

# A HISTORY OF THEATRE IN EDUCATION AT THE BELGRADE THEATRE, COVENTRY

## Introduction

The emergence of organised Theatre in Education (TiE) can be traced back to a particular place at a particular time: Coventry's Belgrade Theatre in 1965. This report will tell the story of how individuals based at the Belgrade Theatre, alongside city councillors and local teachers, developed an organised system of educational outreach – using theatrical performance and drama workshops to explore issues of cultural, social, political and moral significance as part of a free service to the young people of Coventry.

## **1. Context**

### Post-war Coventry

In the aftermath of the Second World War the City of Coventry did not languish in ruin but re-imagined and rebuilt itself. The rapid expansion of its car manufacturing industry made it an economic success story; it became one of the first cities in Europe to develop a traffic-free shopping precinct; it built a new cathedral alongside the ruins of the old one; and in 1958 it opened the Belgrade Theatre. For Britain it was the first theatre to have been built in over twenty years; for Coventry it was a symbol of civic and cultural renewal following the city's devastation at the hands of the Luftwaffe. At *this* particular time *this* particular city was one in which grand ambitions could be realised. Widespread regeneration was not viewed simply in economic terms, but as a social and cultural obligation.

### Drama, Theatre and Education

Alongside this narrative of civic renewal were fundamental transformations to the country's education system. The Labour governments of 1964-70 resolved to dismantle the existing Tripartite structure (Grammar, Secondary Technical and Secondary Modern) in favour of a comprehensive system of education. Coventry was one of the earliest advocates of this new approach, reinforcing its identity as a city ready and willing to undertake radical reform. However, it was not just educational structures that were changing, attitudes to teaching and learning had also shifted.

TiE reflects a learning that is child centred and experiential, seeking to engage young people with and through their humanity, not simply skilling them for the job market. In Britain, it was only during the early to mid-twentieth century that Victorian notions of schooling (didactic and teacher-centred) began to be challenged by more socially constructive and child-centred approaches. Indeed, the 1944 Education Act declared that:

It shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to continue towards the spiritual, mental and physical developments of the community.<sup>i</sup>

However, a formal recognition that drama and theatre might be valuable as learning methods did not emerge until after the Second World War. Alongside those pioneering teachers and educators who had always used drama to enhance the learning process, were a small number of theatre makers ready to play with theatrical forms for the educational benefit of young people. One of the most influential of these practitioners was a man named Brian Way, who founded Theatre Centre London in 1953. The organisation pioneered work that engaged children's creative imagination, by enabling their active participation in the storytelling process. Gordon Vallins, who would prove fundamental in establishing TiE at the Belgrade, cites reading a *Pinocchio* script written by Brian Way and Warren Jenkins as a moment of revelation:

In the script of *Pinocchio* there was a direction that said something like: *Ask the children to go off and invent a song...* Brian would invite the children to do all kinds of things after the play: ask them to write, to paint, make models, invent their own plays. So he was using the play as a stimulus for even more creative work.<sup>ii</sup>

Recognition that theatre and drama could have a positive impact on the social and intellectual development of the child continued to grow, culminating in John Newsom's 1963 report *Half our Future*, which argued:

Drama can offer something more significant than the daydream... By playing out psychologically significant situations, they can work out their

own personal problems. Here is one way in which they can be helped to reconcile the reality of the world outside with their own private worlds... It is through creative arts, including the arts of language, that young people can be helped to come to terms with themselves more surely than by any other route.<sup>iii</sup>

The report, authored just two years before the Belgrade TiE Company was established, represented formal recognition that drama and theatre were not simply cultural frills, but serious contributors to a child-centred education.

## **2. The beginnings of TiE**

### Belgrade Youth Theatre

It was in 1964 with the arrival of Gordon Vallins, the newly appointed Assistant to the Director, that events began to unfold. Vallins was a Geography teacher by training and had spent the previous few years working for an organisation called the British Drama League. His experience of both drama *and* education would not only shape his work at the Belgrade, but determine the founding principles of TiE. Vallins describes the 1960s as a period of energy and change, in which existing theatrical practices were distancing many young people from the theatre:

Society is on the change: this is [the] early 1960s, this is [the] beginning of The Beatles, this is your James Bond period, this is post-austerity fifties – opening up to all kinds of ideas. Wilson was Prime Minister and he would talk of “the approaching white heat of technology”, we had the first Arts Minister, and I think there was a general dissatisfaction with what theatre offered – I think a lot of people like myself thought: “Why should we go and see this rubbish? Why should we go and see something old fashioned?”<sup>iv</sup>

Vallins’ dissatisfaction with dominant approaches to theatre did not dissipate when he arrived in Coventry. At this time, it was standard procedure for local schools to visit the Belgrade Theatre at least once a year and see a production of a Shakespeare play. Vallins’ account of a 1964 production of *Hamlet* illustrates his concern:

There had been no administrative time to say what the play was about; the teachers generally saw it as a day off. The play would start. There'd be mutterings in the auditorium – the play would go quicker. Polo mints would be spun out of the audience onto the stage and the play would go even quicker.<sup>v</sup>

The apparent shortcomings in the Belgrade's educational provision motivated Vallins to think imaginatively about the theatre's relationship with young people. The Belgrade ran a scheme called the Young Stagers, which young people interested in receiving discounts on theatre tickets would sign up to. At this point the Belgrade employed a repertory system, which meant that on occasion the main auditorium was without a production. Rather than 'going dark' Vallins suggested that the Young Stagers develop and perform their own production, a decision which gave birth to the Belgrade Youth Theatre. Its first production was called *Out of the Ashes* (1965) and was an exploration of life in post-war Coventry, devised by the company. According to Vallins, this breakthrough 'proved the Belgrade's commitment to the community and to young people in particular'<sup>vi</sup>. It was an inspiring development and the affirmation of a fundamental principle: the theatre was not only a space for industry professionals, but for the young people of Coventry.

### Workshops in schools

Another factor that drove Vallins to make changes in the relationship between the theatre and young people were his regular visits to local schools. In these he was required to speak to young people about the work carried out at the Belgrade. This routine dissatisfied Vallins, who felt it unimaginative and uninspiring to simply lecture students on the functions of the theatre. Instead, he developed more meaningful relationships with schools and started running workshops using drama to explore a range of experiences and ideas. This development, alongside the formation of the Belgrade Youth Theatre, indicated that the theatre's potential impact on the educational experiences of young people had, up until this point, been largely unrealised.

### Theatre in Education: a vision

These innovations in the theatre's educational remit happened to coincide with the tenure of Anthony Richardson, the Belgrade's Director from 1962-66. Richardson believed that the theatre should be at the heart of the city's civic, cultural and democratic life, and identified the education system as the obvious place to begin. In September 1964, in the boardroom of the Belgrade Theatre, Anthony Richardson and Gordon Vallins met with the Chairman of the Local Education Committee and of the Belgrade Theatre. Their discussions centred on a memorandum written by Vallins outlining the ways in which theatre could be used to benefit local schools. A previous memorandum drawn up by Richardson had been called 'Theatre and Education', a title Vallins had modified to 'Theatre *in* Education' because, in his words, 'the two should not be separated'<sup>vii</sup>. The document put forward a wide range of proposals including training teachers in the use of drama, regular tours of the Belgrade Theatre and formal discussions on main-house productions for young people. However, the most radical proposal was to set up a permanent Theatre in Education company made up of individuals 'trained not only as actors but also as teachers', who would visit schools and ensure that 'children experience an afternoon of theatre in which they will also be involved and encouraged to improvise and create'<sup>viii</sup>. Those present at the meeting backed TiE in principle and decided that it should be a free service available to every state-funded school in Coventry. Putting a penny on the rates would raise £50,000, which they viewed as an acceptable increase for such a progressive scheme. However, as it happened, the first time that the City Council Treasurer heard about these proposals was in the local press, prompting him to demand an explanation as to why he had not been consulted on an issue of such importance – and subsequently, he refused the proposal to put a penny on the rates. Despite this, the publicity surrounding the venture had as good as committed the Council to some kind of financial contribution and they finally settled on a contribution of £15,000, to be paid for by placing a *halfpenny* on the rates. After a consultation process with local head teachers, whose ongoing support and input was viewed as essential, the project was endorsed for a trial period of 12 months.

### The pilot programme

The first company consisted of Gordon Vallins, Jessica Hill, Ann Lister and Dickon Reed, each of whom would devise, produce, act and teach. This gave rise to the term actor-teacher, an appropriate response to the new synergy between theatre and education. The first

TiEprogramme began in September 1965, for which the Company toured an infant-level piece called *The Balloon man and the Runaway Balloons*, a primary-level piece called *The Secret of the Stone* and a secondary-level piece called *The High Girders*— each of which set out to explore the theme of responsibility. An outline of the infant programme is provided below:

This consists of two sections: (a) a twenty-minute lesson when two classes are taught simultaneously in separate classrooms. This includes the telling of the story, the creation and recording of three sorts of sounds (i) the blowing up of balloons (ii) the air being let out quickly and slowly and (iii) the sound of wind and waves: These sounds are used later after [the] break in (b) the thirty minute happening when the two classes come together in the hall and (i) They act being balloons (ii) [they] learn the balloon-man's song (iii) [they] act the story, being in turn balloons, a train, a fairground roundabout, children at the seaside and finally balloons again, when they rescue the balloon man after his boat has overturned in a storm at sea.<sup>ix</sup>

The programme, devised by the company, immersed children in a narrative context that they were also implicit in creating. The experience also asked questions of the participants, who were confronted with the dilemma of how to save the balloon-man from a storm out at sea. The programme was not about the teaching of facts, but an interactive journey using narrative dilemmas to provide students with an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience. *The Secret of the Stone* was also devised by the company, and introduced participants to an island populated by a wide range of animals and plant life who were 'guardians of a magic stone'.<sup>x</sup> It told the story of three travellers (one of whom could not hear, one of whom could not speak, and one of whom could not see) who are led to the stone after hearing that it has the power to heal. The programme involved participants creating the many sights and sounds of this tropical island, as well as experiencing sensory deprivation as they attempted to find the stone themselves. The secondary school programme was called *The High Girders* and differed in form to the infant and primary-level productions. After watching a piece of theatre on the construction and collapse of the Tay Bridge in 1879, students discussed the idea of responsibility. They then broke off into smaller groups and devised short scenes illustrating a day in the life of Coventry in which issues of

responsibility might arise. The interim report from the end of October 1965 describes the “immediate response” of participants as being “most encouraging” and suggests that teachers, whilst lacking the confidence to use drama in their own teaching, recognised the value of this new approach.<sup>xi</sup>

In the first half of the first term alone, the company visited 21 schools in the north of Coventry and involved almost 3000 young people. The second half of this term was equally successful, with the company reproducing *The Balloon man and the Runaway Balloons* as well as developing new work for their primary and secondary-level programmes. The recycling of material would become an important part of the Belgrade’s tradition, with old programmes being re-worked and improved alongside the constant generation of new material. The success of the scheme ensured its continuation and in 1966 it was established as a permanent company and granted £12,000 of ring-fenced funding on an annual basis. With this guarantee, the roles within the company were formalised, with the position of Head of Department created to lead the team of teacher-actors. The job was given to Rosemary Birkbeck, who had taught drama at an Inner London Comprehensive School and founded a youth theatre for its alumni. Gordon Vallins, who had also applied for the role but was unsuccessful, viewed resignation as the most appropriate course of action. With the establishment of a permanent company the number of actor-teachers rose from four to eight, giving Belgrade TiE the scope to cover a far greater area of Coventry than had previously been possible.

### **3. Early expansion**

#### **Becoming embedded**

By September 1966 the new company was in place, and from 1967 began significantly to increase its output. In one half of the 1969 Autumn Term, for instance, the company toured *The Cocoa Tree* to 25 infant schools, *The Lunt Fort at Baginton* to 26 primary schools and *Play* to 14 secondary schools. With each tour, the TiE Company became further embedded in the educational life of the city, a bond made all the more possible thanks to the company’s positive relationship with local teachers. Not only did the company establish a Management Committee of Head Teachers, which approved and supported developments, it maintained a mutually supportive relationship with teachers. Stuart Bennett, who arrived

as an actor-teacher in 1967 and was Head of Department from 1970-72 described this process in the 1969/70 annual report:

We would hold a day course for teachers before we went out and follow up sessions for them after the visit... Our aim was to provide a meaningful experience for the children but leave a teacher stimulated to continue with the work.<sup>xii</sup>

The TiE company did not simply want to provide high impact learning experiences for young people, it wanted to help drama (as both subject and learning medium) become embedded in the curriculum. The company's ongoing process of consultation and dialogue with local teachers was the bedrock of its growing popularity and one of the main reasons it was able to survive for over thirty years. Jane Hogan, a retired teacher who had gratefully received the TiE company during 1970s and 1980s, describes her appreciation of the work:

When I was class teacher... during the late sixties and early seventies visits from the TiE groups were a regular part of the school year. When I became head of St. Thomas More Infant School in 1973 I made sure that this treat was available to the children until I retired in 1984. The casts might change over the years but the same standards and quality were always on offer. I cannot quote individual performances but I was always happy that the material was suited to the age range, no attempt was made to "talk-down" or patronise the audience and each session was greeted by the children with pleasure and understanding.<sup>xiii</sup>

### Development of work

Whilst still making use of the Brian Way model of participatory performance, the company continued to innovate in both the form and content of its work. One of the biggest successes of this period was a programme based on *State of Emergency*, an interactive novel by Dennis Guerrier and Joan Richards focused on the fictional state of Lakoto. The Company's adaptation was named the *Emergent Africa Game* (1969) and was based around a performance, illustrating the social and economic crises gripping the state. At specific points in the performance students were presented with a dilemma and invited to vote on the most

appropriate course of action. At one point students were asked what Lakoto should spend its limited money on in order to confront the country's problems: (a) Welfare State; (b) Experts from abroad; or (c) Education. Participants were presented with arguments both for and against these proposals and instructed that whichever option they chose would have ramifications – positive or negative. The students then voted with their decision determining which version of the narrative the actor-teachers would next unfold. The scheme was aimed at secondary school students and sought to explore social and political issues with facts and figures, alongside narrative and human experience. According to a company report, interest in the programme stretched beyond Coventry and the performance was re-performed in both the Belgrade Theatre's own studio and the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent. As time progressed, the company would gain permanent slots in the Belgrade Theatre's schedule, allowing it to reach larger audiences and create a different kind of experience to the one generated in schools.

### Local history

The company was always mindful of the fact that its work did not take place in a vacuum, but in a specific city in a specific part of the country. The company would often use local history to provide participants with a deeper connection to the work, *The Siege of Kenilworth*, *The Weavers* and *The Carmakers* being prime examples. *The Carmakers* ran from March to April 1971, and explored the dramatic changes in Coventry's industrial landscape during the twentieth century, charting:

The establishment of enterprises like The Standard Car Company in 1903, the munitions factories in the First World War, the expansion of the car trade in the 20's and 30's, the growth of Trade Union organisation, the manufacture of aircraft in the Ministry "Shadow" factories in the Second World War, the post-war rebuilding of the city.<sup>xiv</sup>

In 1971 the history of Coventry's car industry would have been relevant to each generation within the city. The programme was intensively researched and the fact that it was created for English, History and Social Studies students indicates just how diverse a programme it was – exploring historical fact, lived experience and social impact.

## Working with all young people

Early on in its history, the TIE Company established a commitment to working with young people with mental and physical disabilities. Beginning in 1967 with *Danger Ahead* it did not simply create work for the mainstream education system, but tailored specific programmes to the needs of young people attending special schools. Prior to 1967 such schools interested in the work of the TIE Company had to accept the infant, primary and secondary work created for the mainstream system. The decision to create programmes specifically for young people with mental and physical disabilities initiated a dialogue with teachers about the aims of such a programme. A snapshot from this process is provided below:

The teachers... felt that one of the greatest problems facing [their] children was their inability to understand social complexities, the tendency for them to see things in black and white, never to comprehend shades of grey. It was decided that we should attempt to set up a situation which the children would initially see in black and white terms and then in the second visit encourage them to reassess their original judgement by allowing them to explore the complexities of the original situation.<sup>xv</sup>

*Mr Horaldo's Human Puppet Show* focused on a theft, to be witnessed by the children. They would be asked to take an immediate stance on his actions, before subsequent explorations would explore the thief's motives. The constant dialogue with teachers alongside the company's own process of reflection meant such work did not remain static, but continually responded to the experiences of teachers and to the needs of young people. Planning notes from a subsequent programme, called *Trip to the Moon* (1981), demonstrate a shift in emphasis, with the priorities for the new programme being:

- To develop language and awareness
- An environment to stimulate the children – a multi-sensory experience
- To 'carry over' from one experience to another
- Getting to know children individually<sup>xvi</sup>

The *Trip to the Moon* archive contains a letter from an appreciative headteacher lauding the inclusive nature of the programme, the detail of the sets and the realism of the experience, as well as commenting that students were so inspired they “produced pictures and letters” in response to the programme.

#### A national phenomenon

The company’s work did not simply have an effect upon young people in Coventry. From the late-1960s TiE became an established force nationwide and the Belgrade TiE company can be viewed as the roots from which other companies developed and grew. When actor-teachers departed the Belgrade, many would transport the practices established in Coventry to other bases across the UK. Paul Harman, an actor-teacher at the Belgrade in 1966, would go on to run the Liverpool Everyman Priority Community Theatre Project and set up the Merseyside Young People’s Theatre company. Similarly, Michael Jones, also at the company in 1966, would go on to set up Watford TiE company. The Belgrade TiE company had an unprecedented impact on the spread of TiE and the development of young people’s theatre; indeed, by 1977 there were around ninety companies in the country doing work specifically for children and young people. It is extremely difficult to account for the number of companies the Belgrade had a meaningful impact upon, but there is no doubt that the strength of its work and the determination of some of its members ensured that TiE was not restricted to one part of the West Midlands, but spread to towns and cities across the United Kingdom.

#### **4. An established force**

##### “The tales of the world that the children live in”

As the TiE company moved out of the 1960s into the 1970s, the work became more consciously political – not in a simplistic or didactic fashion, but increasingly seeing itself as responsible for exposing young people to the complexities facing humanity. The early work of the TiE company had been hugely radical in its form and had never shirked from exploring grand historical narratives and epic themes. However, as is evidenced by projects such as *Emergent Africa Game*, from the late 1960s onwards there was a

more deliberate attempt to ensure that the work resonated with contemporary dilemmas. David Pammenter, who became Head of Department in 1972, describes the shift:

We need not just the stories of history, but the tales of the world that the children live in.... We wanted our kids to develop some understanding of the world they were in – that was shaping their lived experiences and their futures.... We must make this world open to our children otherwise we do not respect our children.<sup>xvii</sup>

One of the most celebrated pieces from this period was *Rare Earth* (1973), a three-part programme exploring issues of conservation and ecological responsibility. The first part of the trilogy centred on an interactive performance and workshop based on the saying “The only good Indian is a dead Indian”, and examining ‘the relationship of primitive man to his environment’ alongside the ecological impact of ‘western technological man’.<sup>xviii</sup> The second part of the trilogy involved students watching *Drink the Mercury*, a performance piece exploring the story of a Japanese fishing village, in which the seawater had been poisoned by industrial waste. Students did not participate in this part of the programme, but simply watched and digested what they had seen. The final part of the programme was an interactive board game about how to control the Earth’s resources in the years to come. The piece is still celebrated today and represents an epic journey across different cultural landscapes culminating in participants making political decisions about the planet’s future. The first part is reminiscent of a Brian Way-style piece of participatory theatre, the second piece is pure performance, with the third piece being entirely participatory and evoking the sort of interactivity present in the *Emergent Africa Game*.

Another example of the company’s engagement with politics would be *The Price of Coal* (1975), which responded to the coal miners’ strikes of the early 1970s. Miners in Bedworth, which lies five miles to the north of Coventry, were part of this dispute and the issue was hugely divisive; indeed, according to David Pammenter, the sons and daughters of these miners were being spat at in the streets of Coventry. The company felt it was important to tackle this issue head on by highlighting the long and complex history of the mining industry. The company developed a participatory performance that reconstructed 400 years of mining history, giving young people access to an experience and depth of

knowledge they would be unlikely to be able gain from reading newspapers or watching television.

### A national movement

By the mid-1970s, the company consisted of twelve actor-teachers and its impact continued to intensify. During 1975, in one half of one term alone, it reached over 6800 students. This growth, along with the continued development of TIE nationally, meant that a growing TIE community existed in the UK. In 1973 the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre (SCYPT) came into existence. The purpose of this organisation was to create an arena for TIE and young people's companies to share ideas, support each other's work and contribute to the continued growth of TIE. The emergence of SCYPT formalised a network of previously informal relationships between companies, and became a unique space for understanding the contrasting approaches to TIE across the country. Over time, however, SCYPT also became divided over contrasting visions of what it should be seeking to achieve. Some felt that it should be more of an externally facing body, vociferously arguing the value of TIE and ensuring its continued financial and political support. Others felt that it should remain an internally facing body, focusing on the sharing and development of ideas. Despite these divisions its mere existence was evidence of the fact that what had begun as a citywide experiment had become a national movement.

## **5. Belgrade TIE 1980s – early 90s**

### Working with adults

As the TIE company moved into the 1980s it continued to innovate. Thanks to additional Arts Council funding it was able to provide 'two programmes for adults linked to the infant and secondary programmes from touring schools'.<sup>xix</sup> In light of rising racial tensions in Coventry the company wanted to develop a programme that gave children and parents alike a space in which to explore issues of race and migration. They devised a two-part programme beginning with *Land of Hope*, which was directed at infant school children and charted the story of 'three people with different backgrounds who leave their own land to seek a new life in Britain'.<sup>xx</sup> The story sets their hopes and expectations of a better life against the reality of what they encounter. The programme was a performance piece that asked children to

intervene and help make the decisions faced by the migrants as they struggled to find a place within their new community. Later that evening the parents of these children were invited to the school to experience a programme called *A Man I Never Knew*, also connected to racial and cultural difference, but this time focusing on four very different people in Coventry each affected by rising racial tensions. The event sought to pitch a complex issue at both children and parents, ensuring that both had engaged with the ideas and could continue to explore it through conversation outside of school.

### Always open to new ideas

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the company's work remained both ambitious in content and flexible and evolutionary in form. *The Peace War* (1983), for instance, was an all day programme for teachers, pupils and parents exploring whether the nuclear bomb was a symbol of peace or destruction, and examined the ways in which families were affected by the nuclear arms debate. Another piece, one that demonstrates the ever-developing form and structure of the work, was *Blood and Honey* – a secondary programme from 1991. *Blood and Honey* was devised against 'a background of rapid and immense change: the redrawing of national boundaries; the overthrow of political systems, and the Gulf War'. The piece aimed to explore 'the dangers that face us as a species and...the knowledge we need in order to overcome them'.<sup>xxi</sup> The programme includes a far greater level of integration between workshop and performance than had previously been the case. *Blood and Honey* begins with a whole group discussion asking "What do we need to survive as human beings?" before the facilitator introduces students to a girl called Anna – who, they learn, killed herself just yesterday. The group then explore Anna's living room, which is littered with symbolic references and evidence about her life. After discussing their discoveries, the groups are introduced to Anna's best friend (played by an actor-teacher), whom participants then "hot seat". Subsequent parts of the programme contained a short performance illustrating snapshots from Anna's life, and students creating group "sculptures" in response to her story, alongside further interactions with actor-teachers "in-role" as characters. The performance itself was somewhat decentralised, becoming a vital piece of the jigsaw rather than the main event. Elements of theatre and fiction are, instead, woven into the fabric of the workshop using conventions such as "hot-seating" and "teacher-in-role". It would not be inaccurate to claim that by now drama education was having an influence on the

development of the company's TiE practice, as those based at the Belgrade at this point freely admit. Also notable for its wide-ranging use of drama conventions, group activities and creative work was *Zones of Becoming* (1995), a primary programme that used a fictional galaxy as a site of exploration for the hopes, dreams, fears and dangers of human civilisation. In a company booklet describing the programme, there is explicit reference to the theories of a range of educationalists, psychologists and philosophers. Whilst external thinkers had always influenced the work of the TiE company, the company members had rarely been so explicit in publicly theorising their work. Evidence of Brian Way-style participatory performance can still be found, as can the creative ingenuity of *Emergent Africa Game*, as can the emotive and storytelling potential of performance. All of this is still present, but additional influences, can also be detected, particularly the conventions of drama education. As a form, then, TiE is constantly evolving, never ceasing to reflect on the integrity of its practice within the social, political and educational contexts in which it finds itself. It changes because it is child-centred, and an approach which requires flexibility and evolution.

## **6. The closure of the TiE Company**

### National deterioration

The Company was valued and supported by the schools and teachers with which it worked until the final days of its existence. It survived the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s and continued to provide TiE to the young people of Coventry until 1996 – over thirty years after Gordon Vallins had established the pilot programme. By the late 1980s, however, a whole wave of TiE companies began to encounter serious difficulties. The Education Reform Act of 1988 meant that the management of school budgets was devolved to individual institutions, meaning Local Education Authorities lost the power to provide citywide schemes. The 1988 Act also introduced the National Curriculum, which, alongside the publishing of league tables, made schools uniformly accountable to a rigid set of procedures and processes. There was an ideological and organisational shift within the country's education system and the new atmosphere was not conducive to the autonomy and flexibility to which TiE companies had become accustomed.

According to Brian Bishop, a member of Belgrade TiE Company from 1982 until 1996, the members of the company “refused to pander”<sup>xxii</sup> to the National Curriculum, though the

company's eventual closure was more a consequence of the Belgrade Theatre's immense financial difficulties. In 1994, the local council recommended a restructuring of budgets, in which the TiE company's funding was integrated into that of the Belgrade Theatre, undermining its historical financial and creative autonomy. A further internal shake-up ordered that the Theatre in Education company become the Theatre and Education *Department*, and that it link far more of its work to the main house work of the theatre. David Beidas, the Belgrade General Manager from 1989-2003, argues:

There was no link between what the rest of theatre was doing and what the TiE team were doing – they did to all intents and purposes function completely independently. So there was this difficult period of negotiation which ended up with a situation where the TiE team... undertook to do a slightly broader range of work, and did things that were linked to main house shows and other things the theatre was doing.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This new arrangement lasted for two years, with the company contributing to the educational demands of the main theatre, whilst continuing its own programme of TiE tours. In 1996, however, the Belgrade Theatre was ordered to tackle its growing deficit, which had been worsened by consistently poor ticket sales. The quantity of money they needed to save could only be met by cutting something of real significance. After much deliberation, the Belgrade TiE Company was disbanded.

## **7. Education at the heart of the Theatre**

### **Recovery**

By 2010, as the Belgrade Theatre reached its 53<sup>rd</sup> year, it could proudly claim to have one of the most active community and education programmes in the country. From 1996 onwards, the Belgrade began to regain control of its finances and by 1998 began to expand and innovate, with its Acting Out and Big School programmes reinforcing its identity as a theatre *of and for* Coventry's young people. By 2003, with the arrival of Hamish Glen as Artistic Director and Chief Executive, there was a further reaffirmation of the importance of education and community work. Indeed, one of the first decisions Glen made was to appoint an Associate Director for Community & Education. The appointee, Justine Themen, suggests

that this decision was of symbolic importance, demonstrating that education and community work “was central to the creative work of the building”.<sup>xxiv</sup> Today, the Belgrade boasts a wide range of youth and educational strands, each one contributing to its creative and social vision. Whilst it is not possible to mention all of them, the following should indicate the scale and scope of the theatre’s ambition:

- Acting Out

This programme was initiated in 1998 with the help of local authority grants and the support of local schools. Its aim was to improve the learning experiences and life chances of young people not reaching their potential within the mainstream education system. Today, the programme remains at the heart of the Belgrade’s philosophical vision, with eligible students in Year 10 and Year 11 visiting the Belgrade once a week for two years as they work towards two BTEC certificates in Performance and Dance – the equivalent of four GCSEs. Justine Themen argues that the scheme has an even wider impact:

They’re frequently young people at risk of leaving school without any qualifications at all... and it often means that because it’s building their confidence and their ability to achieve, they start to do better in their exams at school as well.<sup>xxv</sup>

The programme is part of the Belgrade’s continued belief that the Arts must make a meaningful commitment to the experiences and aspirations of young people.

- Theatre in Education

In 1999, following the development of Acting Out, there was a reaffirmation of the Belgrade’s commitment to TiE, albeit in a different form. Initiated by the then Head of Young People’s Theatre Matthew Pegg, the Belgrade established Big School – an annual programme of TiE aimed at young people making the transition from primary to secondary Education. The most recent programme, *Promise* by Chris Cooper, is about to enter its fourth year in commission. The piece explores the idea that transition is central to the lived experiences of young people and that they are innately capable of confronting it themselves. In the same way that the TiE company confronted difficult subject matter, *Promise* too “credits young people with a complexity of thinking”.<sup>xxv</sup>

In addition to this annual TiE programme, the Belgrade also undertakes individual TiE projects. In 2007 the Local Authority's Minority Groups Support Service commissioned the theatre to create a piece exploring the challenges arising as a result of new communities moving into the area, an issue schools had struggled to confront. After conducting interviews with local children, parents, support teachers and youth workers living and working in areas that had seen a significant increase in the migrant population, the Belgrade's Community and Education Company devised *The First Time I Saw Snow* – a piece exploring the intricacies and complexities of this issue. The programme was targeted at specific schools during January and February 2008 and, due to its enormous popularity, was revived for further performances during 2009.

- Acting Up

Acting Up is an extension of the Acting Out scheme, giving young people an opportunity to continue working with the Belgrade beyond Year 11. The scheme creates a regular space for participants to continue developing their skills on an informal basis, as they make the transition into college or sixth form.

- Black Youth Theatre and Critical Mass

In addition to conventional youth theatre groups (ages 12-16 and 16-25), the Belgrade has developed provision specifically for young people from black and minority ethnic communities. The Black Youth Theatre meets on a weekly basis and exists, according to Justine Themen, in order to “build identity, confidence and a relationship with the organisation”. This “sustained and targeted” approach not only opens the Belgrade to under-represented and marginalised communities, but also gives them a space in which to explore and articulate their unique cultural experiences.

Connected to this work is a recently initiated scheme called Critical Mass, run in partnership with the Drum Arts Centre, Birmingham and the Royal Court Theatre, London. Critical Mass is a playwriting course open to adults from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Following a ten week programme, additional support and opportunities are provided to new writers showing particular talent and particularly keen to develop their work into performance. Lola Johnson, a 17-year old girl who emigrated from Nigeria to Britain when she was 12, turned a

story about a woman who had escaped domestic violence in Zimbabwe into a play - *Walk for your Life* - which was subsequently performed by the Black Youth Theatre. Another member of Critical Mass, called Daniel Christie, conducted interviews with British people of Caribbean origin, out of which emerged *Look Wid Yu Eye* - a play telling the story of a Jamaican man arriving in Britain during the 1950s in search of his childhood sweetheart. Critical Mass not only gives 15-20 people a year the opportunity to hone their playwriting skills, but allows some the privilege of seeing their work performed in a professional setting. Critical Mass and the Black Youth Theatre not only address a participation gap, they give young people an arena in which to explore their lived experiences and develop their creative, artistic and social skills.

- Outreach groups

In the tradition of the TiE company, the Belgrade is committed to the principle of outreach. It has two youth theatre groups based in Tile Hill and Canley, where it conducts weekly workshops. The idea is to target those areas of the city populated by young people who would not ordinarily seek out or even consider joining a youth theatre.

- Performance Opportunities - The Mysteries In Our Own Words

The Belgrade today is also very committed to providing opportunities for young people to stage work bearing witness to their own experiences. This work is almost exclusively new work, and, as with much of the work of the original TiE company, engages with issues of resonance to young people and to the wider Coventry community. In July 2009 young people from across the Belgrade's various theatre groups staged a radical reworking of *The Mysteries*. Called *The Mysteries – In Our Own Words* the piece used dance, drama and film to highlight the shared heritage of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The success of the event not only led to a revival in 2010, it was also shortlisted for a Coventry Community Cohesion Award.

### Looking backwards, looking forwards

The creation of the TiE Company represented a symbolic moment in Coventry's post-war history – political and educational context coinciding with vision, ingenuity and good fortune. To end the story here, however, would be misleading. The closure of the

TiEcompany did not mark the end of the Belgrade's active involvement with young people, merely the end of a particular chapter. The theatre continues to play an integral role in the educational life of the city and the ideals and ingenuity with which the TiE Company worked continue to endure.

Whether it be weekly workshops with disadvantaged or marginalised young people, staging the new work of aspiring playwrights, TiE programmes confronting fractious and difficult issues, or a 21<sup>st</sup> Century restaging of *The Mysteries*, the Belgrade Theatre continues to place community and education work at the heart of its philosophy. In 1965 Anthony Richardson and Gordon Vallins had a vision to make the Belgrade Theatre a vital component of the civic, cultural and democratic life of Coventry. That vision continues to endure.

### **Additional sources of information**

For those in pursuit of further information relating to the Belgrade TiEcompany, three sources of information have been particularly useful whilst researching this history. The first is the 1980 version of Tony Jackson's *Learning through theatre: Essays and casebooks on Theatre in Education*, which contains an essay by Gordon Vallins describing the setting-up of the TiE company. Secondly, there is Christine Redington's *Can Theatre Teach?*, which includes a forensic account of the early years of the TiE Company.

The Belgrade's TiE archive has also been an invaluable resource for this research. It contains a comprehensive archive of photographs, scripts, rehearsal notes and correspondence between company members. The archive was returned to Coventry in September 2010, and is now housed in the History Centre located in Coventry's Herbert Museum and Art Gallery. The archive is a living testimony to TiE and, aside from talking to those individuals who were actually involved, is one of the most useful resources of its kind.

Researched and written by Oliver Turner

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> 1944 Education Act, Part II, 7.
- <sup>ii</sup> Gordon Vallins, personal interview, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>iii</sup> The Newsom Report: *Half our Future*. 1963, p. 157.
- <sup>iv</sup> Gordon Vallins, personal interview, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>v</sup> Gordon Vallins, personal interview, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>vi</sup> Vallins, Gordon. *Learning through Theatre*. Ed. Tony Jackson. Manchester UP, 1980, p. 8.
- <sup>vii</sup> Gordon Vallins, personal interview, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>viii</sup> Gordon Vallins, "Theatre in Education II" memorandum. 1964, p. 3.
- <sup>ix</sup> Gordon Vallins, Interim Report, September/October 1965.
- <sup>x</sup> Gordon Vallins, Interim Report, September/October 1965.
- <sup>xi</sup> Gordon Vallins, Interim Report, September/October 1965.
- <sup>xii</sup> Stuart Bennett, Annual Report, 1969/70.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jane Hogan, email correspondence, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *The Carmakers*, Company booklet, 1971.
- <sup>xv</sup> Company report on *Mr Horaldo's Human Puppet Show*, date unknown.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Company notes on *Trip to the Moon*.
- <sup>xvii</sup> David Pammenter, personal interview, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2010.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Company outline of *Rare Earth* programme
- <sup>xix</sup> Brian Bishop, "The First 21 Years", 1986.
- <sup>xx</sup> Company outline of adult education programme
- <sup>xxi</sup> Anonymous, *Blood and Honey* summarisation, 1991.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Brian Bishop, personal interview, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> David Beidas, personal interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2010.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Justine Themen, personal interview, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2010.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Justine Themen, personal interview, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2010.