gerald Chapman was the director. I think he had spotted that there was some funding available for such a company and he came to talk to us and we embraced the idea. Can't say my heart was altogether in that kind of work entailing as it did evolving scripts through improvisation to address local issues. In retrospect, I think another aspect of it failed to get my juices running was how synthetic the whole thing seemed in contrast to our usual fare and rather worthy too. [...] [I was always] more inclined to the best theatre writing I could find and ultimately that is what matters. I want poetry on stage rather than social dialogue or community experiments.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 3 December 1974, ACGB 43/36/1. Proud also remembers that he had been involved in writing this show. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 4 January 2014.)

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 3 December 1974, ACGB 43/36/1.

<sup>50</sup> See Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 19 December 1974, ACGB 43/36/1 and Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 11 March 1975, ACGB/43/36/1.

<sup>51</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 14 January 2014.

There are several possible explanations for such a discrepancy. The soliciting of funds and audience numbers often encourages a degree of positive spin. Equally, there may be a natural impulse to downplay the significance of an unsuccessful experiment. Rather than attempting to resolve the contradiction, however, it is more productive to acknowledge it as an example of the way in which archive material and memory can often ‘disagree’, and that an appeal to the authority of either must be qualified and provisional.

### **Other Voices: *James O’Brien***

As noted in my introduction, the first three years at the Soho Poly witnessed the increased involvement of a number of affiliated directors, as well as significant collaborations with other lunchtime companies. In part, this was to allow Fred Proud to pursue opportunities elsewhere. In spring 1973, for example, he accepted work with a newly formed repertory company based at the Greenwich Theatre. A notice in *The Stage* from December 1972 records that Charles Dance, Jeremy Brett, Penelope Keith, Mia Farrow and Joan Plowright were already committed to the enterprise. It was also referred to in the *Sunday Telegraph* as ‘a kind of miniature National Theatre’.<sup>52</sup> Proud was to direct two productions. The first, in February, was an adaptation by James Saunders of Heinrich Von Kleist’s parable *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810), which tells the story of a sixteenth-century horse dealer whose mistreatment at the hands of a Junker border guard drives him to tyrannical acts of retribution. The production, given a ‘Brechtian’ treatment, prompted the critic (and playwright) Frank Marcus to comment that ‘Mr. Proud has served a lengthy and distinguished apprenticeship in the Fringe theatre; it is very nice to see him flexing his muscles on a larger stage so impressively’.<sup>53</sup> The second production, opening in June, was John Vanbrugh’s restoration comedy *The Provok’d Wife*.

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<sup>52</sup> Frank Marcus, ‘Way Ahead’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 31 December 1972.

<sup>53</sup> In fact, the notice submitted by Marcus to the *Sunday Telegraph* was edited before publication (25 February 1973) and this line was removed. Marcus, however, sent Proud the unabridged version, which exists in Proud’s private collection,

Meanwhile, at the Soho Poly, James O'Brien had taken on the role of 'acting artistic director'.<sup>54</sup> O'Brien was one of two associate directors, along with Philip Allen-Morgan, who had been recruited to the theatre the previous summer.<sup>55</sup> His experience included directing credits at Newcastle, Canterbury and the Nottingham Playhouse, where he had also worked as an actor.<sup>56</sup> In February, O'Brien wrote to the Arts Council requesting new play grants for his first four lunchtime productions: *Gangsters* (1973) by David Edgar, *Ag and Fish* (1973) by Roy Minton, *The Illumination of Mr. Shannon* (1971) by Don Haworth and *Cartoon* (1973) by David Pinner. *The Launderette* (1973) by Patrick Carter was also scheduled for an evening production towards the end of March.<sup>57</sup> To support the season, O'Brien also applied for an extra £389 from the FEDC.<sup>58</sup> The minutes from a meeting in January 1973 record the decision:

The Committee felt that this application was a high priority, as the Soho Poly would be coming to them for assistance in 1973/4, and they wished to ensure that Jim O'Brien was capable of running the operation at the same high standard. It would be a useful period of assessment.<sup>59</sup>

The response provides further evidence of the esteem in which the Soho Poly was held less than a year after moving into the Riding House Street premises. It also highlights the flexibility of funding decisions, particularly when the committee wished to promote the interests of a company it judged to be performing well. By the same token, the comments contain the shadow of a threat, the implication being that Soho's application might be reviewed less favourably should the spring season disappoint. It was fortunate, then, that the theatre continued to meet with a positive critical response. By the time of the

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<sup>54</sup> At least according to John Ford's article in *Time Out* (John Ford, 'New Soho Poly Season', *Time Out*, 16 February 1973, 19). Proud is uncertain whether O'Brien was formally given this title. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 5 January 2014.)

<sup>55</sup> See letter from Fred Proud to Nicholas Barter, 18 July 1972, ACGB/40/105/4, and 'Plenty at the Poly', *Time Out*, 4 August 1972, 33.

<sup>56</sup> O'Brien also went on to direct the Granada Television production of *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984). See 'Obituary for Jim O'Brien', *Telegraph*, 1 May 2012, accessed 1 January 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/9239486/Jim-OBrien.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from James O'Brien to Sue Tyler, 15 February 1973, ACGB/40/105/4. See Appendix A for dates of productions.

<sup>58</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 16 January 1973, ACGB 43/36/2. This was over and above their original revenue grant for 1972-3 of £3000.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

next FEDC meeting in February, confidence was formally expressed in O'Brien, despite the fact that, by this point, members would only have had a chance to see his opening show - *Gangsters*, directed by John Tordoff.<sup>60</sup> This was the first of two David Edgar plays mounted during O'Brien's tenure. Both deserve brief mention here in order to contextualise revealing comments made by the playwright on the character of the early Soho Poly.

*Gangsters* tells the story of two small-time criminals who, holed up in a motorway service, lament the fact that their activities have barely been covered by the National Press. Michael Billington, writing in the *Guardian*, commented that '[o]f the current crop of Fringe dramatists, David Edgar is the most nakedly and aggressively political. But *Gangsters* [...] turns out to be a surprisingly wry, affectionate study'.<sup>61</sup> For *Time Out* it was also a 'surprisingly gentle comedy'.<sup>62</sup>

Edgar's second Soho play, *Baby Love*, had premiered in Leeds before moving to London at the end of May. The story was partly drawn from the case of Pauline Jones, who had been sentenced to three years in prison in 1971 for the abduction of a baby. In Edgar's play, 'Eileen' has also stolen a baby following a miscarriage. She is discovered, arrested and incarcerated in a psychiatric institution. Edgar's treatment is immediately notable for the sensitive and layered portrayal of his protagonist. As Elizabeth Swann comments, '[h]e creates a more psychologically complex character than in many plays to date, or for many plays to come'.<sup>63</sup> Swann nevertheless interprets the play as an early experiment in the Lukacsian social realism that, she argues, was to define much of Edgar's later work. She writes that, 'despite the "personal situation" and the psychological complexity, Edgar's interest, ultimately, is the public treatment of Eileen and anyone like her. She is thus perceived as a 'typical' character faced firmly in a social context with which she is at odds'.<sup>64</sup>

For Edgar, however, both *Baby Love* and *Gangsters* stand well apart from the dominant strands of his playwriting at the time: 'agit prop' and 'state of the nation'. In the former category one might place work for The General Will such

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<sup>60</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 12/13 February 1973, ACGB 43/36/2. The second play, *Ag and Fish*, opened on 26 February 1973.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Billington, 'Review of *Gangsters*', *Guardian*, 14 February 1973.

<sup>62</sup> 'Review of *Gangsters*', *Time Out*, 16 February 1973, 68.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Swan, *David Edgar: Playwright and Politician* (New York: P. Lang, 1986), 155.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

as *The National Interest* (1971) and *Rent or Caught in the Act* (1972). The clearest example of the latter would be the jointly written *England's Ireland* (1972), which interrogated the history of Britain's relationship with Ulster. In an article for the *Guardian* in 2006, Edgar described the 'so-called State of England' play as follows: 'non-domestic, contemporary settings, large casts, presentational and episodic structures, and narratives that placed the present in the context of the immediate past'.<sup>65</sup> Of his plays for the Soho Poly, however, he comments that:

[The theatre was] a place where people could go and do things that weren't aggressively what you had to do. [...] Gentle plays about little social issues without feeling they had to justify it in the eyes of history. [...] *Gangsters* and *Baby Love* were much less "State of England". And you could do that at the Soho'.<sup>66</sup>

Edgar's suggestion, therefore, is that both *Baby Love* - which he describes as a 'microcosm' or 'emblem' play - and the more lightly-comic *Gangsters* could find a home at Soho because it was 'a space defined by its lack of ideological status'.<sup>67</sup>

As noted in the first part of this chapter (and elsewhere), this period witnessed an increasingly close relationship between different dramatic media. It is worth mentioning here, therefore, that *Gangsters* and *Baby Love* were both adapted for television, as were two other plays from the James O'Brien season: *The Illumination of Mr Shannon* by Donald Howarth - the story of a naïve young man, newly arrived from Ireland, who is tricked into a world of low-paid drudgery; and *You are My Heart's Delight* by C.P. Taylor - a poignant and humane study of a lonely gamekeeper and his sister living in poverty on a Scottish estate.<sup>68</sup> Whilst it was common during the early days of lunchtime

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<sup>65</sup> David Edgar, in an interview with the author, 22 March 2012. (David Edgar, 'Come Together', *Guardian*, 10 January 2005, accessed 11 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/jan/10/theatre.religion>.)

