SHARED EXPERIENCE THEATRE:
EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF PERFORMANCE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation provides a history of Shared Experience Theatre, a fringe theatre company based in London, England. The members of Shared Experience have earned international acclaim for their commitment to physically innovative approaches to novel adaptations for the stage. Although they are one of the few living fringe companies remaining since the 1970s, this is the first official investigation of the company that revitalized storytelling techniques for the contemporary British stage. The focus of this study is on the creative processes and survival techniques of the artistic leadership over the past twenty-seven years, beginning with Mike Alfreds in 1975, and continuing with Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale since 1987.

It was Shared Experience’s work in the 1970s that sparked the contemporary British interest in stage adaptations of literature, with their landmark productions of Arabian Nights and Dicken’s Bleak House. Under the artistic leadership of Mike Alfreds, the actors employed the narrative of the novel as a wellspring of theatrical possibility, physically transforming themselves through the slightest gesture. From the late 1980s, under Meckler and Teale, the approach to novel adaptation continues to be physical and innovative, yet takes a significantly different path. The style is distinctly and powerfully physical and ‘expressionistic’; their rehearsals are an exploration of what the story ‘feels like’ rather than what it looks like in reality. During the past ten years,
Shared Experience’s work has been most successful with the adaptations of classic and often nineteenth-century novels such as *Anna Karenina*, *War & Peace*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. The use of ritualized gestures, visual images, split characters, and the physicalization of characters’ fantasies and dreams have all become hallmarks of the Shared Experience ‘approach’. With these tools, Meckler and Teale have cracked open the secrets ‘hidden inside’ the heart of the novel for the British stage.

This dissertation also examines the economic and administrative context that supports the continued existence of Shared Experience Theatre. The purpose of this dissertation is to gather together pieces of evidence implicit within the eclectic variety of documents accompanying the creative and administrative lives of this company. This study brings contemporary British theatre scholarship closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between fringe and mainstream theatre practices. It also provides a platform for further investigation of novel adaptations, the language of gesture in performance, physical theatre, fringe theatre, and above all, further meditations on the company fascinated by the potential to ‘dream out loud’ on the British stage.
Dedicated to the memory of William Stuart Adamson
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty-seven years since its inception by Mike Alfreds in 1975, Shared Experience Theatre of London has established itself as one of Britain’s most inventive and enduring alternative theatre companies, producing an eclectic body of work including novel adaptations, experiments with classic dramas, and new scripts. Throughout the company’s existence, the focus of the creative work has centered on the power of the physical presence of the actor, and the process and possibilities of storytelling. It was Shared Experience’s work in the 1970s that re-invigorated the British interest in stage adaptations of novels with their landmark production of Charles Dicken’s *Bleak House* (1976).¹ Today, under the leadership of joint artistic directors Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale, Shared Experience has earned international acclaim for its innovative novel adaptations, including productions such as *Anna Karenina* (1992), *Mill

¹ The British have been staging novels for more than a hundred years. Philip Bolton records the performances of novels by women writers in England until 1900, in *Women Writers Dramatized: A Calendar of Performances from Narrative Works Published in English to 1900*. Bolton’s study is certainly not exhaustive, and, of course, novels by male writers were also given a second life via the theatre. For instance, the works by nineteenth-century novelists such as Charles Dickens were staged by his enthusiasts as soon as they appeared in print. In time, the obsession with novels waned as prospective theatrical source material for twentieth-century audiences. Later, the new media of radio and television picked up this fascination with novels, a trend well-evidenced in the lavish costume dramas presented by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). However, the adaptation of the novel as a uniquely theatrical event in itself was pioneered in Britain by Mike Alfreds, and transformed again by Nancy Meckler in the 1990s.
on the Floss (1994), War and Peace (1996), Jane Eyre (1997), and most recently, Angela Carter’s The Magic Toyshop (2001) and E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India (2002).

The subject of my doctoral dissertation is a history of Shared Experience Theatre. It is a company that was conceived at the height of the fringe theatre movement, and has survived, indeed is thriving, more than ever today. To date, this company has not been the focus of any major study. I am first scholar to document the history of Shared Experience and its significance in contemporary British theatre, producing the first major research of this company. While this study may have a specific and particular focus, it is also intended to extend the general knowledge of the cultural context in which alternative theatre is created in Britain. Shared Experience has never operated in a vacuum. The longevity of this company provides an opportunity to explore the variety of influences attending the birth, progress, and sometimes decline of alternative theatre companies that have been in operation from the heyday of the fringe through to the present day. Arts councils, venue management, educational programming, artistic leadership, trends in theatrical style and design, innovative rehearsal and performance techniques, funding opportunities, and even political administrations: The preceding are a selection of the cultural, social, political, and economic factors affecting the direction and survival of all theatre companies, whether or not they operate from within or without the mainstream tradition.

