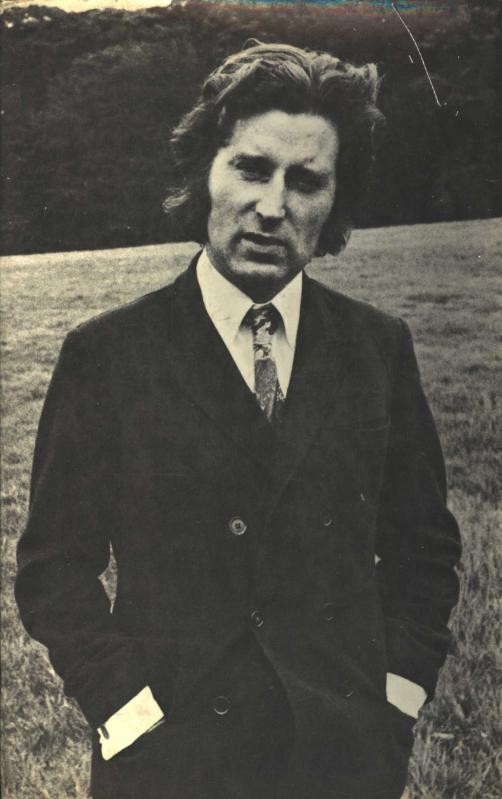


JOHN ELSOM



THEATRE Outside London

JOHN ELSOM

MACMILLAN

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SBN boards: 333 11066 8

First published 1971 by
MACMILLAN LONDON LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in New York Toronto
Dublin Melbourne Johannesburg & Madras

Printed in Great Britain by
WESTERN PRINTING SERVICES LTD
Bristol

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Acknowledgements

I WOULD like to express my thanks to E. A. Markham and Sally Mays for their help with the research and preparation of this book, to the actors and managers of repertory theatres who have given me so much of their time, to Victor Corti and John Olley for allowing me to use their plan for a community theatre, and to London Magazine and Gambit, who have allowed me to reprint extracts from previous articles.

JOHN ELSOM

Change and Prophecies

THOSE two masks, Comedy and Tragedy, the ancient shorthand for the theatre, still hang even today when tragedy is out of fashion – grinning and scowling in the new rep buildings, in an Equity organized, Arts Council subsidized profession. And, although the plays and productions we watch no longer suffer from so marked a division between gaiety and gloom, the image persists when we talk about the theatre, in our hopes and forebodings. Some directors echo the words of *Stage* that 'we are obviously on the brink of an exciting theatrical renaissance', while others argue that the theatre is on another brink altogether, hanging on to a thorn bush at the top of a crumbling cliff – one slight movement and the art and the profession together will be avalanched down.

Neither face is exactly dishonest. The fortunes of one section of the theatre have declined, while those of another (particularly the subsidized reps) have risen. The distortion comes with the melodrama, the very theatrical tendency to over-project. This, too, would be no more than an error of taste, were it not that these cheerful or woebegone stances have the habit of growing inwards, from the mask to the face to the bone - so that while some prophesy revolution and act accordingly, demanding an end to cupids and proscenium arches, nubile maids and tea ceremonies, others stand stolidly still, enquiring with John Counsell of the Theatre Royal, Windsor, where the new dramatists are coming from, the new 'Rattigans, Priestleys and Frys'. Some insist that the theatre is really a licensed play-area, where anti-social aggressions can be released and tolerated: others that it is a place for entertainment, mere entertainment, and to pretend otherwise is pretentious and economically disastrous. There seems to be a sort of incest taboo preventing these two faces, which share after all a common spine, from turning towards each other in a friendly fashion. What should be a dialogue sounds suspiciously like polemic, delivered unheard in opposite directions.

The problem is partly, I'm afraid, one of language and interpretation. Most rep directors would say, loudly and confidently, that 'the theatre should serve the community', but what is meant by theatre, service and community? Is the community that section of the public which acquired the habit, during the twenties and thirties, of going to the theatre - or should it refer to the public in general. to the students and factory workers, to both sides of the generation and class gap? And where does the value of the theatre lie - in the process or the performance? In the acting-out of an event in game form, or in the presentation of this game? Is the theatre the play, the profession, the building or the relationship between the actors and the audience? Is service a cant word useful to counter the still persistent puritanism towards the theatre - or is there some other meaning marginally more precise, creeping through the altruism? Does the theatre serve the public by amusing them when the dav's work is over - or by presenting masterpieces of literature in elegant productions - or by confronting social problems directly, through local documentaries, theatre-in-education programmes and so forth? As these words are used, so one can select statistics, another form of language, to support the conclusions one wishes to draw - that the theatre is at a watershed, or a springboard, in decline or buoyant, or something like that.

