



THEATRES OF CONSCIENCE 1939–53

A STUDY OF FOUR TOURING
BRITISH COMMUNITY THEATRES

PETER BILLINGHAM

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1939–53

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A STUDY OF FOUR TOURING
BRITISH COMMUNITY THEATRES

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Cover illustration: Masks made by John Crockett for use in the Compass Players' production of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* in 1950.

*For Marilyn
and in affectionate memory of my father
Thomas 'Ernie' Billingham
and of my father-in-law
Douglas Lee*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

Franc Chamberlain

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INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this book came as a direct consequence of areas of British theatre history and practice that were of interest to me, and also a fortuitous discovery of certain theatre practitioners and companies who had hitherto been unknown, both to myself and also to wider academic research. The discovery occurred by chance during the successful completion of my MA Theatre Studies at the University of Leeds in 1985. As a playwright as well as a researcher, I had long been interested in examining the relationship between a playwright's belief system with the form, structure and content of their work. Consequently, this concern became the focus of my research dissertation and, to this end, I looked to examine a writer whose work had received significant professional production, but who had not received previous academic analysis. On this basis, I selected three plays by the actor, writer and director, Wilfred Harrison whom I had met some twelve months previously. In the midst of one of our regular, recorded interviews related to his work, he mentioned the name of R H Ward and The Adelphi Players. Harrison had begun his professional acting career with this company after seeing them on tour in his native Sheffield some forty years previously. Whilst twentieth-century – and especially post-war – British theatre had always represented one of my principal teaching areas, I had never encountered either Richard Ward or The Adelphis and was intrigued to try and find out more. Further conversations with Wilfred Harrison led to my discovering the existence of John Crockett's Compass Players and Elliott Martin Browne's Pilgrim Players, all of whom had toured theatre to communities and venues between 1940 and the early nineteen fifties.

The final piece in this emerging and fascinating jig-saw was Harrison telling me of the early years and origins of the Century Theatre, a unique touring theatre company in which the auditorium itself, along with the cast and scenery, toured small towns and villages, beginning in 1952.

Whilst I had come across the name of Martin Browne and the Pilgrim Players in guides such as Phyllis Hartnoll's *The Concise Oxford Guide to the Theatre*, and also knew of his connections with Eliot's plays, the other companies and persons were entirely new to me. Not only was I intrigued by these hitherto unknown examples of touring repertory theatre, but I was also increasingly certain that they represented an unjustly unrecognised aspect of relatively recent British social, cultural and theatrical history. When I then read a copy of Ward's manifesto article 'Theatre of Persons', published in *The Adelphi Magazine* [1941] and discovered his commitment to a radical

overhaul of theatre practice, and also to a wider ideological climate of political and cultural change, my interest was confirmed. Amongst other things, Ward had been a conscientious objector during the Second World War, as well as an active member of the Independent Labour Party and the Peace Pledge Union.[1] His ideological basis for his proposed 'Theatre of Persons' was driven by a passionate commitment to a revival of the dynamic relationship between art and ethics, resulting in a vibrant theatre that was broadly humanistic, whilst retaining a Hegelian, quasi-religious dimension. With Harrison and Crockett sharing broadly similar philosophical ground with Ward, and Martin Browne motivated by the potential he saw within the revival of religious drama, there seemed to be a very real sense in which a study of these four theatre companies might justifiably be called 'Theatres of Conscience'.

At the time, when I first came across these companies, I was also, by synchronicity, committed to re-examining my own personal interest in left-field politics and a non-orthodox, neo-Quaker [2] ethical perspective. This dialectical process of ideological debate has continued in the ensuing period, and I would want to acknowledge the extent to which the research for my book has helped to challenge and stimulate that debate for me. Whilst I had naturally been aware of well-documented initiatives such as Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and also the Unity Theatre, my discovery of companies such as The Adelphis and Compass who were contemporaneous to them excited and engaged me enormously.

My methodological approach has entailed the close reading and analysis of substantial amounts of unique primary source material as well as consulting an increasingly wide range of secondary sources. I have been most fortunate indeed to have access to a wide range of primary material, previously unexamined, especially in relation to the Adelphi Players and the Century Theatre. For most of this material, I am particularly indebted to Cecil Davies and Wilfred Harrison. Both were former Adelphi members at different stages and Harrison, after also acting occasionally with the Compass Players, went on to co-found the Century Theatre with Richard Ward and the engineer/designer, John Ridley. I am also most grateful to all other surviving company members across the four companies whom I have been

1. Peace Pledge Union. This organisation is discussed in some detail later in this chapter. Founded by Canon Dick Shepherd in 1936, the PPU represented a broad affiliation of pacifist and anti-militarist viewpoints.

