

Curtains For The Theatre

Britain's civic theatre is dying, sustained only by subsidy and misplaced civic pride. **Ken Worpole** traces the emergence of a new, dynamic and flexible performance culture which is taking over the streets and the airwaves

The fanfare of trumpets which greeted the opening of the new £14m Leeds Playhouse in February probably marked the end of an era rather than the beginning of something different or new. For in many other places in Britain the civic theatre is in a critical condition: the Leicester Haymarket has a deficit of £531,000, the Liverpool Playhouse is down nearly £400,000 and many others are struggling to survive. The poll tax and charge capping may bring others to the brink of closure. Many theatre critics and arts administrators, while praising the energies and monies invested in the Leeds venture, felt obliged to record that it was likely to be the last of the great monuments to traditional civic culture. For in many places the living theatre has packed its bags and moved on.

Further signs of the difficulties of sustaining a traditional building-based approach to public cultural provision were the recent announcement that the innovative Half Moon theatre company in London was to close as debts caught up with it and the Arts Council's deci-

sion to cut any further funding to the long-standing Roundhouse renovation project, intended to be a showcase of black and Asian theatre and performance arts in Britain. Finally, in January, one of the candidates for the post of artistic director of the RSC apparently made it a condition of appointment that the company be allowed to leave the Barbican building, hopefully one of the last great fortresses of contemporary public culture.

So what went wrong? In recent years most public subsidy of the theatre has been spent on buildings rather than playwrights or actors, on administration rather than on developing new audiences, as John Pick convincingly demonstrated in his 1985 study *The Theatre Industry*. Early last year I spent an evening with a playwright friend of mine I hadn't seen for some time. Although his real love was for the live theatre he had prospered by writing for television. But in his city - a conurbation of over half a million people in the Midlands - the main theatre, the pride of the Labour council and subsidised by local and national government funds to

the tune of over Elm a year, spent, in his words, '£100,000 a year on the boilers and £5,000 a year on commissioning new plays'.

The old radical slogan of 'A propertyless theatre for a propertyless class' has somehow, in the magnificent journey of collectivist provision, been turned inside out. The contemporary civic theatre is now beset with problems of real estate, debt charges and leaking roofs rather than the ideological agonies of naturalism, realism or agitprop. Increasingly the publicly-funded theatre seems locked behind doors, entombed in ungainly buildings, immured behind concrete and municipal glass. The civic theatre, the spirit of the times of the postwar age of cultural settlement, is now landlocked, beached by the tides of cultural fragmentation and aesthetic pluralism. The crowds swirl around it daily, but few go in.

In many towns and cities in Britain in the past, spending on the arts amounted to little more than the upkeep of a civic hall or theatre. No arrangements were made to set up or fund venues for dance, jazz and pop music, low-tech production facilities for film, video and recorded music, publishing, photography and many of the other cultural forms which have gained prominence and broken down cultural barriers in recent decades. Until recently, Coventry council didn't even have a full-time arts officer, though it employed over 100 staff at the Belgrade Theatre. Developments such as the Towngate Theatre in Basildon and The Hawth in Crawley have embodied space for other art forms, though the buildings are still dominated by a main auditorium primarily for large-scale theatre and concert performances.

The classic economic bind that much cultural funding has got itself into is in supporting an inordinately high proportion of fixed costs in buildings, maintenance staff and administration. This leaves little available to spend on the variables, such as the actual programmes, exhibitions, performances and artists' fees. Of the national Arts Council drama budget, £ 10.5m is spent on building-based companies, £2.6m on touring companies and just £0.2m for theatre writing schemes - the development of new work. In dance there is a similar pattern: 13 companies get between them £10.5m, of which the Royal Ballet at the Royal Opera House gets £6.6m, 'New Dance' gets just £0.1m, 'Dance For Ethnic Minorities' and 'Dance Development' each get £0.1m. The dead weight of the old repertoire weighs heavily on the shoulders of the new. By contrast, in other cultural forms - cinema, radio, television, popular music - developing new ideas and material is what artistic policy is all about.

The centralisation of resources has also had an effect. The 1986 Cork Re-



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port, 'Theatre Is For All', found that between them the National Theatre and the RSC had systematically increased their share of the total national budget for drama (from 30% in 1970/71 to 47% in 1985/86), that Arts Council support for small-scale experimental work had decreased (from 60% in 1977/78 to 49% in 1985/86) and that support for touring theatre had decreased. It concluded pessimistically that, 'It is hard to escape the conclusion that the seedbed of theatrical development in England is neglected and dying.'

Today there are fewer and fewer radical or innovative touring companies around who can fill a 500-plus seat auditorium outside London even for a short run of three days, let alone a week or a fortnight. Theatre as a form of political mobilisation - entertaining and rallying the troops, Roland Muldoon used to call it - is not in tune with the current political or cultural mood, which is struggling to work through diversity and pluralism. Pub theatre is by definition more exploratory, more reflective, more domestic and intense. Cabaret and performance art encourage us to mock our own pretensions. These forms problematise politics rather than seeking to rally audiences for that one last battle.

Instead of being able to programme only drama the managers of many 'receiving' theatres often have to try to balance an unhappy combination of O-level Shakespeare, amateur productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, professional touring work by companies such as Temba, Hull Truck, Shared Experience, Red Shift or Cheek By Jowl, with a very heavy ballast of Care Bears Show, Bobby Davro and Des O'Connor. The result is often a complete lack of cultural focus or sense of audience. What is more, the public-sector network of subsidised theatres is the only thing that keeps a dying commercial entertainment sector just about on its feet. Let the dead bury the dead. For much of the subsidy is going to keep ageing racist comedians and blow-dried 50s' pop musicians on the road rather than underwriting the discovery of new talent, or sustaining an avant-garde or the right of innovative theatre to fail.

There is nothing wrong with 50s' English pop or Bobby Davro, but they surely shouldn't be the main cultural forms that local public subsidy is supporting. Investment in a local recording studio or a regional publishing house would be of at least equal merit. A fringe theatre festival or local network of informal theatre and performance venues would be a better option. Hearing Ornette Coleman or Kathryn Tickell in the intimacy of a club or at the Barbican or London Arena are very different experiences. For many people who enjoy live performance - dance, jazz, theatre, cabaret - small is still beautiful.

In national rather than local terms, the Arts Council spends some £27.6m a year on drama, £24.3m on music (primarily

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opera), £11.4m on dance and mime, £2.3m on the visual arts, £0.7m on film, video and broadcasting and a mere £0.5m on literature. These varying sums hardly reflect the priorities of cultural policy as we near the end of the 20th century. Broadcasting and literature, and most certainly popular music, for example, have in recent times more acutely reflected the challenges and tensions of the diverse multi-cultural society we now live in. Artists such as Salman Rushdie, Liz Lochhead, Hanif Kureishi, Neneh Cherry, John Lydon and Steve Williamson have been among the most articulate and expressive visionaries of recent years. They are transforming the traditional 'English' literary and musical repertoire in as powerful a way as modernism transformed European bourgeois culture at the beginning of the 20th century.

But it is not just the civic theatre that faces problems of retreat and potential dissolution. The whole issue of what constitutes a 'civic culture' needs radical rethinking. For the model that has served us well for nearly 150 years - going back to the Museums Act of 1845 and the Public Libraries Act of 1850 which encouraged the local municipal provision of museums and libraries - has in recent years begun to crumble from within. The great era of civic provision, which in many towns meant a neo-classical town hall to which a museum, public art gallery and central library were adjoined, is being recast as policies of de-centralisation, outreach and a recognition of new cultural forms challenge the authority of a building-based culture.

The ethos of traditional civic culture was based on what has been called 'the distribution theory of culture': that public cultural policy was best achieved by distributing the national (and often imperial) culture to the emergent classes eager for education and enlightenment. This gave rise to the lending libraries of approved works. Even I can remember when Joyce's *Ulysses* was available only by special request at Southend Central Library in the early 1960s. The museum collections of imperial exotica, native baubles, photographs of white men bringing civilisation to foreign lands, stuffed parrots and collections of locally-found Roman coins are all products of this tradition. Only the art galleries sometimes contained works by local artists - watercolours of local scenes - rather than a further helping of the national diet.