If, for example, the word theatre is interpreted very broadly to mean the drama which can be - and is - watched by the public in general in any medium, then undoubtedly theatre is more important and popular today than it has ever been: more plays are watched by more people, more actors are better known, and, I suppose, drama has more influence. If, on the other hand, the word is limited to mean 'live theatre', the stage, but includes all the various facets of show business, from variety to straight plays, then the theatre has been on an erratic decline since the turn of the century. Seventy years ago, there were over five hundred music-halls, over fifty 'straight' theatres and many touring companies, some owning chains of part-time theatres, which were often little more than barns. By 1939, this number had slumped to between 200 and 300 theatres of which not all were in full-time use - and, by 1970, to about 140. These figures are not easy to establish, as the Arts Council itself (whose facilities for checking are so much better than my own) has admitted. Not all the theatres were in use at one time: some were small local ventures, barely professional, whose work has sunk unrecorded. Much of the old music-hall trade has now gone to the clubs and pubs. Judged by the number of buildings devoted to the professional live theatre, there has been a general decline. Leicester used to have three theatres: now it has one. Between 1938 and 1958 no new theatres at all were built – although there were some conversions. It's not hard to find reasons for this decline – the impact of cinema and television, better travel and so on – but, interestingly enough, the number of buildings where 'straight plays' are performed has not noticeably declined. The numbers have fluctuated, but there has been no steady drift downwards: and indeed, since 1958, twenty new theatres have been built – of which fifteen are provincial reps – and many more are planned.

If, therefore, we define the word theatre fairly narrowly, to mean the live performance of straight plays or musicals, and we try to gauge the growth or otherwise of the theatre by the number of buildings devoted to that purpose, there are few signs of an over-all decline this century, and over the past twelve years in particular there has been a sort of resurgence, a revival of theatre. This is rather surprising, remembering the impact of television during the fifties. The theatre has held its own - not solidly like a strong-room door, but variably, like a revolving door in a hotel, throwing some managements out quickly, sucking others in. The most dramatic decline of all has been in the fate of touring commercial companies and of those theatres which depended on them for the product. These, according to the Arts Council Theatre Enquiry Report, 'have shrunk in numbers within the last 40 years, from 130 to about 30'. The Report proposes that the number of touring theatres should contract still further to provide a grid of between twelve and eighteen theatres, 'fed' by 'quality products' from the two national companies, several leading reps, opera and ballet companies, and some commercial companies. Partly to offset this decline in the number of provincial touring theatres - and the commercial companies which fed them - there has been a remarkable increase in the number of provincial reps, from about twelve in 1939 to about sixty in 1970. What has happened during the past few years has not been a growth or a decline in the theatre as such, but the rapid reorganization of the theatre as an industry, accelerated by the impact of television, assisted by the growth of the Arts Council and of local council support, and, above all, by a climate of opinion which has turned slowly and consistently towards the local product,

to offset perhaps the growing pervasiveness of a national, televised and centralized culture.

This reorganization of the provincial theatre has happened - is continuing to happen - and the consequences cannot be brushed aside. It is now almost as difficult for a London management to turn its back on the provinces as it was once for a provincial management to ignore London. To take one small autobiographical example: in 1960, I joined the script department of Paramount Pictures, my job being to cover the theatre and to recommend to my script editor plays which might become suitable film-scripts. Sometimes, at the beginning, my editor would send me out of London, to Brighton or Windsor perhaps, to catch a production on a pre-London run. For the first five years, I went no further afield than Oxford or Brighton, and then it was only to forestall the West End opening, to steal a march on rivals. This is not to suggest that admirable work was not being achieved in Liverpool, Nottingham, Sheffield and elsewhere, but that it was safe for Paramount to assume that any good play or production would come to London and that to cover these places wasn't worth the added expense of travel. By the time I left Paramount, however, it was no longer safe to make these assumptions: in the last three years, I travelled all over the country - from Chichester to Bristol to Nottingham to Edinburgh. We could no longer accept as a fact of theatrical life that an admirable new play would come to London and that we would hear about it through the grapevine soon enough to buy. Many rep productions did come to London - but many more would be waiting in the pipeline for a suitable West End theatre. During these eight Paramount years, as well, there was a slow but noticeable change in the sort of theatres I was asked to visit. At the beginning, I visited the touring theatres. where various West End managements would try out new productions: at the end, if and when I reviewed outside London, I would probably be visiting the reps. In other words, during this period, the reps started to take over from the commercial managements as the major supplier of new drama.

