

## ‘Gesticulating Peanuts’: the introduction of theatre-in-the-round to 1950s British Theatre

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Stephen Joseph was a pioneer of theatre-in-the-round and was instrumental in progressing and democratising theatre in the UK; his name remains largely unknown, however, despite his wide-ranging influence on theatre architecture, playwriting and directing. In this article, I will explore Joseph’s philosophy and how he furthered his aims of reigniting a passion for theatre in Britain by making it relevant and accessible to all people. I will consider why he had such a strong belief in the potential of theatre-in-the-round; how he influenced the early career of regional director, Peter Cheeseman, and how together they battled to create a radical theatrical space in an unlikely industrial city. This article forms part of a larger study on the history of the Victoria Theatre, in Stoke-on-Trent, and its relationship to the community it served.

Whilst London theatres had managed to sustain impressive audience figures throughout the Second World War, many key figures felt less optimistic about the future of theatre in post-war Britain. Harold Hobson, for example, argued that audiences would need more than the traditional West End offerings of farces and comedy revues if theatres were to remain popular.<sup>1</sup> Further North in Salford, Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood were beginning their collaboration as Theatre Workshop; they believed that theatre needed to ‘face up to contemporary problems’ in order to ‘play an effective part in the life of the community.’<sup>2</sup> Whilst Joseph shared both of these concerns, for him it was the playhouses themselves that lay at the root of the problem. Having returned from a recent trip to America to examine the variety of spaces available to theatre companies, Joseph believed that the one way of ‘reviving’ the theatrical tradition in England was to introduce new spaces altogether.

In his 1964 text, *Actor and Architect*, Joseph championed his long-held view:

It is my belief that the single most serious ailment of the live theatre, in our country, is the fact that unless you can pay very heavily for the best seats, you just don’t see enough of the actors [...] we just don’t want any longer to look at miniscule peanuts gesticulating in a big theatre. We want to get close and see what is going on.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph believed passionately that, with the advent of television, theatre had to appeal more directly to a wider cross-section of society and highlight its advantages of live action by allowing every audience

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1 Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 3.

2 Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 49.

3 Stephen Joseph, *Actor and Architect* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 47.

member the chance to be fully immersed in it. Here, Joseph's ideals came to the fore; he was unwavering in his belief that theatre-in-the-round was the best way of engaging a cross-section of people in the action and, therefore, engaging them in theatre:

If we can sort out the tangle of words and ideas, we may find through our new buildings a way of establishing the live theatre, with its ever new dramatists, as a valid activity in our own society; if not, it seems likely that the drama, with new waves of writers or without, will do no better than remain a cliquish activity for relatively few people.<sup>4</sup>

He was anxious to affirm the excitement of live theatre, a pastime that should not be reserved for an 'educated' few but a pursuit that would engage and entertain everyone, particularly because of one's proximity to the action. In a 1959 article for *Theatre World*, Joseph manifested his enthusiasm:

So to hell with the scenery that the films can do so much better! To hell with the frame that protects the cathode ray tube! Let's have the actors in the same room as the audience, let's have four front rows, let's get really excited about this acting business!<sup>5</sup>

It was to this end that Joseph formed the experimental Studio Theatre Company, to impart his enthusiasm for theatre to a previously deprived public and to produce new plays. The group began as a Sunday night fixture at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall in London but failing to attract audiences, Joseph moved his company base to the Library Theatre in Scarborough, a basic room above the library which the company transformed into theatre-in-the-round with Joseph's specially designed seating built on portable rostra. Curiously in this rudimentary setting, new plays regularly drew in audiences more successfully than in London. Perhaps this could be explained by the fact that the regions had not been able to access the same productions that were being billed for the London stage and when they were, the productions were often poor imitations of the original. Therefore, when quality drama was presented, regional audiences were not preoccupied with the 'star turn' and were often more open to new writing and 'serious drama' than had been anticipated. Peter Cotes, a director and producer who recounted his struggles to create a group theatre company in his book *No Star Nonsense*, recalled his tour to Wales in 1947:

My tour of the coalfields in the autumn of 1947, when I took a company of players, sponsored by the Arts Council and the Miners' Welfare Commission, to the South Wales mining valleys, proved a revelation[...] There was no blind hero-worship and stupid fan hysteria as far as the cast was concerned. People came to see 'the drama' as they called it.<sup>6</sup>

In pursuit of these open-minded audiences, Joseph established regular touring venues in theatreless towns across the UK, including Hemel Hempstead, Totnes and Newcastle-under-Lyme. Arts Council Great Britain, which referenced the progress of Joseph's company each year in its Annual Report, noted in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Joseph, article for *Theatre World*, 1959, pp. 46-50, quoted in Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Cotes, *No Star Nonsense* (London: Rockliff, 1949), p. 3.

particular that Studio Theatre Ltd was 'still trying to find a permanent home'.<sup>7</sup> This preoccupation with finding a venue for the company was a nod perhaps to the changes of emphasis in the Arts Council's focus. Its early focus had appeared to centre on bringing productions to the 'theatreless towns' of the UK (continuing the wartime aims of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) and almost as an aside, 'to make London a great artistic metropolis';<sup>8</sup> however by 1955, in reaction to public frustration, their tone had become more defensive when addressing the amount of money allocated to London:

To this criticism the first answer is that a capital city is also the metropolis of the nation's art [...] The Arts Council did not decide to give half of its money to London; it decided to act as patron to certain institutions already established, and of these the most meritorious and representative were situated in London.<sup>9</sup>

This arguably circular claim certainly carried a different emphasis to the founding comments in the 1945 statement. Elsewhere in the report, those who argued for fairer funding distributions were referred to as 'dissidents' and this rhetoric continued in the reports that followed with a negative view of regional culture clearly espoused in the Arts Council's Twelfth Annual Report of 1956-57:

Many theatres have lately been shut down or demolished and, despite the abolition of Entertainment Duty, the process is bound to continue. Some of the towns which have lost their only theatre had long since demonstrated the fact that they were unable or unwilling to provide a regular and dependable audience for professional drama. In other places the local theatre had long since declined into the status of a common lodging-house for the less reputable kind of Variety Show.<sup>10</sup>

There is a suggestion here that the regions were somehow at fault for not attending the performances that the Arts Council had deemed suitable and appropriate; that it was the fault of the community for the closure of so many regional institutions, rather than a funding or quality issue. The Council's response, as Nadine Holdsworth argues, was to 'redraw parameters by maintaining established value systems and conventional notions of artistic practice'<sup>11</sup>; their insistence on maintaining the 'quality institutions' in the Capital seems evidence enough. Joseph almost certainly did not fit neatly into the 'conventional notions' of the Council members, which may explain why the company's grant remained so small (£250 in 1956/7, compared with £7,000 to the English Stage Company and £12,000 to the Old Vic). Years later, in *New Theatre Forms*, Joseph claimed that subsidy was being used to 'ensure that what happens on stage can never be more than a nostalgic, harmless, and indulgent ceremony to attract the middle-class, middle-aged

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7 Arts Council Great Britain, *Twelfth Annual Report* (1956-7), p. 36.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

9 Arts Council of Great Britain, *Eleventh Annual Report* (1955-56), p. 23.

10 Arts Council of Great Britain, *Twelfth Annual Report* (1956-57), p. 11.

11 Nadine Holdsworth, 'They'd Have Pissed on My Grave': The Arts Council and Theatre Workshop', *New Theatre Quarterly* 15 (February 1999), p. 4.

and middle-brow sector of a sleepy society.<sup>12</sup> Elsam describes how the lack of state subsidy forced Joseph to search elsewhere for financial support. In this he was successful, securing donations from Independent Television and the Pilgrim Trust, which supplemented his own personal payments.<sup>13</sup>

With these limited funds to hand, Joseph and his company found spaces that were well-disposed to an in-the-round conversion: a large room above the library in Scarborough, and the Municipal Hall in Newcastle-under-Lyme, for example. For five years Studio Theatre toured these regional venues, carrying everything including the 'theatre' itself – raked rostra providing in-the-round seating for up to 250.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, Joseph was attracted to Newcastle-under-Lyme not only because it fitted neatly into his notion of a community in need of a theatre but importantly, because it had a receptive Council. The council treasurer, Charles Lister, was particularly enthusiastic about the idea of a civic theatre and watched the Studio Theatre Company's progress with interest.<sup>15</sup> At the time, the city of Stoke-on-Trent may not have seemed the most likely choice for such a radical venture. With 94% of pottery workers in the country in 1958 being based in North Staffordshire and 70,184 people employed in the pottery industry, Stoke-on-Trent was the worldwide centre for pottery production.<sup>16</sup>

Peggy Burns, in her book, *Memories of Stoke-on-Trent*, remembers how 'the fields around Etruria were the playground of many local children, and playing with the biscuit ware dumped on the Horse Fields was one of their favourite pastimes.'<sup>17</sup> The air was heavy with smoke from the bottle ovens and the skyline was dominated by chimneys from the local iron and steelworks, Shelton Bar. By 1962, the prefabs built during the 1920s and 30s as a rapid solution to the housing crises still dominated the crowded housing estates of Cobridge and Trent Vale where between forty and fifty homes could be found per acre.<sup>18</sup> This heavily industrialised area was (and still is) fiercely proud of its label as 'the Potteries' (despite the increasing redundancies that were taking place as many of the larger companies underwent a process of rationalisation), and consequently their available leisure time and interest in theatre was assumed to be limited, despite the presence of a strong amateur scene. Indeed, for a city that boasted seven thriving amateur groups, the lack of a professional theatre was anomalous.<sup>19</sup> Jim Lagden, founder of the Stoke-on-Trent festival, commented:

Just over ten years ago Mecca took over the Theatre Royal in Hanley, an excellently-equipped theatre of the variety hall type. A series of unimpressive variety shows failed to draw audiences, perhaps predictably, and the conclusion was reached that it was 'obvious that there was no economic demand for live theatre.' The Theatre Royal became a bingo hall.<sup>20</sup>

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12 Stephen Joseph, *New Theatre Forms*, (NY: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), p. 124.

13 Paul Elsam, *Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 26.

14 *Council of Repertory Theatres* publication (1971), p. 29 (located at Victoria Theatre Archive).

15 Terry Lane, *The Full Round: The several lives and theatrical legacy of Stephen Joseph* (Italy: Duca della Corgna, 2006), pp. 162-63.

16 Steven Birks, [www.thepotteries.org](http://www.thepotteries.org), [accessed 26 February 2017].

17 Peggy Burns, *Memories of Stoke-on-Trent*, (Halifax: True North Books, 1998), p. 22.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

19 *The Stage Year Book* (Carson and Comerford Ltd, 1952), p. 310.

20 Jim Lagden, 'Professionals, Amateurs and Students', *Theatre Quarterly* 1/1 (1971), p. 69 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

The local press, too, seemed frustrated by the 'cultural decline', fearing that the closure of the theatre 'has passed virtually unnoticed. It is almost incredible that an area with a population exceeding 300,000 allowed this to happen with little more than a few growls of protest.'<sup>21</sup> Joseph and his company were not deterred by this apparent indifference however, and perhaps encouraged by the success of amateur groups, the company included the city as a regular stop on their circuit of the UK from 1955 and slowly built a reputation for themselves there with the local press acknowledging that 'audiences have continued to increase, with – which is unusual for a provincial theatre company – a high proportion of young people;' <sup>22</sup> indeed, Studio Theatre began to welcome 'a coterie of faithful supporters for their productions.'<sup>23</sup> By their third season of plays at the Municipal Hall, Joseph had seemingly proved that there was in fact an audience in this 'cultural desert'<sup>24</sup>; in 1961 Newcastle Council voted in favour of building a new, purpose-built theatre-in-the-round, which could be erected at a tenth of the cost of a conventional building.<sup>25</sup>