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> David Edgar, in an interview with the author, 22 March 2012.

<sup>68</sup> See Appendix A for full list of plays and production dates. *The Illumination of Mr Shannon* had originally been broadcast on radio in 1971. *You Are My Heart's Delight* was also subsequently adapted for radio, before being televised as an ITV Sunday Night Drama on 27 August 1978. ('You Are My Heart's Delight', *IMDB* website, accessed 11 May 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1824481/>.)

theatre for radio and television scripts to be co-opted for the stage, the direction of travel was now often reversed. It isn't possible to say for certain that the Soho Poly productions of these plays led directly to their later adaptations.

Nevertheless, TV and radio producers were to become increasingly frequent attendees of the Riding House Street basement. Broadcasting House was, after all, less than a five minute walk away on Portland Place. Jack Bradley, a literary manager for the Soho Poly during the late 1980s, remembers that, when the lights came up after a one-act play, the audience would be full of people with their eyes shut: radio producers hoping to have found their next commission.<sup>69</sup>

Taken as a whole, James O'Brien's season was less varied than Proud's the previous year, with an emphasis on well-crafted short plays such as those by Edgar, Howarth and Taylor. David Pinner's *Cartoon* was a gentle character comedy set in a local boozer. *Ag and Fish* by Roy Minton was another comic piece about, in the words of Michael Billington, 'a frustrated Crawley housewife on heat for physical contact and a pervy [Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries] clerk'.<sup>70</sup> More potentially provocative was Terry James' *Urban Guerrilla Boutique* (1973). This story of inept urban terrorists in search of appropriate clothing was, however, parodied by *The Stage* as 'a preliminary study for an "Up the Boutique" film, or maybe even a "Carry on Revolting"'.<sup>71</sup> *Snaps*, three short plays by John Grillo, were better received, with the *Financial Times* reflecting that Grillo had shown himself to be 'one of the ablest miniaturists of the lunchtime scene'.<sup>72</sup> There were also two evening productions. The first, opening in March, was Patrick Carter's *The Launderette*. The play tells the story of a man who, in a sublimated response to his wife's infidelities, creates 'works of art' by spinning clothes in washing machines.<sup>73</sup> Later in the same month, Soho was visited by Sal's Meat Market, otherwise known as the American comedy duo John Ratzenberger and Ray Hassett. Rather than performing one of their largely

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Bradley, in an interview with the author, 21 November 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Billington, 'Review of *Ag and Fish*', *Guardian*, 27 February 1973.

<sup>71</sup> Douglas Blake, 'Perverted Martyrdom', *Stage*, 10 May 1973.

<sup>72</sup> Garry O'Connor, 'Review of *Snaps*', *Financial Times*, 18 April 1973.

<sup>73</sup> The *Jewish Chronicle* interpreted the piece as a 'a slight dig at the permissive society'. (David Nathan, 'Women and Lovers', *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 March 1973). Harold Hobson, on the other hand, enthused that the production's virtues 'ought to bring such crowds as will cause a traffic block round the doors of Soho Poly'. (Harold Hobson, 'Taking the Offensive', *Sunday Times*, 18 March 1973.)

improvised shows, however, a scripted piece was developed with Proud. The production, which enjoyed a short run in the more unusual late night slot, stood somewhat apart from the rest of the season.

O'Brien was himself aware of the more 'conventional' nature of the theatre's programming. In an article for *Time Out* in February 1973, John Ford reported that '[he] sees the present work as a bridge to their following season which will concentrate on new non-literary theatre'.<sup>74</sup> This period was notable, however, for one further innovation: the introduction of a 'pay what you can' pricing policy (assuming membership at 25p). This was announced as follows in the *Time Out* interview with John Ford:

Of course, it was Inter-Action's idea [...] and it was a very good one. Such a good one that we thought it was time people stopped regarding it as just the province of the Almost Free. So we checked with them and went ahead.<sup>75</sup>

In the end, however, the 'pay what you can' experiment only lasted until the following summer when the scheme had had to be abandoned 'for economic reasons'.<sup>76</sup> Prices were re-instated at a rate of 40p, or '30p for bona fide students, OAP's etc.'. The annual membership had now risen to 50p.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Wakefield Tricycle and the Basement Theatre**

As discussed in detail in Chapter One, 1972 saw the formation of the Association of Lunchtime Theatres, a response to Equity's increasing agitation for minimum payment contracts to be rolled out across the 'fringe'. That autumn, the Soho Poly had hosted the meetings at which the ALT's campaigning aims were formalised. In these early discussions, there had also been a general agreement

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<sup>74</sup> John Ford, 'New Soho Poly Season', 19. The new non-literary theatre is presumably a reference to what was to become the 'Bunch of Fives' experiment.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. In fact, this experiment had been trialled before. A programme for Chris Allen's *True Life*, one of the 'Bunch of Fives' season produced the previous autumn, also announced pay-what-you-can pricing. (Chris Allen's private collection.)

<sup>76</sup> Soho Poly press release [June 1974?], Tricycle Theatre Archive, Press and Publicity Files, 1972-2003, THM/317/4/1/3.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

that, in order to meet the challenges ahead, greater co-operation was required between lunchtime producers. One of the key suggestions, championed by Kenneth Chubb (co-founder, with Shirley Barrie, of the WTC and chair of the association) was that two or more lunchtime companies might produce work out of the same venue. Minutes from an EDC meeting at the beginning of 1973 reveal that Chubb had been quick to discuss this idea with the Arts Council.<sup>78</sup> In a subsequent application, carefully-worded to address the funding body's preoccupations with quality and cost, he set out the benefits of such an arrangement:

In line with the thinking of the Association of Lunch Theatres, we wish during the following year to try the experiment of a shared venue. The advantages of such an experiment would be

- 1) that each contributing company would need to do fewer shows and thus improve standards
- 2) that costs could be shared, thus easing the drain on the Arts Council resources
- 3) that continuity of performance could be maintained at the venue, avoiding the re-building of audience figures, necessary if plays are done in small batches with intervals when the theatre is "dark".<sup>79</sup>

Chubb's specific proposal was for a joint season with Walter Hall's Basement theatre, to take place at the King's Head theatre in Islington. Each company would then present alternate productions. Following various back and forth discussions between the NDC and the EDC, financial support was duly agreed. The experiment proved a success and, in September, the WTC and the Basement made an application for a second season to take place early in 1974.<sup>80</sup> This time, however, the Soho Poly would provide the venue. Later that year, this was to develop into a three-way collaboration with Soho itself, which lasted until December. The greater part of 1974 was, therefore, defined by shared programmes of work.

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<sup>78</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 16 January 1973, ACGB 43/36/2.

<sup>79</sup> Wakefield Tricycle Company Application for Arts Council Assistance, 1973-74, ACGB/43/43/6.

<sup>80</sup> Wakefield Tricycle Company Application for Arts Council Assistance for the Second Half of 1973-74, ACGB/43/43/9. This application also provides a reminder of the scale of lunchtime enterprises, recording that '[O]ur average audience now numbers approximately 31 per day and attendance has ranged all the way up to 92'.

In addition to the benefits identified by Kenneth Chubb, there were other reasons for Soho's interest in accommodating the WTC/Basement season, and later joining with them. As noted earlier in the chapter, Proud would use this time to pursue new directing projects, including, in the first part of the year, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* at The Tramshed.<sup>81</sup> Shirley Barrie also remembers that Bargate may have been unwell at this period. Although it is difficult to be certain on this point, there is no doubt that breaks were crucial to combat potential exhaustion, as Barrie's own vivid description of life on the lunchtime circuit makes clear:

In retrospect we were out of our minds, absolutely crazy cuckoo. Or maybe we were just young. [...] The schedule was mind-boggling. For example: we opened a WTC show at the Soho Poly on July 8. Alexis was born on July 16. On Aug. 19 we opened another of our productions at the Soho Poly. On Sept. 10 we opened the touring show, *A Roof Over Your Head*. On Sept 17, WTC's final show of the lunchtime season opened. Maternity leave? What's that?! I had a little wicker Moses Basket to carry the baby around in and I'd leave her with Ken at the *Roof Over Your Head* rehearsals in a very cool room (maybe a garage - with bales of hay piled at one end) and race over to the Soho Poly for the middle of the day. I remember once coming back to find that the Moses Basket had fallen over and the baby was face down in the hay, and Ken hadn't even noticed. I tore a huge strip off him in front of an embarrassed cast.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the obvious need for periods of recuperation, Proud and Bargate were also anxious to maintain the integrity of the Soho Poly 'brand'. When the WTC and Basement theatre first took up their residency in January 1974, therefore, they went to considerable lengths to preserve the impression of continuity. As Barrie recalls,

Verity was most insistent that everything about the Soho Poly remain the same - even the lunch on offer. I remember visiting her in their flat in Soho, writing down her recipes for pate and cheesecake and getting specific instructions about where to get ingredients for the best price in Berwick St. Market.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> There was also a musical adaptation of Joe Orton's *The Good and Faithful Servant* at the King's Head (see Appendix A for full list of plays).

<sup>82</sup> Shirley Barrie, in an email to the author, 14 September 2013. Proud also talks of the need for 'breaks'. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 4 January 2014.)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

It is clear, however, that Proud and Bargate saw the first WTC/Basement season as distinct from their own company's activities. Soho's cutting books, for example, include few reviews for either of these company's productions. A list of the theatre's output from 1968-75, subsequently prepared by Proud, also makes only this, passing, reference to the period from January - May 1974: 'interim season of lunchtime plays from the Wakefield Tricycle Company. ([N]ot listed)' .<sup>84</sup>

### **Fred Proud's Departure**

Thanks to the combined efforts of the different lunchtime companies, there was little sense during the first months of 1974 that Soho's identity was becoming diluted or that its reputation had in any way diminished. When, after a hiatus in late spring, the second collaborative season was announced, Naseem Khan welcomed back 'the excellent Soho Poly' and an article published in *Time Out* in June named Soho, the WTC and the Basement theatre as three of the five companies which had 'kept good quality lunch-time theatre going in London'.<sup>85</sup> Throughout this period, however, as his more frequent involvement with other theatres might suggest, Fred Proud was beginning to pull away from Soho. His marriage to Bargate was also running into difficulties, but although such personal issues will surely have played their part, Proud had been openly expressing professional frustrations for some time. In an interview for *Plays and Players*, published in August 1973, he had commented as follows on what he perceived to be a sense of stagnation within the 'fringe' scene:

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<sup>84</sup> This fact posed something of a dilemma when compiling my own list of Soho productions (see Appendix A). In the end, I have chosen to include all the plays presented at this time, indicating clearly which company contributed which production. I am conscious that a casual glance offers a potentially misleading account of the complex relationship between the different groups. However, other guest seasons (James O'Brien's for example) are not excluded from Proud's list. To have made an exception for the Basement / WTC productions would have been equally misrepresentative. Furthermore, the collaborations are certainly a part of the Soho Theatre's history even if some productions, in another sense, are not.

<sup>85</sup> Naseem Khan, 'Alfresco Ionesco', *Evening Standard*, 2 July 1974, 23; 'Lunch Bunch' *Time Out*, 28 June 1974, 33. The other companies being Inter-Action and the Richmond Theatre at The Orange Tree.

[T]hings have come to a halt for several reasons: a) there has not been sufficient subsidy for the fringe to retain its innovators; b) these people *do* want to move onto larger theatres - there is an innate restlessness about creative people which compels them to seek new situations; and c) that creative period has exhausted itself.<sup>86</sup>

Despite such 'restlessness', in the second part of the year Proud reasserted his directorial presence at the Soho Poly somewhat with productions of *Our Sort of People* (1974) by Jeremy Seabrook and Michael O'Neil, *Kong Lives* by George Byatt (1974) and *Standards* (1974) by Chris Allen, one of the writers who had participated in the 'Bunch of Fives' experiment of 1973. In the short opening season of 1975, however, he directed only one play - *Post Mortem* (1975) by Brian Clark - before handing over programming responsibilities again, this time to the director Robert Walker. Proud remembers that Walker 'was welcomed with open arms' given the package of plays he had put together.<sup>87</sup> This included Howard Brenton's *The Saliva Milkshake* (1975), originally shown on television and *Gem* by Barrie Keeffe (1975). Reviewing the unfolding season in *Plays and Players*, Steve Gooch commented that:

It is a testimony to the persistence and durability of art that during a summer of even more overt economic crisis than usual, the Soho Poly lunchtime theatre should come up with a season of new plays more interesting in its range of authors and subject-matter than anything else in London.<sup>88</sup>

As part of this season, Proud directed Christopher Wilkins' *The Late Wife*. Although he didn't know it at the time, this was the last time he would work for the Soho Poly. His next directorial commission was for the Young Vic in January 1976. This production - an early play by Ingmar Bergman called *Wood Painting* (1955) - provides, perhaps, a more decisive marker of his separation from the theatre he had co-founded with Verity Bargate seven years before.<sup>89</sup> A review for the *Financial Times* noted that '[t]his is not a Young Vic production, but comes

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Coveney, 'All messed up and no-where to go', *Plays and Players*, August 1973, 34.

<sup>87</sup> Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 9 May 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Steve Gooch, 'Soho Poly Summer Season', *Plays and Players*, October 1975, 28.

<sup>89</sup> 'Wood Painting' is a translation from the Swedish 'Trämålning' (Sometimes translated as 'Wood Carving'). The play was eventually developed into the film *The Seventh Seal*.

from Mr Proud's own company'. The company in question was the newly-named Insight Productions.

## Conclusions

During the early period at the Soho Poly, Proud and Bargate continued to engage directly with the perceived limitations of lunchtime theatre. The 'Bunch of Fives' season, in particular, was an innovative and successful attempt to generate new material. It received positive encouragement from the critics and the Arts Council, although it can also be noted that the latter was much less enthusiastic about Proud and Bargate's proposed move into other areas of theatrical work. Indeed, the resistance to Bread 'n Butter recalls Kenneth Chubb's anxieties, expressed in an April 1974 meeting of the FEDC to which the ALT had been invited, that lunchtime theatres' attempts at expansion faced greater restrictions than other companies'.<sup>90</sup>

Many of the theatre's activities in this period, however, had a dual aspect, particularly as far as Proud was concerned. On the one hand, the offering of guest director spots and collaborations with other groups brought new energy, and new writers, into the theatre. Work by David Edgar and Howard Brenton - introduced by James O'Brien and Robert Walker respectively - also helped to raise Soho's profile. At the same time, such decisions allowed Proud to pursue career-building opportunities elsewhere. These aspirations could easily have put the survival of the Soho Poly at risk. The fact that such tensions remained, instead, in a state of delicate equilibrium was largely a function of the Riding House Street premises itself - a powerful, and to some extent misleading, signifier of continuity. Certainly, Proud's departure in 1975 had the potential to upset this equilibrium. But the recent involvement of so many other practitioners in Soho Poly's output reduced any sense of decisive rupture. And in any case, there was no precise moment of exit. It was rather as if a gradual movement away from the theatre - influenced by creative ambitions and, no doubt, personal considerations - had finally been completed.

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<sup>90</sup> Minutes of the Fringe and Experimental Drama Committee, 9 April 1974, ACGB/43/36/1.

A final point can be made here about the relationship between the Soho Poly and the wider lunchtime scene. And, once again, the theatre's premises come to the fore. Indeed, the securing of the basement venue in March 1972 can be seen to have set off something of a chain reaction. It was here, after all, that the early ALT meeting took place, meetings at which plans for wider operation between the lunchtime groups were formulated. These plans led to collaborations which removed some of the major obstacles to individual companies' survival - specifically a lack of money, the difficulty in sourcing suitable scripts, the risks associated with 'going dark', and the very real possibility of physical and psychological exhaustion.<sup>91</sup> In the second part of 1974, the Soho basement then provided a venue for such collaborations to take place. The history of the Soho (Poly) Theatre during this period is, therefore, intricately bound up with that of other lunchtime companies. One of these, the Wakefield Tricycle Company, was eventually to rename itself the Tricycle Theatre. Nearly fifty years later, both the Soho Theatre and the Tricycle are amongst the most vibrant producing theatres in London.

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<sup>91</sup> Proud acknowledges that towards the end of his time at the Soho Poly, he may have been 'burned out'. (Fred Proud, in an email to the author, 1 January 2014.)

## Conclusion: The Soho Poly Festival

In June 2012, I curated an ‘anniversary festival’ to mark forty years since the opening of the Soho Poly. The three-day event included a panel session with Michael Billington, Irving Wardle and Michael Coveney and a discussion on supporting new playwriting with practitioners from across the theatre’s history. On the first and last evenings, there were readings of early works by David Edgar and Robert Holman - *Baby Love* (1973) and *Coal* (1973) respectively. Both were introduced by their authors. On the second day, there was a lunchtime performance of three pieces produced by the Miniaturists, described on their website as ‘a growing group of playwrights and other theatre workers interested in the possibilities of the short play’.<sup>1</sup> Most exciting of all, the events took place on the site of the original Soho Poly itself, which I had first ‘discovered’ the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, I had always known where the old venue was - anyone passing along Riding House Street can catch a glimpse by looking past the battered black railings and down the flight of concrete steps. But I hadn’t thought it might be possible to get in. The gate in the railings was permanently padlocked, and there were never any signs of life from the room beyond. Investigating one day from within the University of Westminster’s library building on Little Titchfield Street, however, I came across a heavy grey security door that seemed to lead to nowhere in particular. I persuaded the attendants in the building’s control room to lend me the key. And sure enough, behind the door was a crumbling flight of steps, leading to the basement.

The room itself was absolutely filthy. It was full of rusting filing cabinets, overflowing boxes of papers (belonging to the University’s Law school as it turned out), old planks of wood and other unidentifiable detritus. Battered cartons of rat poison were tucked into the corners of a stained carpet strewn with screws and nails. Near the bottom of the staircase, a small window set into a red door showed the way up and out onto Riding House Street. Across the floor was another tiny, window-less room. Next to it was a second unlocked door to a yard,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘What Does it all Mean’, *Miniaturists* website, accessed 2 March 2013, <http://www.miniaturists.co.uk/>.

<sup>2</sup> The festival programme is included in Appendix C.

enclosed by high brick walls. Looking around, I could see nothing that suggested that this had ever been a theatrical space. It was, to all intents and purposes, a junk room. I decided, there and then, that I wanted to get my hands on it.

There followed many months of negotiations with the university's building and maintenance departments before I was given the green light to use the space, and only then did I fully appreciate how much work it would take to prepare it for a public event. Predictably - perhaps even appropriately - there was also very little budget. My head of department was able to stump up £2,000, but simply to have had the space professionally re-painted would have taken all of that and more. By this stage, I had discussed the idea several times with Fred Proud himself, and between us we decided we might just about be able to do the job ourselves. So together with my co-curator Ben Musgrave and festival administrator Lydia Thomson, we emptied the room, painted it, put up partitions made of curtain or plywood, and tried our best to turn it back into something resembling its original state.<sup>3</sup> Then began the task of inviting participants and audience. Even as the three-day festival began to take shape, however, I'm not sure I had fully understood its purpose. I talked a lot about the pleasure of 'getting my PhD on its feet', without quite knowing what that meant. Most of the time, I was simply caught up in the excitement and anxiety of producing. It wasn't until it was all over that I realised how central the event had become to my research.

In fact, some of the most revealing discoveries had been made before the festival began, when Fred Proud and I were still preparing the space. During the hours spent clearing, cleaning and redecorating, we were able to discuss many of his early experiences. This shared activity, however, also offered other, more unexpected, insights. When it came to painting the room, for example, my initial instinct had been to create a serviceable 'black box'. Proud, however, was insistent that we choose a brown colour in sympathy with the original cork wall-lining created by designer John Hallé. Hallé, he explained, had always believed that black was an unwelcoming colour - one that cast the audience into an abrasive relationship with the space.

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<sup>3</sup> There are photographs of the space as we found it at back of the festival programme (see Appendix C) and also online at: 'Gallery', *Soho Poly Theatre Festival* blog, accessed 3 November 2013, <http://sohopolyfestival.blogspot.co.uk/p/gallery.html>.

Proud's determination drew my attention to what has become a recurring theme throughout this study, namely the perception of the various venues at which the theatre was resident, as 'friendly', 'inviting', 'intimate', 'cosy' and 'atmospheric'. Le Metro Club, perhaps the least theatrically fit for purpose, was nevertheless described by Audrey Slaughter as a 'chummy place'.<sup>4</sup> The King's Head pub was described by John Ford as 'friendly' and 'un-posh' and this informality was reflected in the inclusive tone adopted by Soho in press releases and other marketing material.<sup>5</sup> Then, when the company moved to Riding House Street, Ford not only commented on the 'cosy and compact' character of the theatre's new home, but delighted in the offer of 'real coffee in a pottery mug'.<sup>6</sup> And once the festival had begun, it was immediately obvious how well the basement functioned as a meeting place. Although the foyer had seemed tiny while we were clearing it out, it provided ample room for milling around and talking to guests. This was helped by the fact that there was often an overspill into the auditorium. Indeed, the lack of strict dividing lines between social and theatrical spaces recalled comments made by Irving Wardle in his 1972 article for *New Society*. There, he drew attention to the way in which 'fringe' venues like the Soho Poly were helping to break down the barriers between audience and spectator. He observed that '[t]he actor is somebody like you, and you have probably just pushed past him on the stairs, or queued behind him for a coffee'.<sup>7</sup>

When planning the festival's events, I had wanted to make sure there was an element of live performance, partly to honour the venue's original function, but also so that I could see some of its theatrical properties for myself. Given their commitment to the short form, the Miniaturists were an obvious choice for a celebration of lunchtime theatre. Of the three productions they chose to present, Steve King's comic monologue *The Well Made Life* was particularly successful. The self-referential story follows the desperate attempts of a playwriting lecturer to apply the rules of dramaturgy to his disintegrating personal life. (King had pitched the play well. There were several playwriting teachers in the audience - including myself.) Following the structure of a seminar, the play had echoes of

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<sup>4</sup> Audrey Slaughter, 'Living Out a Dream on a Shoestring', *Evening News*, 27 January 1970.

<sup>5</sup> See John Ford 'The Soho Theatre', *Time Out*, 18 June 1971, 33.

<sup>6</sup> John Ford, 'The New Soho Poly', *Time Out*, 3 March 1972, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Fringe Theatre', *New Society*, 29 June 1972, 686.

Conrad Bromberg's *Dr Galley* (1970), produced during the Soho Poly's inaugural season in 1972. In response to that production, and with respect to lunchtime theatre specifically, Irving Wardle had commented that, '[a]s a spectator, the work which has always affected me most strongly has been either un-impeded story-telling (preferably by a single actor) or some form of confessional'. King's play demonstrated the impact that the monologue form could have in such an intimate venue. Forced into close proximity with his audience, the actor was unable, in Wardle's phrase to 'to defend himself with technique'.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the piece gripped with a compelling voyeurism.

There is no doubt that certain types of play are well suited to particular places of performance. Throughout this research, however, I have shown that the Soho Theatre's productions frequently experimented with the cross-fertilisation of dramatic forms and tested the assumed boundaries of the playing space. Indeed, it was often those pieces that seemed an awkward fit for Soho's various stages that proved most theatrically revealing. In Chapter Three, I illustrated the point with respect to the production at the King's Head of *The Good and Faithful Servant*, originally a television play by Joe Orton. Here, the problem of frequent set changes was solved by a multi-stage design. This brought the audience into the heart of the action and encouraged a more empathetic relationship with Orton's characters. The constraints of time and space, I argued, could be as important to creative innovation as defined artistic policy or 'coherent' programming decisions.

On the final afternoon of the festival, Michael Billington hosted a conversation with Irving Wardle and Michael Coveney. These critics have been quoted extensively throughout my research, and it was fascinating to hear them reflect on the period. Irving Wardle, in particular, spoke movingly about his early visits to the venue. Echoing some of the comments made above, he remarked on its 'irresistible sympathetic identity', and continued:

You felt pretty sure when you came along to Old [sic] Compton Street or here you were probably going to have a good time. There was a sort of irreducible professional minimum below which it never sank [...] and also it was a hugely welcoming place, thanks largely to the angel of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

house, Verity, on the door there, with soup and home baking and this welcoming smile that came right from the heart.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Michael Coveney joked about learning the craft of reviewing on the job, and noted ruefully that his boss at the *Financial Times*, B.A. Young, would always bag the press tickets whenever Soho could boast star-casting. Later in the week, Coveney offered further thoughts in a blog post for WhatsOnStage. Referring to Nigel Hawthorne's portrayal of Judge Bakwater in *The Trial of St George*, he wrote that '[h]is participation on the burgeoning new fringe was a good indicator of how theatre was changing and shifting away from so many hidebound traditions at this time'.<sup>10</sup> It was sometimes argued that lunchtime theatre's primary value was as a training ground for emerging actors who would eventually feed into the larger repertory theatres and the West End. In fact, as many examples from this study show, actors from the commercial sector, and indeed television, were increasingly keen to 'moonlight' on the lunchtime stages.<sup>11</sup> Theatres such as Soho, therefore, quickly became places of theatrical exchange, where practitioners with a range of different experiences could influence and inspire each other.

It was perhaps Michael Billington who provoked the most revealing insight into the Soho (Poly) Theatre's wider significance. Introducing the session, he began by reading a long list of playwrights associated with the theatre during the 1970s. Names included Sam Shepard, Peter Weiss, Slawomir Mrozek, Frank Marcus, Colin Spencer, Heathcote Williams, David Edgar, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems and Michelene Wandor. (Most of these, but not all, had been involved during the period considered here.) In the context of this roll call, Billington remarked on the 'striking [...] eclecticism and range of the repertory'.<sup>12</sup> What was equally striking was that these notions of 'eclecticism' and 'range' were being praised as positive attributes. Billington's comments in 2012, in other words, were in marked contrast to the way in which lunchtime

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<sup>9</sup> Irving Wardle, speaking at the Soho Poly Festival, 21 June 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Bargain Basement Revisited', *WhatsOnStage* blog, accessed 14 October 2013, [http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/06-2012/bargain-basement-re-visited\\_3755.html](http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/06-2012/bargain-basement-re-visited_3755.html).

<sup>11</sup> Frank Warren, for instance, one of the actors in Fred Proud's first production (*One Autumn Evening* in 1968), had written that he was 'keen to get back to the grass roots of theatre'. (Programme notes for *One Autumn Evening*, Fred Proud's private collection.)

<sup>12</sup> Michael Billington, speaking at the Soho Poly Festival, 21 June 2012.

theatre's output was often judged at the time. The shift in perspective draws attention to the impact of social, cultural and political circumstances on earlier critical assessments.

As many histories of the period have argued, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of significant social change. The growing student voice, disenchantment with the political classes, despair over foreign conflicts and cultural influences from abroad were just some of the factors contributing to oppositional ideologies expressed in various ways across the artistic spectrum. Many critics and early historians of the period tried to categorise this new activity. Peter Ansorge for example, argued that the most significant fringe and alternative theatre companies were those that were committed to an assault on a consumerist and media-controlled society. Others, like Jonathan Hammond, went further, hoping to galvanise and encourage groups that seemed to be engaging directly with the social and political questions of the day. Writing at the end of the decade, Sandy Craig was determined to demarcate the territory of 'alternative theatre' groups in order to prevent what he saw as the incorporating instincts of the mainstream. And there were many others who felt that, if fringe and alternative theatres were not doing explicitly 'experimental' work, their reasons for existence were in question.

For such commentators, the eclecticism on display at the lunchtime theatres was often seen as a weakness - a sign of contingent decision-making in response to a dearth of 'high quality' material, or, more generally, a lack of artistic or political purpose. Throughout this study, I have suggested that the value placed on such notions of 'coherence' and 'consistency' - both by contemporary critics and later historians - has distorted the picture of the theatrical landscape. Certainly, it has meant that many of the innovations offered by the lunchtime theatres were missed, or misinterpreted. As I have shown, lunchtime experiments raised important questions about the nature of theatre going as a social activity, interrogated the relationship between performer and spectator, and challenged the assumed aesthetic boundaries of the short dramatic form.

In key respects, the reflections offered by Coveney, Wardle and Billington help to pull the three central research questions of this study (as set out in my Introduction) back into focus. In response to the first of these - the

question of how Soho came to establish itself on the lunchtime theatre scene - the perceived quality of productions, coupled with the 'welcoming' properties of the various venues, were critical factors. Between them, Proud and Bargate created places that, to borrow John Grillo's phrase, 'encouraged one to return'.<sup>13</sup>

In considering the second question - the extent to which Soho contributed to the developing discourses surrounding fringe and alternative theatre activity - I have argued that misplaced anxieties over eclecticism and range have drawn attention away from the deep engagement with issues of form, content and social function that often characterised Soho's work. The third of my research questions sought to examine the ways in which the study of the Soho Theatre might cast new light on the wider fringe and alternative theatre landscape. And here, Billington's intervention is particularly significant. For whilst his list of writers was presented as a summary of Soho's output during the 1970s, it also, I suggest, serves as a more general snap-shot of the period. It included, for example, writers from the American and European avant-garde (Sam Shepard, Peter Weiss, Slawomir Mrozek), British playwrights associated with various strands of 'political' theatre (David Edgar, Howard Brenton), as well as several of the women writers who were coming to prominence at the time (Olwen Wymark, Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems). Billington used such examples to suggest that Soho was primarily a playwrights' theatre. A longer list might have complicated this argument, taking into account Chris Wilkinson's experiments with environmental theatre, the more collaborative 'Bunch of Fives' season of 1973, and Soho's own adventures in the fields of touring and community work. Soho's output also reflected the frequent movement of practitioner (actors, writers, designer and directors) between theatrical sectors. Frank Marcus, for instance, whose monologue *Blank Pages* premiered at the Soho Poly in 1972, was best known for his West End hit *The Killing of Sister George* (1964). A developing relationship between different forms of broadcast media was also marked by Soho productions such as *The Tower* and *The Good and Faithful Servant*. The detailed study of the Soho Theatre offers, in other words, more than the opportunity to plug a gap in recent theatre history. It provides an interpretative frame through which to consider a

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from John Grillo to Nicholas Barter, received 12 October 1972, ACGB/43/43/12.

wider 'fringe and alternative theatre' ecology to which Soho itself made a major contribution.

### **The Growing Archive**

At the beginning of this thesis I explained some of my research strategies and the reasons for adopting them. I have admitted, here, that with regard to the Soho Poly Festival I did not have clear outcomes in mind from the start. I take some comfort, however, from Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson's introduction to their edited collection, *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011). There they make a case for the benefits of 'research unpredictability' and the value in not always knowing 'where research is heading'.<sup>14</sup> It may even be possible to make a tentative claim that the model represented by the festival - in which the subjects of a particular study become active participants in its investigation - makes a contribution to the growing number of unorthodox research methods and methodologies in this field. It is also significant to note that, as well as adding to the body of written and recorded commentary about the theatre, the festival was, itself, archive generating. The Miniaturist plays, for example, add a new layer of (documented) performance history to the Riding House Street premises. During the event, Fred Proud also made a fifteen-minute YouTube video. Its content is, simultaneously, the festival and the theatre it remembered: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95eLIAIg3z0>.

With this in mind, I close my thesis by offering up two further documents from the Soho Theatre's developing archive. The first is an entry I asked Proud to write for the festival's blog. The second is a photograph of me, Ben Musgrave, Lydia Thomson and Fred Proud. In the picture, we stand outside the original entrance to the Soho Poly, with a sign we had painted earlier in the week and hung from the railings to announce the theatre's 'return'. Both this photo and Proud's text point to the live discourse between now and then that all archives, and all histories, represent.

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<sup>14</sup> Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, 'Introduction: Doing Methods Creatively'. In *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, eds. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 8-9.

It was an almost magical, never to be repeated period of utter artistic freedom for me in this little one-time, pop-up theatre - more accurately perhaps 'pop-down!' While running the ship, or the submarine that was The Soho Poly all of forty years ago, there were forty productions or more staged - mostly at lunchtime, though there were half a dozen notable evening productions too. At that time there was no board of directors, no vetos, no rules, no censorship, no limits (except financial) on what bold experiments one could undertake. There had already been a sado-masochistic strip-club play with a torture scene, another where two monks humping a fresh corpse in a coffin were avidly pursued by a necrophiliac and one other with a grotesque cross between a spider and a rabbit who ate the brains of a US marine with a spoon. These were at the first Soho Theatres in New Compton Street or featured in the two seasons at The King's Head in Islington. [...] The Poly had a unique ambiance and was more flexible than you would think as we had a good lighting rig and a succession of able designers who invariably rose to the challenge. Their designs were as in-your-face as the performances. [...] I loved the fact that you were so close to the actors that you could count the pores on their noses if you wanted. A tough challenge for them but incredibly satisfying for all once they got used to it. Experiment was rife everywhere it seemed and venues were beginning to pop-up in all manner of places in the early and mid- seventies. Most were certainly never intended as theatres. The Fringe was the centre of enormous interest and coverage. [...] [P]erhaps there is more opportunity now than ever and, in addition[,] an urgent need to invent a new kind of theatre that is honest and provocative; one that pulls down the dumb obedience to consumerism and hand-me-down depression and encourages out-spoken individualism. Time to promote new waves in experimental theatre. Something to 'Stop the world', change one's thinking about the Self and the many myths and half-truths about the Society in which we live. What are we waiting for?

Fred Proud, 2014.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 'Some Words from Fred Proud', *Soho Poly Theatre Festival* blog, accessed 3 November 2013, <http://sohopolyfestival.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/some-words-from-fred-proud.html>.



Figure 4: From left to right: Ben Musgrave, Matthew Morrison, Lydia Thomson and Fred Proud. (Photograph: Sabrina Cammarata.)

## Appendix A

### Soho Theatre Production History: November 1968 - August 1975

Note: unless otherwise stated, productions took place at lunchtime. Over this period the Soho Theatre also invited a large number of companies to present work for single nights or very short runs. This list only includes a selection of such productions. It should also be noted that I have recorded the month of opening, rather than the exact dates of a play's run. These were often subject to last minute changes and revisions, and apparently precise listings in newspapers and magazines (like *Time Out*, etc.) can, on occasion, be misleading.

Month of Opening	Title	Author	Director	Venue
<b>November 1968</b>	<i>One Autumn Evening</i>	Friedrich Dürrenmatt, translated by Gabriel Karminski	Frederick Proud	The Open Space Theatre, Tottenham Court Road
<b>December 1969</b>	<i>Bad Bad Jo-Jo</i>	James Leo Herlihy	Frederick Proud	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>January 1970</b>	<i>The Local Stigmatic</i>	Heathcote Williams	Frederick Proud	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>February 1970</b>	<i>The Tower</i>	Peter Weiss, translated by Michael Hamburger, adapted by Frederick Proud	Frederick Proud	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>March 1970</b>	<i>A Crucial Fiction</i>	Malcolm Quantrill	Frederick Proud	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>March 1970</b>	<i>The Pardoner's Tale</i>	Chaucer, adapted by Pip Simmons	Pip Simmons	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street: <a href="#">a Pip Simmons Theatre Group production</a>
<b>March 1970</b>	<i>Red Cross</i>	Sam Shepard	Julie Zellweger	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street: <a href="#">a New York Workshop production</a>
<b>April 1970</b> (early evening production)	<i>Electra</i>	Euripides	David Thompson	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street: <a href="#">a Traverse</a>

				<u>Theatre production</u>
<b>April 1970</b>	<i>Laughs Etc. / History of a Poor Old Man / The Old Jew</i>	James Leo Herlihy / John Grillo / Murray Schisgal	Chris Parr	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>April 1970</b>	<i>The Solemn Communion / Orison</i>	Fernando Arrabal, translated by John Calder and Barbara Wright.	Frederick Proud / Roland Jaquerello	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>June 1970</b>	<i>Samson</i>	David Selbourne	Raymond Ross	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>June 1970</b>	<i>Number Three</i>	John Grillo	Frederick Proud	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>July 1970</b>	<i>The Waiting Room</i>	John Bowen	John Bowen	Le Metro Club, New Compton Street
<b>Summer 1970</b>	The Soho Theatre visited the Edinburgh festival with the following plays from the repertory: <i>The Local Stigmatic</i> , <i>The Solemn Communion</i> , <i>Number Three</i> and <i>Oh Bangkok</i> (devised by the Edinburgh company).			
<b>November 1970</b>	<i>Gilgamesh, King of Uruk</i>	Adapted by Frederick Proud	Frederick Proud	On tour to: Oval House, The Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Universities of Durham and Newcastle
<b>February 1971</b>	<i>Spider Rabbit</i>	Michael McClure	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>March 1971</b>	<i>The Informer</i>	Bertolt Brecht	Paul Thompson	The King's Head
<b>March 1971</b>	<i>The Good and Faithful Servant</i>	Joe Orton	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>March 1971</b>	<i>Neither Here Nor There</i>	Olwen Wymark	Charles Savage	The King's Head
<b>April 1971</b>	<i>Blubber</i>	John Grillo	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>April 1971</b>	<i>Enchanted Night</i>	Slawomir Mrozek	George Plawski	The King's Head
<b>May 1971</b>	<i>Inquisition</i>	Michael Almaz	Chris Parr	The King's Head
<b>May 1971</b>	<i>Night School</i>	Harold Pinter	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>June 1971</b>	<i>Boy in Darkness</i>	Mervyn Peake, adapted by Paul Alexander	Paul Alexander	The King's Head

<b>June 1971</b>	<i>Dynamo</i>	Chris Wilkinson	Howard Panter and Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>July 1971</b> (evening production)	<i>Entertaining Mr Sloane</i>	Joe Orton	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>Summer 1971</b>	The Soho Theatre visited the Edinburgh festival with Chris Wilkinson's <i>Dynamo</i> .			
<b>October 1971</b>	<i>As is Proper</i>	Tom Mallin	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>November 1971</b>	<i>Captain Fantastic Meets the Ectomorph</i>	Barry Pritchard	Nigel Gregory	The King's Head
<b>November 1971</b>	<i>The Technicians</i>	Olwen Wymark	Frederick Proud	The King's Head
<b>November 1971</b>	<i>Plastic Birthday</i>	John Kane	Paul Alexander	The King's Head
<b>March 1972</b> (evening production)	<i>The Trial of St George</i>	Colin Spencer	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1972</b>	<i>Infancy and Childhood</i>	Thornton Wilder	John Link	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1972</b>	<i>The Rooming House / Dr Galley</i>	Conrad Bromberg	Joe Fairclough / Frederick Proud and Henry Woolf	The Soho Poly
<b>April 1972</b>	<i>The Hero / The Pansy</i>	Arthur Kopit Michael McClure	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>April 1972</b>	<i>The City</i>	Loula Anagnostaki	Janet Henfry	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1972</b>	<i>Ladybird</i>	Monique Wittig	Sheila Allen	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1972</b> (evening production)	<i>Janet and John / Chelsea Hate Whores / Joseph Arch / Superscum / Ten Minute Problem</i> (These five short plays were grouped under the collective titles 'Soho Double Act' and 'Social Circus'.)	Frederick Proud / Frederick Proud / Paul Thompson / Mary O'Malley / Frederick Proud	Frederick Proud / Paul Thompson / Frederick Proud / John Tordoff / John Tordoff	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1972</b>	<i>We are all Niggers Under the Skin</i>	Robert Ray	Roger Christian	The Soho Poly
<b>August 1972</b>	<i>On the Road</i>	Anton Chekhov, translated by Basil Ashmore	James Grout	The Soho Poly
<b>August 1972</b>	<i>The Cave of Salamanca</i>	Miguel de Cervantes	Philip Allen-Morgan	The Soho Poly
<b>November 1972</b>	<i>Husbands and Lovers</i>	Ferenc Molnár	James O'Brien	The Soho Poly

<b>September 1972</b> (evening production)	<i>The Fifth Labour of Hercules</i>	Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Translated by Agnes Hamilton	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>September 1972</b>	<i>Lonesome-Like</i>	Harold Brighouse	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>September 1972</b> (evening production)	<i>Evidence of intimacy</i>	Gabriel Josipovici	Phillip Allen-Morgan	The Soho Poly
<b>October 1972</b>	<i>Overruled</i>	George Bernard Shaw	Phillip Allen-Morgan	The Soho Poly
<b>November 1972</b>	<i>St. Patrick's Day, or, The Scheming Lieutenant</i>	Richard Brinsley Sheridan	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>November 1972</b> (evening production)	Double bill entitled 'Monograms': <i>Blank Pages / Why Mrs Neustadter Always Loses</i>	Frank Marcus / Colin Spencer	Frank Marcus / James O'Brien	The Soho Poly
<b>February 1973</b>	<i>Gangsters</i>	David Edgar	John Tordoff	The Soho Poly
<b>February 1973</b>	<i>Ag and Fish</i>	Roy Minton	Philip Allen-Morgan	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1973</b>	<i>The Launderette</i>	Patrick Carter	James O'Brien	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1973</b>	<i>The Illumination of Mr Shannon</i>	Don Haworth	Colin Blakely	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1973</b> (late night production)	<i>The Ass-Hole</i>	Sal's Meat Market	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1973</b>	<i>Cartoon</i>	David Pinner	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>April 1973</b>	<i>Snaps</i> - three short plays: <i>Civitas Dei / Days by the River / Macenery's Vision of Pipkin</i>	John Grillo	Donald Sumpter	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1973</b>	<i>Urban Guerilla Boutique</i>	Terry James	James O'Brien	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1973</b>	<i>You Are My Heart's Delight</i>	C.P. Taylor	Nicolas Kent	The Soho Poly
<b>May 1973</b>	<i>Baby Love</i>	David Edgar	James O'Brien	The Soho Poly
<b>October 1973</b>	A season of plays produced by the Factory Theatre Lab of Toronto.			
<b>October 1973</b> (evening production)	<i>Mrs. Argent</i>	Tom Mallin	Maxwell Shaw	The Soho Poly
<b>October 1973</b>	Her Original Britischen Boys	Improvised comedy	The company	The Soho Poly: <u>a Theatre Machine</u>

				<u>production</u>
<b>October 1973</b>	<i>Coal</i>	Robert Holman	Chris Parr	The Soho Poly
<b>October 1973</b>	<i>Fun</i>	Geoffrey Case	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>November 1973</b>	<i>Come</i>	David Mowat	Max Stafford-Clark	The Soho Poly
<b>November 1973</b>	<i>True Life</i>	Chris Allen	Chris Allen and Chris Parr	The Soho Poly
<b>December 1973</b>	<i>The Ruffian On the Stair / The Dumb Waiter</i>	Joe Orton / Harold Pinter	Paul Joyce	The Soho Poly
<b>December 1973</b>	<i>The Serial</i>	Patrick Carter	Jeremy Young	The Soho Poly
<b>December 1973</b>	<i>Grabberwitch</i>	Vicky Ireland	Chris Parr	The Soho Poly
<b>January 1974</b>	<i>The Dinosaurs / Certain Humiliations</i>	John Antrobus	Performed by Theatre Machine	The Soho Poly: <u>a Wakefield Tricycle Company (WTC) production</u>
<b>February 1974</b> (evening production)	<i>The Good and Faithful Servant ( a new version with added songs)</i>	Joe Orton (added songs by Chris Gilmore and Gary Carpenter)	Frederick Proud	The King's Head: <u>a Soho Theatre production</u>
<b>February 1974</b>	<i>An Evening with the GLC</i>	David Pinner	Walter Hall	The Soho Poly: <u>a Basement Theatre production</u>
<b>February 1974</b>	<i>The Recorder</i>	Martin Duberman	Robert Gillespie	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>March 1974</b>	<i>Botticelli / Clevinger's Trial</i>	Terrence McNally / Joseph Heller	Gavin Douglas / Walter Hall	The Soho Poly: <u>a Basement Theatre production</u>
<b>March 1974</b>	<i>Cowboy Mouth</i>	Sam Shepard and Patti Smith	Walter Donohue	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>March 1974</b> (evening production)	<i>The Illegal Immigrants / Certain Humiliations / The Dinosaurs</i>	John Antrobus	Kenneth Chubb	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>May 1974</b>	<i>Fing's Ain't Wot They Used T'be</i>	Frank Norman and Lionel Bart	Frederick Proud	The Tramshed Theatre, Woolwich - billed as a Soho Theatre production
<b>June 1974</b>	<i>Our Sort of People</i>	Jeremy Seabrook	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly

		Michael O'Neill		
<b>July 1974</b>	<i>Old Man Aesop He Knew the Game</i>	Edwin Turner	Kenneth Chubb	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>July 1974</b>	<i>Rape</i>	James Duke	Walter Hall	The Soho Poly: <u>a Basement Theatre production</u>
<b>August 1974</b>	<i>Hells Bells</i>	Tony Perrin	Tim Aspinall	The Soho Poly
<b>August 1974</b>	<i>The Athlete</i>	Derek Smith	Peter Stevenson	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>September 1974</b>	<i>Who'll Be Next and Who'll Be Lucky?</i>	John Mackendrick	Walter Hall	The Soho Poly: <u>a Basement Theatre production</u>
<b>September 1974</b>	<i>Bar-b-q</i>	John Anthony West	Kenneth Chubb	The Soho Poly: <u>a WTC production</u>
<b>September 1974</b> (evening production)	<i>Kong Lives</i>	George Byatt	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>October 1974</b>	<i>The Old One-Two</i>	A.R. Gurney Jnr.	Dickon Reed	The Soho Poly: <u>a Basement Theatre production</u>
<b>October 1974</b>	<i>Standards</i>	Chris Allen	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>February 1975</b>	<i>Oh, If Ever a Man Suffered.</i>	Mary O'Malley	Brian Croucher	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1975</b>	<i>Perfect Happiness</i>	Caryl Churchill	Susanna Capon	The Soho Poly
<b>March 1975</b>	<i>Post Mortem</i>	Brian Clark	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly
<b>June 1975</b>	<i>The Saliva Milkshake</i>	Howard Brenton	Robert Walker	The Soho Poly
<b>July 1975</b>	<i>Gem</i>	Barrie Keeffe	Keith Washington	The Soho Poly
<b>July 1975</b>	<i>Hello Sailor</i>	Eric Sutton	Robert Walker	The Soho Poly
<b>August 1975</b>	<i>The Late Wife</i>	Christopher Wilkins	Frederick Proud	The Soho Poly

## **Appendix B**

### **List of Interviewees**

Note: additional email correspondence is fully noted in my manuscript.

Alexander, Paul. Interview with the author, 29 November 2013.  
Billington, Michael. Interview with the author, 4 February 2008.  
Bradley, Jack. Interview with the author, 21 November 2006.  
Callow, Simon. Interview with the author, 24 January 2008.  
Case, Geoffrey. Interview with the author, 30 June 2013.  
Christian, Roger. Interview with the author, 18 January 2014.  
Croucher, Brian. Interview with the author, 14 November 2013.  
Edgar, David. Interview with the author, 22 March 2012.  
Holman, Robert. Interview with the author, 28 February 2012.  
Leventon, Patricia. Interview with the author, 27 March 2013.  
Linthwaite, Illona. Interview with the author, 18 September 2013.  
Marlowe, Linda. Interview with the author, 22 July 2013.  
O'Malley, Mary. Interview with the author, 26 January 2013.  
Panter, Howard. Interview with the author, 31 July 2013.  
Parr, Chris. Interview with the author, 22 March 2013.  
Pinner, David. Interview with the author, 17 March 2012.  
Plummer, Sue. Interview with the author, 27 January 2013.  
Proud, Fred. Interviews with the author: 19 July 2010; 19 January 2013; 5 December 2013, and many other informal occasions.  
Sirett, Paul. Interview with the author, 27 April 2011.  
Spencer, Colin. Interview with the author, 16 January 2013.  
van Zwanenberg, Miki. Interview with the author, 22 July 2013.  
Wardle, Irving. Interview with the author, 14 February 2008.

## Appendix C

**Programme for the Soho Poly Theatre Festival, 19 - 21 June 2012.**



**Soho Poly Theatre**

**Festival**

**19th - 21st June**

**Basement, 16 Riding House Street, W1W**

## Welcome to the Soho Poly Theatre...

A few months ago I found myself standing knee-deep in junk in a filthy basement storeroom. It was hard not to choke on the dust, and even harder to imagine it as a theatre.

Fred Proud and Verity Bargate must have felt something similar in 1972 when they first saw the tiny premises on Riding House Street. Yet it was here that they established the Soho Poly, one of the most iconic theatres of the 1970s and '80s. To mark the moment when the story began, playwright Ben Musgrave and myself - with a lot of help from Lydia Thomson - have programmed this fortieth anniversary festival. In the early 1990s the (then) Polytechnic of Central London reclaimed the space, stripping it of its theatrical fittings and using it for storage. But together with Fred Proud himself, we've cleared it out, given it a lick of paint, and invited the fantastic contributors listed below to celebrate the theatre's history and its continuing influence on the arts scene today.



We hope you enjoy it!

Matt Morrison  
Festival Curator

*sohopolyfestival.blogspot.com*  
*@SohoPolyFest*  
*Matt.Morrison77@gmail.com*

### Contributors

**Frederick Proud, the first artistic director of the Soho Poly**, trained at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in the late sixties. He left with qualifications to act and teach but with a stronger hankering to direct. The Soho Theatre Company, which he founded with his late ex-wife Verity Bargate, followed soon after that. The Company had small beginnings in a number of venues but was to find a permanent home in this legendary basement, known as the Soho Poly.

By the time Fred had moved on, years later, he had run 8 seasons of plays of all kinds. Never solely interested in new writing, though there was much of that, he had also cultivated an appetite for excellence from other cultures, other times. When forgotten gems were thrown into the mix, he believed a more penetrating light would be thrown on the mores and gross 'insanities' of the present.

Apart from the 'discovery' of the new writers of that time like Barry Keeffe, Mary O'Malley, Michael McClure, John Grillo etc., there were stage premieres of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (3,500 years BC), plays by Durrenmatt, Arrabal, Peter Weiss, Orton, and revivals of works by Harold Brighouse, Sheridan and Chekhov. Most of this fare was at lunchtime, served up to local office workers with bowls of soup and crusty wholemeal bread in the 45 minute slot. There were many evening productions too.

All in all it was only a part of the explosion of work on the fringe at the time. But an indication of the impact is clear when one considers how, in the decades that followed, so many theatres up and down the country felt the need to build a small, experimental, studio somewhere round the back.

**Matthew Morrison** is a playwright and lecturer at The University of Westminster. He is also currently under commission with LAMDA. His play 'Through the Night' (Finborough, 2011) was one of four selected for the Papatango New Playwriting Awards 2011, and his monologue 'Inside Out' was chosen for the inaugural High Tide festival. Other recent work includes: 'Brightest and Best (Half Moon, 2012); 'Insect' (Miniaturists, 2011); 'Hypertension' (Old Vic Tunnels, 2011); 'W-11' (The Gate, 2010). Matt has also written radio comedy, short stories and two non-fiction books. As an actor he has performed at The Tricycle, the Arts Theatre and The Watermill. He is an Associate of Soho Theatre.

**Ben Musgrave's** play 'Pretend You Have Big Buildings' won first prize in the inaugural Bruntwood Prize, in 2006. The play was performed in the main house of the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, in July 2007. He has since written plays for the National Theatre, Y Touring, Only Connect, and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. His most recent play, 'His Teeth', was performed at Only Connect in October 2011, and was nominated for an offwestend award for 'Best New Play'. His play for Radio

4, The British Club, was broadcast in March this year. He is also a visiting lecturer in creative writing at The University of Westminster.

**Lydia Thomson** is currently studying English Literature and Creative Writing at The University of Westminster. She is also part of a semi-professional dance company (B.A.D Company) with whom she has performed in various shows, festivals and commercial pursuits. She has performed as a principal dancer in the pantomime 'Cinderella' in 2009 (UK Productions, The Anvil). Amateur credits include the role of Louise in 'Carousel', Lavinia in Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus' and co-director of a production of 'Agnes of God' (Central Studios, Basingstoke).

**Oladipo Agboluaje** was a writer on Soho Theatre's writers' attachment programme. He was also writer in residence. He has had three plays produced at Soho Theatre: The Estate (Tiata Fahodzi), The Christ of Coldharbour Lane, and Iya-Ile (Tiata Fahodzi) and also now serves on the board.

**Michael Billington** has been the drama critic of The Guardian newspaper since 1971. He is a regular contributor to radio and television programmes and was a former presenter of the BBC Radio 4 arts programmes 'Kaleidoscope' and 'Critics' Forum'. His books include biographies of playwrights Tom Stoppard, Alan Ayckbourn and Harold Pinter.

**Michael Coveney** is the chief critic for Whatsonstage.com. He has written about theatre for over three decades, as editor of Plays and Players, and as staff drama critic on the Financial Times, the Observer and the Daily Mail.

**Sarah Dickenson** is the Senior Reader at Soho Theatre. Prior to joining Soho she worked nationally and internationally as a dramaturg and project manager with a focus on new writing for organisations including writernet, Theatre503, Bristol Old Vic, Churchill Theatre Bromley, Ustinov Bath, Plymouth Theatre Royal, Hall for Cornwall, Tamasha, RSC, Exeter Northcott, The Red Room, Goldsmith's College and Apples and Snakes.

**Sue Dunderdale** is a director and writer in theatre, television and film. She is specially known for her work with new writers and with actors in all three media, not least through her work at RADA (where she runs the MA in directing), Mountview and the Actors Centre.

**David Edgar** is a British playwright and author who has had more than sixty of his plays published and performed on stage, radio and television around the world, making him one of the most prolific dramatists of post-1960s Britain.

**Dan Herd** is Artistic Associate of Soho Theatre and a freelance theatre director. He has worked as a director at The Old Vic, Theatre Royal Haymarket, Soho Theatre, Arcola Theatre, Theatre503, The Old Red Lion, King's Head Theatre, Samuel Beckett Theatre (Dublin) and Public Theater (New York). In addition, he has directed

over ten major comedy and theatre productions at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, as well as short work at Latitude Festival. Dan has worked as associate and assistant director at Lyric Hammersmith, The Old Vic, Soho Theatre, Theatre503 and Regent's Park Open Air Theatre.

**Robert Holman** is a British dramatist whose work has been produced since the 1970s at the RSC, the West End, Royal Court Theatre and elsewhere in the UK. He has been resident dramatist at both the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.

**Bryony Kimmings** is a Live Artist based in the East Region, she creates full-length performance works, cabaret acts, homemade music, audio installations and spoken word. During her career Bryony has performed and exhibited at many venues and festivals including Glastonbury, Duckie, Latitude, Roundhouse, Brighton Festival, Assembly Rooms, The National Review of Live Art, Frieze Art Fair, The Secret Garden Party and The Barbican. For 2011 Bryony is Associate Artist at The Junction, Cambridge and A Soho6 Artist at Soho Theatre.

**The Miniaturists** is a growing group of playwrights and other theatre workers interested in the possibilities of the short play. They stage a regular writer-led event of short but perfectly formed plays. Every show is packed with 5 original pieces from an array of talented writers, new and established. Each piece is no longer than twenty minutes, and the dizzying mix makes every event as various and unpredictable as life itself.

**Amy Mulholland's** credits include as Director: 'A Very Grimm Christmas: Hansel & Gretel' (Wireless Theatre Company / Roundhouse), 'The Secret Love Life Of Ophelia' and 'Artificial Gods' (both Mustard Seed Productions, Oxford). She received the James Sargant Bursary Award at the Oxford Playhouse 2008-2009 and the Farnham Maltings No Strings Attached Bursary in 2010. She was also on the Young Vic Springboard Director's Course in 2012. She studied English Literature & Language at University of Oxford.

**Paul Sirett** is an award-winning playwright, dramaturg, teacher, and musician. His plays have been produced in London's West End and in theatres throughout the UK and around the world. As a dramaturg Paul has worked on numerous professional productions of new plays, classics, devised work, translations, and adaptations. He has taught playwriting and dramaturgy at several top universities and conservatories in the UK and abroad. As a guitarist, Paul has recorded and toured with many bands, playing on chart-topping singles and albums in a number of different countries.

**Ben Walters** is co-author, with JM Tyree, of the BFI Film Classic on The Big Lebowski. He has also written books on The Office and Orson Welles and contributes to Time Out, Sight & Sound and Film Quarterly.

**Irving Wardle** is a writer and theatre critic. He wrote for the Observer from 1959 - 1963 and the Times from 1963 - 1989. More recently he has written articles for Prospect and the Oldie. He is the author of a biography of George Devine and another book on theatre criticism.

**Charlotte Westenra** is a freelance theatre director. Her most recent credits include 'Titanic' by Owen McCafferty (MAC Belfast), '66 Books' by Helen Edmundson, Matt Charman and Nathalie Handal (Bush Theatre) and 'Lower Ninth' by Beau Willimon (Donmar at Trafalgar Studios). She trained as a director on the Donmar's Resident Assistant Director scheme and studied Drama at Manchester University.

All images courtesy of our fantastic festival photographer Nick Coupe.  
[www.nickcoupe.com](http://www.nickcoupe.com)

**Huge thanks (in no particular order) to:**

All our contributors, Alex Warwick, Vince Gwiazda and his entire team at the University of Westminster, Malcolm McNeill, Sabrina Cammarata, Steve King, Stephen Sharkey, Declan Feenan, Flavia Fraser-Cannon, Caroline McGinn and Ben Walters at Time Out, Steve Marmion, Sarah Dickenson, Sandra Weer and everyone else who has offered their support and good will.

Tuesday 19 June, 7pm: **Fred Proud**, the Soho Poly Theatre's first artistic director, will introduce the festival, followed by a reading of **Robert Holman's** short play 'Coal', directed by Amy Mulholland.

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Wednesday 20 June, 1pm and 7pm: The festival hosts **The Miniaturists**, who will present three twenty minute plays:

'Manchester' by Dan Reballato  
'Burger Burger Death Burger' by Stacey Gregg  
'Well Made Life' by Steve King

Directed by Sophie Motley

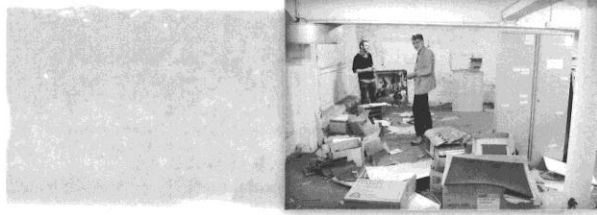
4pm: A panel discussion on supporting new theatre makers, with:

Dan Herd  
Oladipo Agboluaje  
Bryony Kimmins  
Ben Walters  
Sarah Dickenson  
Sue Dunderdale  
Paul Sirett

\*\*\*

Thursday 21 June, 1-2pm: 'Theatre Then and Now' - a lunchtime conversation with **Michael Billington**, **Michael Coveney** and **Irving Wardle**.

7pm: an evening reading of **David Edgar's** play 'Baby Love', directed by Charlie Westenra.



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