2. Quakers. The Society of Friends, more commonly known as the Quakers, is discussed in some detail later in this chapter and also in the context of chapter three, in relation to Ward's ideological position. Originating as a radical, non-conformist, Christian sect at the time of the English Civil War, the Quakers continue to be active on a global basis in our contemporary world. Whilst Christian in origin, Quakers are pluralistic in practice and emphasise both the individual spiritual journey and also the collective opposition to all forms of discrimination and oppression. Whilst not a Quaker myself, I attend Quaker meetings – characterized by shared and silent contemplation – on a regular basis.

able to contact, and all of whom have been most generous and supportive in both time and the loan of primary source materials and other documentary evidence. A special thanks in this respect should also go to Pamela Dellar for her help on the Compass chapter. A full list of everyone concerned is given in Appendix A at the end of this book.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to thank the archivists at both the London Theatre Museum and the headquarters of The Society of Friends (Quakers), and particularly William Hetherington, archivist at the Peace Pledge Union, for their invaluable help in making available both masks and designs by John Crockett and, at the PPU, various primary and secondary sources relating to the Peace Pledge Union and Richard Ward.

Researching a previously disregarded area of relatively recent British theatre history has its obvious rewards but also inherent difficulties. To begin with, whilst I had access to the kind of extensive primary source material referred to above such as photographs, newspaper reviews, sketches, programmes etc, there was generally a shortage of direct secondary source material from which to measure my own analysis and conclusions. There is no reference at all in any of my secondary reading to The Adelphi Players, whilst the Compass Players were effectively unrecognised with the exception of a brief reference in Christine Redington's *Can Theatre Teach?* There is substantial, though largely anecdotal, material in Pamela Dellar's edited collection of personal reminiscences of the Compass: *Plays Without Theatres*. Also, George Ineson's autobiographical, and necessarily subjective *Community Journey* provides a valuable insight into aspects of nineteen-thirties' and forties' leftist concerns, namely psychoanalysis and experiments with community living. As far as the Pilgrim Players are concerned they represent a double difficulty. Firstly, they offer the least available primary source material available of the four companies under discussion Secondly, the three principal secondary source texts which relate to them are entirely autobiographical [*Pilgrim Story* and *Two In One*] or, in the case of *The Making of T S Eliot's Plays*, reflect the personal memories and subjective evaluation of Martin Browne.

Largely as a result of Martin Browne's wider reputation as a theatre director, particularly in relation to Eliot's plays, there are other occasional references to the Pilgrims in George Rowell and Anthony Jackson's excellent study of the development of British regional theatre *The Repertory Movement* and also in Norman Marshall's personal account of non-commercial theatre between the wars *The Other Theatre*. Finally, as regards the Century Theatre, other than Alan Hankinson's creditable account of the company's history *The Blue Box*, I have been unable to discover any other published critical analysis of that unique touring theatre. Consideration of the analysis of first and secondary source material, and the criteria by which one evaluates and assesses their comparative value as evidence, is clearly an essential and fundamental basis for any academic research. This naturally involves the careful cross-checking of references and sources. Therefore, such

considerations were clearly in my mind when I first began my research for this book. For example, in the study of various newspaper critical reviews of The Adelphi Players in performance, I recognised that the significance and value of these reviews as evidence upon which to base an objective assessment of their performance style and standard must attempt to be subject to wider criteria. This was especially so because of the nature of most of the Adelphi's earlier, touring work. During that period, from 1941 until 1946, they were performing under wartime conditions and in non-theatre venues. They were reviewed principally by smaller regional newspapers under circumstances in which it was unlikely that the reviewers would necessarily be specialist theatre critics. One has to be cautious, therefore, in accrediting an informed and reliable significance to all of their evaluations of the Company in performance.

Similarly, the many personal reminiscences that were made available to me through interviews or correspondence, whilst invaluable as first-hand, eye-witness accounts of life with the companies, must naturally be subjected to the critical scrutiny of both their subjectivity and the selectivity of memory, especially over a period of forty or fifty years in most cases. This said, I have tried to carefully balance and objectively assess such primary source materials through cross-referencing and, where possible, through using the relatively objective distance afforded through secondary critical sources, where they have existed. Perhaps the most significant issue that arises from these methodological considerations is that of the difficulty of reconstruction when the nature of the evidence is of the kind that I have identified. This is not an issue that one can, or should, attempt to deal with in any sense of seeking to define ready conclusions or resolutions. To summarise for the purposes of this introduction, my methodological guidelines and principles have been, firstly, to read closely all visually primary source material as evidence of the working practices and performances of the four companies. Secondly, I have sought to evaluate carefully all other documentary, primary source material in the form of written recollections, personal memories expressed orally in interview and recorded, or written minutes of company meetings etc and to try to balance the insight and evidence that such material offers with its essentially inherent subjectivity. Thirdly, and finally, I have sought, as a matter of course, to substantiate such evidence, where possible, with secondary source material. In summarising my methodological approach in this way, and having regard for what lessons might be learned from my enterprise by future workers of theatre history, I also wish to establish clearly the inevitable limits that one must work within in this kind of study.

Owing to the travelling character of the four companies concerned and the social and cultural conditions of wartime Britain in which two of them functioned, they were inevitably performing in constantly changing, non-standard venues to similarly transient and diverse audiences. Social and cultural activities are necessarily suspended and altered under such conditions. This factor inevitably effects the formal recording and critical