To carry out the task of establishing a purpose-built home for Studio Theatre Company, Joseph recruited Peter Cheeseman, a young director at Derby Playhouse who had become disillusioned with the state of regional theatre. In a later interview for *Plays and Players*, Cheeseman bemoaned the presence of what he labeled 'Cake Mix theatre (powdered scripts from London, add water)' and the 'set of values which infect every area of our profession from the airy reaches of the Treasury and the cigar smoke of Shaftesbury Avenue to the slogging resignation of the summer season repertory company.'<sup>26</sup> Having encountered Joseph at a Council of Repertory Theatres conference, Cheeseman undoubtedly found inspiration in Joseph's vision and tenacity. The relationship was to prove instrumental in shaping both the progression of Studio Theatre Company and the future of Cheeseman in the theatrical life of Stoke-on-Trent. However, despite apparent local council support, Cheeseman and Joseph had an arduous mission ahead of them; not everyone in the local community was united behind the cause. The letter pages of the local paper, the *Evening Sentinel*, were filled nightly with hotly contested arguments over the idea of theatre-in-the-round being established in Staffordshire and, indeed, whether taxpayers' money ought to be spent on theatre at all. A typical correspondence read:

Mr. Stephen Joseph lives in a cultural world. No doubt the majority of the people he meets at Newcastle have had the educational and social opportunities of appreciating the interesting and stimulating brand of culture theatre-in-the-round offers [...] To the ratepayers of these areas, which house the bulk of Newcastle's population, it seems that there are more urgent channels for money than to provide cultural entertainment for ex-grammar school pupils and their affluent

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21 'The fight for "live" drama', *Evening Sentinel*, 22 August 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

22 From our Special Correspondent, 'Enterprise at Newcastle-under-Lyme', *The Times*, 6 February 1961 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

23 'For and against "round" drama', *Evening Sentinel*, 9th July 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

24 J.S.A, 'Vic on crest of success: capacity audiences prove it,' 26 November 1965 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

25 'Studio Theatre at Newcastle', *Financial Times*, 2 October 1961 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

26 Peter Cheeseman, 'The Director in Rep – No. 6 – Peter Cheeseman', *Plays and Players*, May 1968 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

parents [...] The fact is that if this scheme goes through before more basic assets are in evidence a residue of bitter censure will be left from one end of the borough to the other.<sup>27</sup>

There is clearly a disconnect here between the people who were welcoming ‘culture’ to the area and those who felt the project would only serve to benefit an elite section of the population. There was a fear that the project was bound to be unsuccessful since both the Grand and the Theatre Royal had been forced to close due to lack of patronage, and ultimately that ‘Mr. Joseph and his company would not suffer in the event of the failure of the project but, once again, the milking cows (ratepayers) would have to foot the bill.’<sup>28</sup> Many of the letters to the press do evidence a real resistance to this form of theatre. A sense that here was something radical, experimental and elitist that was not welcome in a working-class community. The success of the Studio Theatre’s tours, however, gave the group confidence that there was an audience for their work, albeit perhaps a different audience to those that may have patronised the Grand or Theatre Royal previously. Joseph recognised that theatre-in-the-round ‘tends to alienate many people who have had a long experience of the theatre’<sup>29</sup> but for him and Studio Theatre this was, in many ways, a positive attribute. Their theatre welcomed new and (significantly) young audiences to their productions and it was this enthusiastic and dynamic following that helped to pioneer theatre-in-the-round in the area. For Joseph, the encouragement of young people into the theatre was a crucial element of his philosophy:

If we delay, I believe that we shall lose a great part of this potential audience – a whole generation, I suspect, who have been given a sample of theatre and now want the proper thing, or they will seek their entertainment in other forms altogether...

Theatre-in-the-round was a way of revitalising theatre, and for Joseph it was essential that the young felt included in the movement. He believed that if the temporary work of Studio Theatre was not continued in Stoke-on-Trent in the form of a permanent space, there was a danger that this new audience would disappear. By 1962, the outlook was promising; both the local authority and the Arts Council were seemingly behind the project. However, while *The Times* reported that ‘plans have been drawn up, the money is available, and now all that is needed is planning permission’<sup>30</sup>, the venture was far from agreed. As Terry Lane recalls: ‘In an Arts Council memo of 1962, Linklater informed the Secretary General that the Town Clerk was stating that his council had never made an offer of £99,000, even though the sum had been made public and never denied.’<sup>31</sup> Money, however, was not the only limiting factor. After months of planning and discussions, Joseph also found it hard to accept the restrictions placed upon his designs by Newcastle Borough Council who were proposing a proscenium arch theatre to be built alongside a studio space:

27 F.D. Wright, Letter to *Evening Sentinel*, 11 July 1961 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

28 H. G. Rowley, ‘And more letters about theatre-in-the-round’, *Evening Sentinel*, July 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

29 S. Joseph, ‘Stephen Joseph writes on his Theatre-in-the-round at Newcastle-under-Lyme’, *Plays and Players*, March 1962, p. 26 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

30 From our Special Correspondent, *The Times*, 6 February 1961 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

31 Linklater to Secretary General ACGB 22 February 1962, quoted in Terry Lane, *The Full Round: The several lives and theatrical legacy of Stephen Joseph* (Italy: Duca della Corgna, 2006), p. 169.

The confusion arises out of ignorance. It is common in this country to assume that any big space with a large number of seats is a proper theatre, provided they all face a hole in the wall got up to look like a proscenium arch. Sight-lines matter little, backstage equipment and working space even less.<sup>32</sup>

Joseph's clear frustration with the status quo is evident: his unyielding belief that in-the-round was able to offer opportunities over and above that of the proscenium arch; his preoccupations with 'sightlines' that enabled every audience member access to an immersive experience, rather than only those who had paid for premium seats; his determination that the technicians' needs in his theatre would be ranked alongside those of his actors and his audience. This last grievance may have been a direct attack on the recently built Belgrade theatre at Coventry which had been lauded nationally as 'one of the great decisions in the history of local government.'<sup>33</sup> Joseph criticised the design, describing the stage arrangements as rather old-fashioned<sup>34</sup> and later in 1970 Bentham too commented on the poor provision backstage, in his round-up of new theatres:

It is strange now to look back to 1958 and the Coventry Belgrade. This represented a more spacious approach to the front of house with a restaurant and all the rest which was unusual for a theatre here, but at the same time horrified theatre people with its cramped facilities backstage – the money having run out. It looked as if audiences were going to be cosseted while actors and technicians had to make do. After all the public had many other things to do and had to be lured in, whereas the stage struck could consider themselves lucky to find a job at all.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst there was an emerging sense then, that theatre needed to be comfortable for audiences and to be the centre of a community. Joseph was keen to ensure that new theatres were able to cater adequately for everyone who worked there as well as the paying public. The loss of the combined backing of Newcastle Borough Council and the Arts Council meant that the new theatre was no longer a feasible venture. Since local public reaction was so mixed, Joseph felt the need to prove that theatre-in-the-round had a chance of success in Stoke-on-Trent on a more permanent basis than the Studio Theatre tour. He felt that the Council 'will only back a winner which has actually won the race.'<sup>36</sup> Joseph and Cheeseman set about locating a building that had potential for conversion into a theatre-in-the-round:

We visited a number of depressing old chapels, cinema and even a crisp factory. Finally we settled on a suburban cinema turned into a variety club and empty after a police raid had

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32 Joseph, *Adaptable Theatres* – conference notes from the third biennial congress of the *Association Internationale de Techniciens de Théâtre* (AITT), 25-30 June 1961, Published by ABTT February 1962, ed. S. Joseph, Quoted in Elsam, p. 129.