Therefore, a documentation and analysis of the life and development of Shared Experience Theatre is, in an important way, also a reflection of the conditions affecting all alternative work produced by companies during this rich period of theatrical history, 1975-2001. What makes a study of Shared Experience significant is precisely the series
of administrative decisions and artistic efforts that have kept this company thriving in a turbulent theatrical atmosphere in which so many other companies, such as Joint Stock, Cheek By Jowl, Foco Novo, Monstrous Regiment, or Method and Madness and others have failed to survive. This is the phenomenon that makes an exploration of the company’s history a compelling one.

With a total of only three artistic directors in twenty-five years, the company has achieved remarkable stability. Further, it has effected a national and global impact through extensive educational work and touring throughout Britain and twenty different countries, including India and China. As the first major study on this important and influential company, my research provides an important context to contemporary British theatre and a much needed counterpoint to the existing studies of the heavily subsidized mainstream theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal National Theatre.

Mike Alfreds, the creator of the company and the first artistic director, has never been simply a fringe theatre director. Nor has Shared Experience ever been just another alternative theatre group. The company has survived from 1975 during a burgeoning wealth of innovative companies, through the cuts of the Thatcher administration in the 1980s, to the present day. Like Joan Littlewood and Peter Brook, Alfreds has taken upon himself the tasks of questioning and re-defining the very nature of theatre. Also like Littlewood and Brook, Alfreds has championed a “total commitment of the actor to the
role, action, and performance.” Yet, Alfreds and his company created a narrative theatre process unique to Shared Experience alone.

Though now under the artistic leadership of Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale, the company continues to forge a formidable reputation on the strength of various adaptations of classic novels for the stage. Shared Experience Theatre represents a commitment to actor-centered theatre, ensemble playing, and a physical approach to novel adaptation which has re-invented storytelling techniques for the British stage. Further, although the company firmly rejects the notion that they are a feminist company, Shared Experience produces shows which often center on the experiences of women: *Anna Karenina, Mill on the Floss, Jane Eyre, A Doll’s House, The House of Bernarda Alba, The Magic Toyshop.*

It is not surprising that this British theatre company is exploring the novel form, given the special, if not revered place the novel holds in British cultural history. British entertainment industries have demonstrated an obsession with the novel, adapting countless narratives for the stage, film, television, and radio. However, the use of novels as creative source material may appear to be a wholly text-based or traditional way of working. Yet, Shared Experience requires a new category, for it does not fit easily into any of the established developments of alternative work. The Shared Experience style is distinctly and powerfully physical and ‘expressionistic’, melding text with gesture; rehearsals are an expression of what the story “feels like”, rather than what it looks like in reality. The company excels in revealing the inner, subjective experience of their

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characters, rather than telling the “story of what happens on the surface of life.” They explore this sensory approach to drama by examining characters’ hidden, inner worlds through image and movement. The company is interested in theatre that expresses those areas of human experience that are inside our heads, the world of images and memory, and hidden thoughts. This is, “storytelling in which the inner lives of those on stage is made palpably physical.”

A key goal of this dissertation is to redefine the nature of London alternative and fringe theatre companies that rely on non-naturalistic and physical rehearsal techniques. Specifically, Shared Experience is intriguing for its contribution to storytelling, imagination, communication, and that special and intimate relationship that occurs between actors and audiences in the unique event that is the live theatrical experience. As there has never been a full-length study of Shared Experience, scholarship directly related to this company is fairly limited. At the tenth anniversary of the company’s existence, Mike Alfreds released a brief but informative publication highlighting the rehearsal process of shows produced between the years 1975-1985. Although his volume does not attempt to explore the theoretical, or even the daily administrative or financial basis for the company’s existence, it does gather show titles, performance dates, and cast and production team information for these years of operation.

There are few scholarly articles that analyze the company’s directorial methods or investigate their contribution to the shape of alternative theatre in Britain. Several articles

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4 Brooklyn Academy of Music’s publicity statement for the American presentation of *Jane Eyre*. 5
have appeared in regard to Alfreds’ work as a director of Chekhov. However, most of these studies have largely been inspired by Alfreds’ presence at the Royal National Theatre, rather than his Chekhov work for Shared Experience. Clive Barker is the only critic who has ventured to pursue a thorough analysis of the creative process of a particular Shared Experience production. He took a specific look at the company’s method for creating *Science Fictions* in 1978.\(^5\) This article has further value in that it includes interviews from members of the acting company on the training methods and specific creative exercises that contributed to the creation of the show. The few articles on Nancy Meckler as Artistic Director, reflect a primary interest in Meckler as a ‘woman’ directing in Britain. In the 1980s, there were a plethora of articles and studies investigating the number, or lack, of women in leadership positions in British theatre companies. There has been a strong and consistent interest by the British press in Shared Experience productions, but this journalistic interest has not yet paved the way for more scholarly investigation.

One reason for the dearth of academic interest in Shared Experience is that the creative processes of alternative theatre productions are frustratingly difficult to document and to discuss. Theatre is a ‘live’ event, a communion between actors and audiences. Theatre is ephemeral, fleeting; it lives only in the place of performance. Once the performance is over, the experience is gone forever. Yet, since much experimental theatre work relies on movement, gesture, and sound, how is it possible to accurately describe or articulate this visual and aural information in a written form for a reading

public? The difficulties of writing about alternative theatre methods have led to a self-generating cycle of neglect. First, because most of the early fringe pieces were low budget, small-scale touring productions, few documents remain to bear witness to their emotional power or artistic achievements. These companies were formed for the purpose of immediate performance only, not for the comprehensive records and convenience of later scholars. In addition, many of these fringe companies operated under the ethos of experiment and risk, with no real assurance of a continued life and existence beyond any given season of production. Prompt books reveal few details of acting and movement choices. At any rate, prompt books may not be particularly useful for this kind of work, given that Alfreds’ work was based as much on the movement and gestures of the actors as it was on the scripted dialogue. Further, video documentation was not a normal practice for fringe theatre companies, so it is nearly impossible to accurately describe the movement, tone, level of energy, or general *mis en scene* of these events. And since these shows were based on the physical creation of a particular group of actors, Alfreds has been keen to not impose his own company’s choices and decisions upon other actors who wish to creatively explore the same material.

Under the artistic leadership of Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale, the obstacles preventing scholarly documentation remain remarkably similar. Like Alfreds’ productions, the work directed by Meckler and Teale highlights the importance of movement, gesture, and the creation of abstract images. What is the best way to document such ephemeral performances? Even though the company has been retaining video archives of the productions since the 1990s, these videos are held primarily for the benefit of designers and other artistic personnel, rather than for academic research.
Further, since their creative process requires an exceptional investment of personal emotional risk and vulnerability from the actors, the company currently operates under a closed rehearsal policy. Even the administrative staff members are not invited to attend rehearsals. As a result, scholars of a company like Shared Experience must function as ‘detectives’ relying on a variety of related documents such as interviews, a handful of archive video performances, artistic statements, and critical reviews to document what is largely a rather ‘intangible’ experience.

An additional reason for the paucity of academic interest in this company may be related to the field of scholarship surrounding British fringe theatre in general. There are a number of seminal studies documenting the early years of alternative theatre movements and its characteristics. These include such works as Peter Ansorge’s *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain*, Sandy Craig’s (ed) *Dreams and Deconstructions*, Catherine Itzin’s *Stages of the Revolution*, and Roland Rees’s *Fringe First: Pioneers of the Fringe on Record*. These works do a commendable job of investigating the key factors influencing and nourishing the initial growth of fringe theatre, as well as considering the difficulty of categorizing the enormous variety of creative work spawned since 1968. However, most of these studies were completed and published prior to 1975. Therefore, only the very first and most visible fringe companies received critical attention. Interestingly, Meckler’s early work with Freehold Theatre, an outgrowth of Warehouse La Mama in the early 1970s, is

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6 Certainly the rehearsal processes for all theatre companies require an amount of risk and vulnerability from the actors. This is, in fact, the very task of acting. Yet, the process specific to Shared Experience requires a extraordinary emotional investment: actors must
discussed by Ansorge as an example of the early psycho-physical alternative explorations
and adaptations of classic drama such as Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Still, since Alfreds did
not found Shared Experience until 1975, these studies provide a useful frame of reference
in which to consider the birth and growth of the company, but are unable to discuss
Alfreds’ methods within the context of these fruitful years. Sadly, there are few recent
comprehensive studies of Fringe theatre.

Several related investigations provide case studies of individual alternative theatre
companies. Considering the number of groups that appeared between the 1970s and the
1990s, there appear to be significant and regrettable omissions in the field. Some of the
individual histories and biographies that we do have include investigations of politically-
oriented groups such as Maria DiCenzo’s account of 7:84 (Scotland) in *The Politics of
Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: the case of 7:84 (Scotland)*, Tony Coult’s
groups including Rob Ritchie’s *The Joint Stock Book* and Tim Etchells’ *Certain
Fragments*. Other individual studies include Simon Reade’s *Cheek by Jowl*, Geraldine
Cousins’ investigation of feminist theatre companies in *Recording Women*, Gillian
Hanna’s *Monstrous Regiment*, and Michael Coveney’s *The Citz*. In *The Citz*, Coveney
makes direct reference to Gile’s Havergal’s appearance as guest director for Shared
Experience at a time when Mike Alfreds was himself guest director for the Royal
National Theatre. This chapter in *The Citz* also suggests the popularity and impact of
novel adaptation for the stage during the 1980s, the importance of the storytelling

articulate and openly share their own childhood memories and personal tensions, as well
as hidden dreams and desires.
techniques of Shared Experience, and the extraordinary influence Havergal’s time spent as a guest with this company had on his subsequent work for the Citizens’ Theatre in Glasgow. