

## Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

In Mark Lawson's *Guardian* column following the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics 2012, he commented that director Danny Boyle and producer Stephen Daldry owed a debt to the political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. He also pointed to the influence of the pioneering Artistic Director of Theatre Workshop and Theatre Royal Stratford East, the incomparable Joan Littlewood. This is particularly remarkable because neither Boyle nor Daldry worked directly with Littlewood, yet the influence came through nonetheless. It is also worth noting that the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics 2012, co-directed by Jenny Sealey of Graeae Theatre Company and Bradley Hemmings of the Greenwich and Docklands Festival, matched Boyle's ceremony in its political daring. Perhaps even more so, considering the inclusion of the defiant Ian Dury anthem 'Spasticus Autisticus', culminating in the extraordinary image of a giant Alison Lapper statue; celebrating the disabled body in front of an audience of over 11 million in the UK alone. I'm certain that Sealey and Hemmings would acknowledge a range of influences in their theatrical journeys, particularly

the Theatre-in-Education and Street Arts movements.

The 2012 Opening Ceremonies were just two very high profile examples of the abiding influence of the radical theatre in the UK that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. The DNA of alternative theatre can be detected even further: in mainstream theatre, television, film, visual art practice, participatory arts and across new media as well. Nevertheless, owning their theatrical ancestry could be a more elusive and ad hoc mission for tomorrow's theatre artists.

I have personally been fortunate to have come into contact with some inspirational alternative theatre-makers, including those who themselves were the theatrical descendants of major pioneers. At Theatre Royal Stratford East, I worked under the leadership of Philip Hedley, a direct descendant of Joan Littlewood's. As a lecturer in Nottingham, I worked with David Johnston, who had been passed the baton at Theatre Centre from Brian Way. Although occasionally Philip and David would pass on

Monstrous Regiment: *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* by Chris Bond, Claire Luckham and the company, 1976. Cast included Chris Bowler, Gillian Hanna, Helen Glavin, Ian Blower. The play dealt with the struggle of the Paris washerwomen during the Commune. Photo: Roger Perry

The Artaud Company: Sally Willis in *Story* by Michael Almaz, 1974. Sally Willis toured solo all over Europe in a series of powerful one-woman shows for the company with only one suitcase of props and one of personal belongings. Photo: Pam Martell

Graeae: *Sideshow*, devised by Richard Tomlinson and the company, 1981. Michael Flower, Nabil Shaban, Deniz Bull in the revival of the 1980 show, following its successful US tour

an understanding about theatrical methods from their mentors, it was the groundbreaking spirit and divergent thinking of the pioneers that gave me the most inspiration.

Many theatre-makers of my generation, now into our middle age, have been fortunate to feel a strong sense of the history of our work: feeling part of a movement. This has been hugely motivational in imagining new possibilities when beset with the day-to-day pressures of funding and managing theatre companies. When faced with a challenge, I still regularly ask myself: "What would Joan Littlewood do?" I have been lucky to stand on the shoulders of the people who stood on the shoulders of giants. However, the further you are on the human pyramid from the base, the wobblier it gets! As the decades roll forward, future generations, further distanced from their forebears, could lose a sense of history as a vital instrument for imagining the future. Unfinished Histories is now providing this essential tool for future theatre-makers, using new platforms and channels of communication that are at our disposal for the first time.

For today's theatre-makers to know of and be inspired by radical theatre history, more is needed than the serendipity of meeting the right people. So much exciting work was never adequately documented, the books and plays that have been published only reflect a fraction of the work and, sadly, many pioneers are no longer with us to tell us their extraordinary stories.

The materials put together for this exhibition, the Unfinished Histories website and the company's events are making a major contribution to addressing this deficit. In my work now, as I teach students about theatre, I know that they won't be as fortunate as I to meet and work with some of the people who made the breakthroughs in those unique decades in the second half of the twentieth century. They will, however, have Unfinished Histories.

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