33 Kenneth Tynan, *The Observer*, 30 March, 1958, quoted in "A new image of the living theatre': the Genesis and Design of the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1948-58, Alistair Fair', *Architectural History* 54 (2011), 347-382).

34 Stephen Joseph, 'Introduction', in *Actor and Architect*, ed. Stephen Joseph (Manchester, 1964), pp. 1-29.

35 Frederick Bentham, *New Theatres in Britain*, (London: Whitefriars Press Ltd, 1970), p. 3.

36 S. Joseph letter to J. Hodgkinson, 17 July 1962, quoted in Terry Lane, *The Full Round: The several lives and theatrical legacy of Stephen Joseph*, (Italy: Duca della Corgna, 2006), p. 170.

discovered several hundred people merrily boozing long past the permitted hour – the old Victoria Cinema in Hartshill.<sup>37</sup>

For Joseph, whose dreams had been to create a custom-built space for theatre-in-the-round, the conversion of the old cinema and nightclub in Hartshill came as something of a disappointment. Cheeseman, though, still maintained that a base for the company was now necessary in whatever capacity that may be:

The company's work, I believed, could only now effectively develop and mature in a permanent context: the days of touring and self-discovery must be left behind.<sup>38</sup>

Despite Joseph's disappointment, he was still keen to see the success of the venture since it was as close as he had come to achieving his long-held ambitions. He set about work with local architect, Peter Fisher, to design a space that would fill the void in the Potteries' theatrical landscape. Funding for the venture, however, had now all but disappeared. Through his frustration, Joseph had alienated a large section of the local authority and consequently he struggled to mobilise funding for the Vic conversion. In the end the whole conversion was completed in eight weeks for less than £5000, with no state funding whatsoever. Cheeseman recalled:

We were given seats by Granada Television out of abandoned cinemas, and we fitted in 347 [...] with the company finally sorting out the first load of second-hand cinema seats into three piles – the unacceptable (apparently vomited on), the dubious (possibly pissed on) and the acceptable (only stuck with chewing gum).<sup>39</sup>

The space, arguably, was already defining the company that would work in it: not anti-establishment but working in some way 'outside' of and facing a large degree of hostility from both the local and national arenas, the company of the Victoria Theatre (the Vic, as it became known locally) was inevitably drawn closer together during the theatre's opening. In keeping with his disappointment, though, and since he 'couldn't face more work in a converted situation for the moment,'<sup>40</sup> Joseph distanced himself from the company, taking up the role of Fellow of Drama at the University of Manchester whilst maintaining his role as Managing Director of the Victoria Theatre and therefore ultimately remaining in charge. It was in this challenging situation that Cheeseman had his first taste of running a theatre: in a working-class locality with seemingly little interest in theatre generally; in a theatre-in-the-round towards which many had voiced hostility; in the absence of his pioneering mentor and with a grant of just £490 from the Arts Council to cover both the company's dealings in Scarborough and in Stoke-on-Trent.

Cheeseman understood from the outset that if the theatre were to have any chance of success, it was vital that their work was relevant to the immediate community. Discussing the choice of area ten

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37 Peter Cheeseman, 'A Community Theatre-in-the-Round', *National Theatre Quarterly*, (Vol. 1, Issue 1, January-March 1971), p.

72 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

38 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 72.



years after the company's arrival, Cheeseman asserted that, 'the precariousness of the industry in past times has kept the community busy and poor, and has also successfully prevented it from being culturally or socially tyrannized by a strong and coherent middle-class section in the community.'<sup>39</sup> Indeed Cheeseman seemed particularly drawn to the area because of the absence of a middle-class; he commented that:

The district is quite coherent, separate, distinct [...] it is the character of the people of North Staffordshire that really makes our situation an enviable one. It is wrong to generalize about what is only the sum of so many particulars, but I can only describe how I feel about the community that has become my home. The people of North Staffordshire are exceptionally friendly, naturally sanguine, and more absent of concern for social distinction than any community in the United Kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

Whether Cheeseman saw this group of people as a 'challenge' or whether he simply felt they would be less self-conscious in their theatre choices is not clear; perhaps it was a combination. Nevertheless, Cheeseman's attraction to the 'naturally sanguine' population of Stoke-on-Trent was unquestionable. In the first announcement by Studio Theatre Company at the Victoria Theatre, Cheeseman stated:

We believe that this theatre will enrich the life and vitality of the Potteries, that it will provide good entertainment and stimulating ideas, and that it will fill a long felt demand, in an area where there is so much good amateur drama, for a permanent professional company with high standards.<sup>42</sup>

It was essential for Cheeseman that the theatre was firmly connected with the wider life of the community; for him a permanent company allowed the artists to reside in the same community as their audiences and as Cheeseman's ideas developed, plays were written specifically for the community too in the form of the local documentaries. Ticket prices remained 'low enough to compete with cinema prices'<sup>43</sup> with a student seat costing just 3/-, equivalent to around £2 in today's money. It is also interesting to note how careful Cheeseman is to cite the 'high standards' of amateur drama in the area. This was an important and shrewd strategy and one that followed in Joseph's touring traditions. Joseph had a strong belief in the partnership of amateur and professional theatre; on his arrival in Scarborough in the mid-1950s, Joseph had formed an essential partnership with Ken and Margaret Boden, founding members of the Scarborough Theatre Guild which began as an amateur dramatic society but later became intrinsically linked with Studio Theatre in Scarborough. The Guild had a central role in securing funding, props and staging for Joseph's company and in keeping the Library Theatre viable out of season.<sup>44</sup> In

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41 Ibid., p.72.

42 Peter Cheeseman, *Victoria Theatre Appeal first announcement*, Aug 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

43 Peter Cheeseman, *First Three Rounds: a report from the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent*, August 1965, p. 7 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

44 Simon Murgatroyd, <http://theatre-in-the-round.co.uk/page7/styled-66/styled-108/index.html> [accessed 19 February 2017].

order to embed themselves in the Stoke community, it seems that Joseph was encouraging Cheeseman to adopt similar tactics:

We are pursuing our audience with breathless vigour and arranging quite a number of talks over the next few weeks. We shall certainly follow up your idea of visiting amateur productions, however much suffering it costs us.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst it may not have been Cheeseman's first choice (indeed he recorded a visit to a local amateur group at Crewe as 'depressing' and 'atrocious')<sup>46</sup>, he did adopt Joseph's strategy, presumably understanding the mutual benefits that it offered. By the following year, relations between the Vic and the New Era players had been extended:

I am sure you will be pleased to hear that I have come to an arrangement with the New Era Players for them to present their next production (which is to be Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*) in the round here during the week beginning 27 January [...] They are very excited about it and it has the advantage of bringing to the theatre their enormous audience, the bulk of whom I don't think have been here before.<sup>47</sup>

This association was evidently fruitful for all participants; the amateurs having guidance from professionals and opportunity to perform in an innovative space and the Victoria Theatre Company attracting 'enormous' new audiences who may return to a future production. Cheeseman went on to support the 'New Era players' in their own quest for a new theatrical space in Stoke-on-Trent and continued to retain a link with the company through to the New Victoria Theatre's opening in 1986. Certainly, in terms of the theatre's policy, Cheeseman and Joseph appeared to share at least one coherent vision: theatre was for all. Before plans for the new project had collapsed, Joseph had stated his philosophy in an early edition of *Plays and Players*:

As soon as we have premises of our own, the company hopes to encourage other social activities in the theatre, including dances and discussions, as well as meetings of outside groups [...] and practical courses related to the theatre itself for adults and for school children. [...] The theatre belongs to everyone – and one looks forward to the time when everyone realises it and enjoys it.<sup>48</sup>

Joseph was not alone in seeking to revitalise the theatre; Wesker, for example, in 1960 was fundraising for a permanent home at the Roundhouse for his Centre 42, where 'the original intention was to create a 'gymnasium of the arts'. It was to be based in a converted theatre and offer activities such as a youth

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45 Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 12th Nov, 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

46 Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 18th Nov, 1962 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

47 Letter from Peter Cheeseman to Stephen Joseph, 25th Nov, 1963 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

48 Stephen Joseph, 'Stephen Joseph writes on his Theatre-in-the-round at Newcastle-under-Lyme', *Plays and Players*, March 1962, pp. 26 and 38 (located at Victoria Theatre archive).

club, jazz groups, exhibitions, concerts, films, plays, revues and lunchtime concerts.<sup>49</sup> Littlewood too was gradually moving in a similar direction with her plans for a Fun Palace published in *The New Scientist* in May 1964. Her aim was to create a 'university of the streets' in which people were encouraged to partake in a wide range of leisure activities and the 'essence of the place will be informality – nothing obligatory – anything goes.'<sup>50</sup> Reacting to these democratic movements, the relatively new Labour government presented a policy for the Arts in 1965, which emphasised its importance:

[I]n any civilised community the arts and associated amenities, serious or comic, light or demanding, must occupy a central place. Their enjoyment should not be regarded as something remote from everyday life.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of a theatre being a centre for a wide range of arts and activities was something that Joseph continued to develop until his premature death from cancer in 1967, when he had begun plans for a radical new form of 'fish and chip' theatre in which the audience was encouraged to eat their 'solid, familiar fare' whilst watching the play. David Campton, a playwright who had been discovered by Joseph on one of his playwriting courses and who subsequently became the first resident writer for the company, recounts the origin of Joseph's plans:

The germ of this idea began to incubate in the first years of the Scarborough company, when plays were taken for matinees to a local holiday camp. The audience was almost totally unused to the conventions of theatre, so an in-the-round production did not worry them at all (they had been expecting performing seals anyway). They talked in low tones to start with, but growing louder until the actors were straining to be heard above the noise – until a really interesting scene was reached, when silence fell: not a murmur was heard until the play began to lose its grip again, when the conversation level rose once more. It was a useful experience for a beginning playwright: decibels alone demonstrated where rewriting was called for.<sup>52</sup>

Whilst a 'fish and chip theatre' might at first glance be discounted as an outlandish scheme, Campton's background demonstrates that it is rooted in good sense and upholds a coherent set of values that Joseph maintained throughout his career: to engage a broad cross-section of society in a stimulating theatrical experience. He asserted in *Actor and Architect*:

It is not a matter of 'educating' people so that they can join the privileged ranks of, for instance, theatre-goers. The theatre can speak, if we allow it, to all people; we have only to take it out of its fetters.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Steve Nicholson, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1960s* (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 32.

50 Joan Littlewood, *Joan's Book* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 704.

51 'A Policy for the Arts: The First Step', Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, Feb 1965.

52 David Campton, 'Stephen Joseph...And After', <http://www.stephen-joseph.org.uk/styled/styled-72/styled-75/index.html>, [accessed 4 March, 2017].

53 Stephen Joseph, *Actor and Architect*, ed. Stephen Joseph (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), pp. 28-29.

Despite his untimely death in 1967, Joseph's vision continued to influence the theatrical landscape of Stoke-on-Trent with Cheeseman remaining as one of the longest-serving regional theatre directors and using Joseph's teachings to establish the New Victoria Theatre (the first purpose-built theatre-in-the-round in Europe) in Stoke-on-Trent in 1986. Arguably, Joseph's commitment to revitalising theatre went further too, with Elsam charting his influence across the north of England with the establishment of a 'wide band of open stage theatres'<sup>54</sup> all of which ultimately share Joseph's common goals: to promote new writing; to experiment with new theatre forms; and to provide quality theatrical performances for all.

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<sup>54</sup> Elsam, p. 167.

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