In general, civic culture did not include the notion of local or indigenous cultural production. The libraries did not see it as their function to encourage local writers or to enter publishing themselves. The museums often turned their backs on the living cultures within which they operated. When the civic theatre emerged its programme was essentially the 'national' repertoire: Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Congreve, Shaw, Wilde, Noel Coward,

Terence Rattigan, Wesker, Pinter, Ayckbourn, to which was added the European classical tradition. The initial impulse of the repertory movement which emerged in Birmingham and Liverpool at the beginning of the century, to create a regional drama based on local writing, conspicuously failed.

Public subsidy was a proper ingredient of civic culture, but essentially it was the subsidy of buildings rather than performances, of symbolic cultural spaces rather than of artefacts or artists. It is no wonder that today, in an economy which derives much of its momentum from inflated land values and property speculation, a building-based approach to cultural policy produces enormous stresses on local-government finance. Town councils are struggling to subsidise arts and leisure centres located on town-centre sites when retailers and office-builders are prepared to pay £50 a square foot.

Some administrators and politicians argue that the reason for continuing to build large concert halls, theatres and art centres is to attract the 'national' theatre, dance companies and orchestras to perform in their towns and cities; to bring 'the best' to local audiences. If this still is the case, portable venues could be set up just for the occasion and taken down and used somewhere else afterwards. The technology of portable buildings is now so advanced as to be able to meet most if not all artistic, comfort-of-audience and safety needs. The Bubble Theatre have been doing it for years, as has the Zap Club 'Elephant Tent' at the Edinburgh Festival.

In Europe, portable structures are used much more for festivals and big events. Putting up buildings designed expressly for an event that may happen only twice a year is hardly radical planning. It makes no more sense than building a new motorway in order to cope with the crush of Christmas shopping or an FA Cup tie. But a large capital building project looks good on an ambitious local government officer's CV, and that can occasionally be one of the less rational impulses for thinking big.

In an era of extraordinary cultural innovation and change (and it is going to get even more frenetic, not less), flexibility and adaptability should be the key principles of cultural policy. It is clear that what both artists and audiences want is flexibility in creating meeting places for ideas and performances. Artists no longer stay in one place or within one discipline; people move from rock music to dance to performance art and back again within the same week; actors move from cabaret to television commercials to experimental theatre in the same day. The amateur/professional divide is breaking down as performance poets and musicians go from street busking one day to the television studio the next.

One can already see this need for greater flexibility in the growth over

the past decade of pub theatre, now one of the most exciting developments in contemporary drama, much of it taking its cue from the success of the fringe at the Edinburgh Festival. London is now threaded with a large number of pub venues regularly producing new work, translations, or innovative productions from the traditional repertoire. There are similar networks in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle and Birmingham and developing elsewhere. If you had wanted to see a Vaclav Havel play in London in the last 12 months you would have gone to the Old Red Lion, the Soho Poly or the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith rather than to the West End or 'national' stages. Only the fringe theatres seem able to respond to the urgency and immediacy of contemporary political theatre.

The recent jazz renaissance in Britain cannot be separated off from the proliferation of small venues. Wine bars, pubs, community centres, fringe theatre, dance clubs and even deconsecrated churches have afforded musicians time, money and regular opportunities for developing their work in numerous combinations of line-up and changing ensembles. 'Jazz At The Town Hall' no longer has the same appeal. The number of venues regularly programming jazz in London has grown from 70 to 350 in the last five years, most of them outside the 'civic' circuit.

In recent years most other civic institutions have undergone dramatic transformations: the Town Hall is being de-centralised; the public library is going on-line; the walls of the civic art gallery and museum have been breached by the growth of public art, environmental art, open-air museums and educational outreach. It is time too that the civic theatre or concert hall in Britain renewed itself, if it is not to suffer the fate of the great music halls of the 1890s or the film palaces of the 1930s whose audiences moved on; bulldozed to the ground to make way for shopping centres, or converted into carpet warehouses or indoor antique malls.

In the end there are only two ways to defend a fortress. One is to surround it with out-houses, buildings which mediate between it and the everyday world - and this has in some places happened with outreach work, theatre-in-education teams, networking with educational and other local and regional institutions. The other is by vacating it and disappearing into the countryside or going underground. In post-modern society cultural transformation takes place on the streets, on the airwaves, in the ebb and flow of subcultures and networks, through fanzines and samizdat, on the dance floor and in the alternative cabaret venue above the high-street pub. The theatre started on the streets, on makeshift platforms erected by the Guilds for local festivals. It is re-establishing that connection. Let the walls come tumbling down.