This change has already had a considerable impact on the London theatre. Over the past year, 1969-70, the Nottingham Playhouse became the first rep company to offer two productions at the Old Vic (the temporary home of the National Theatre) – The Alchemist and King Lear: and the new ILEA Cockpit Theatre was opened by Peter Cheeseman's company from Stoke-on-Trent – in a documentary

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production, The Burning Mountain, which they had written and compiled themselves. Hadrian VII, which was first performed at the Birmingham Rep, is the longest running 'serious' play in London in the year of writing, still at the Haymarket: and one of the most successful boulevard comedies, The Man Most Likely to ..., came originally from the Theatre Royal, Windsor. Among the revivals, Ian McKellen has scored a major personal triumph in two Prospect productions, Edward II and Richard II at the Piccadilly; another Nottingham production, Shaw's Widowers' Houses, was at the Royal Court; and Alastair Sim is starring in that magnificent Chichester production of Pinero's The Magistrate at the Cambridge. An interesting minor revival, Rodney Ackland's The Old Ladies, came from the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford. Three productions from the Bristol Old Vic are currently running in London: Conduct Unbecoming at the Queen's; It's a Two Foot Six Inches above the Ground World at Wyndhams; and Mandrake, a musical, at the Criterion. Another musical, 'Erb, at the Strand, came from the '60 Company in Manchester. And so on. . . . Not so long ago. The Ruling Class came from Nottingham, The Narrow Road to the Deep North received its first performance at Coventry, Close the Coalhouse Door from Newcastle, The Blacks from the Oxford Playhouse - without these plays and productions from the provincial reps, the theatre in the West End would have presented a very lean and impoverished face indeed over the past few years.

But to judge the success of the repertory movement solely by the number of transfers to the West End is to add to the folly of London superiority. A number of exciting new plays have not yet transferred and may not do so: W. J. Wetherby's Breaking the Silence, first produced at the Liverpool Playhouse, is an example. Nor have all the productions survived unscathed, though several have been greatly improved. A commercial management may buy up a wellbalanced rep production, introduce a couple of stars and sometimes spoil the effect. Sometimes the ethos of a town adds to the success of a production, sometimes a permanent company playing on its home ground, sometimes the shape of the theatre for which the play was originally produced. London is notably short of new theatres, although, as I have said, twenty new theatres have been built in the provinces since 1058. The experiments in theatre design - thrust and arena stages, adaptable and environmental theatres - have taken place outside London. Nor has London yet felt the impact on a

community which a successful rep can have - as an arts centre, through theatre-in-education programmes and studio productions. I found it almost disconcerting to enter a Nottingham coffee bar and overhear the students at the next table talking about Arrabal as if he were John Lennon. The head of the theatre-in-education programme at the Dundee Rep, Michael Barry, writing in a report for the Gulbenkian Foundation, mentions that theatre-in-education may be a way of lowering the crime rate in the town. Such ideas, in London, seem laughably naïve and optimistic: but in some provincial towns they are not only taken seriously - they also seem to have some facts to support them. I do not wish to convey the impression that Drury Lane will soon be part of the Number 2 Touring Circuit from Nottingham, but rather that the sun of the West End theatre no longer stands isolated and unrivalled by other stars in the sky. Or perhaps (to change the metaphor) London may still be the heart of British theatre, but this heart is fed with blood from several large and important veins from the repertory movement, which in turn, through their close contacts with different communities, are nurtured by the universities, amateur dramatic societies and student experimental theatres. These are the capillaries, and their importance as well should not be overlooked. Zoo Zoo Widdershins Zoo went to Nottingham from a student production: Disabled by Peter Ransley from an adult education group in London to the Stables Theatre. Manchester, and from there to television: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead from an Oxford University production to the National Theatre. The modern repertory movement has become a vital link between local talent and national, has become involved in the life of the community in a way which was unthinkable fifty years ago, and in doing so has altered our conception as to what theatre is or can be. The comparative health of British theatre which sometimes seems more enviable from across the Atlantic than from here, where we have got used to it - is very largely due to the growth of the repertory theatre movement particularly since the war, a growth which is more remarkable because of the decline in the other sections of the theatre.

This seesaw in the fortunes of different sections of the theatre is startling enough, and would be more so if there were not some good mechanical reasons governing the change. To say baldly that the

number of touring theatres has declined from 130 to about 30 suggests that 100 theatres have closed. Not so, Some have certainly closed, but others have simply changed status. When, for example, the old Cheltenham Opera House closed in 1959, it opened again a few months later, this time as a repertory theatre, the Everyman, run by a non-profit-distributing limited company. Under this new status, the theatre could claim rate reductions, income-tax reductions. did not (later) have to pay Selective Employment Tax, and, of course, could apply for local and Arts Council grants. At first, the concessions were more important than the subsidies; and from the early fifties onwards the commercial theatre in the provinces found itself fighting a losing battle for trade against unfair odds. Commercial managements, by definition, are profit-distributing: they aim to make money. The non-profit-distributing companies were considered to offer a social service and therefore they received certain concessions. Even when the fortunes of a theatre were not desperate and no subsidies were expected - as at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, where the Penguin Players, although firmly established in the town, became a non-profit-distributing company in 1956 - the temptation to change status, to blow away a few clouds from a stormy and insecure living, was very strong. Only a few sturdily independent managements of commercial reps, such as John Counsell at Windsor or Charles Vance at Eastbourne, resisted - more, I would imagine, from conviction than economic logic. As the Arts Council funds increased, the subsidies to the non-profitdistributing theatres became more important, and the balance tilted still further against the commercial theatre in the provinces - either the reps, the touring companies or the productions on pre-London tours. These grants were given almost without qualitative restrictions. The Arts Council would try to assess the needs and potentialities of the theatres before awarding grants, but they wouldn't be cut on the basis of a bad season or because of uneven standards. In 1968, a major rep, the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, with an annual Arts Council subsidy of £50,000, presented Frankie Howerd and Barbara Windsor in a spoof Western, The Wind in the Sassafras Trees, and what chance had the commercial theatre to survive against such competition? Very little. Many companies went out of business: others were forced to play in smaller towns without reps. in inadequate theatres. The commercial companies which did survive with some ease were the larger ones, who could afford, say, to

present spectacular musicals on tour, The Black and White Minstrel Show, productions which were beyond the reach of reps to stage. But the risks with these spectacular productions were equally great, and the competition was keenest - and most ill-balanced - on a workaday level, in the small-cast, low-budget productions. The Arts Council has complained that West End managements do not release the rights of successful plays promptly, when the West End run is over, so that reps can stage them: but these managements are protecting their own interests. Low-budget 'winners' were hard enough to find, in any case: to release the rights to reps quickly would have made life in the provinces even more difficult for commercial managements. Indeed, to describe the reps as subsidized is slightly misleading: they receive subsidies, of course, but these subsidies do not condition their programmes, and most of their income still comes from the box office: seventy-five per cent, according to the Theatre Enquiry Report, but this average includes some heavily subsidized theatres, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford and the Manchester '69 Company. Very few reps can afford to ignore the box office in the interests of Art. And so there has been direct competition between the assisted reps and the various commercial managements, and in this struggle the assisted reps have nearly all the advantages. Many commercial managements, faced by the choice of changing status or going out of business, preferred to throw themselves into the arms of the local authorities - if these were cautiously extended - to register as non-profit-distributing limited companies and hope for the best.

This situation could have arisen almost by accident. It could be argued that in a mixed economy the balance between private and public investment is never rigidly maintained but that there is always a drift from one direction to another. The Arts Council, I am sure, had no intention of depressing the commercial theatre, when, in the mid-fifties, it began to jack up the reps on small grants. On the contrary, it wanted to support the theatre in itself, and it saw no way of helping the commercial theatre on the money available and without contradicting the terms of its Charter. It even respected profit as a spur to Art. However, the commercial theatre in the provinces was depressed, and the assisted reps began to flourish: and in attempting to explain the behaviour of a society, as of an individual, it is never satisfactory to leave the word accident dangling. without further explanation. Why was the Arts Council formed?

Why was the theatre considered worthy of support? And why were the provincial reps so high on the list of priorities?

One answer to all these questions is that since the middle of the nineteenth century – and indeed before – the *idea* of non-commercial art, of art related more to social needs and concerns than to profit, has been expressed with increasing eloquence and urgency. In 1850 the first legislation was passed to establish public libraries, and gradually these libraries started to oust the private circulating libraries which still survive, of course, but in a very impoverished state. In 1879, Matthew Arnold wrote an article, 'The French Play in London', for the magazine, *The Nineteenth Century*: and in spite of the curiously uneven tone, the rhetoric which stumbles, the class distinctions which we would now prefer to express more euphemistically, his theme has a surprisingly modern ring, could be paired with speeches from Parliament today, with editorials from *Stage*, with prefaces from Arts Council reports:

We are at the end of a period, and have to deal with the facts and symptoms of a new period on which we are entering; and prominent among these fresh facts and symptoms is the irresistibility of the theatre. . . . The change is not due only to an increased liking in the upper class and in the working class for the theatre. Their liking for it has certainly increased, but this is not enough to account for the change. The attraction of the theatre begins to be felt again, after a long interval of insensibility, by the middle class also. . . . The human spirit has a vital need, as we say, for conduct and religion; but it has the need also for expansion, for intellect and knowledge, for beauty, for social life and manners. The revelation of these additional needs brings the middle class to the theatre. . . . The revelation was indispensable, the needs are real, the theatre is one of the mightiest means of satisfying them, and the theatre is therefore irresistible. That conclusion at any rate we may take for certain. But I see our community turning to the theatre with eagerness, and finding the English theatre without organization, or purpose, or dignity, and no modern English drama at all except a fantastical one.

And he concludes: 'The theatre is irresistible: organize the theatre.' Few nowadays would dismiss modern English drama so categorically, and many would say that the 'organization' has either taken place,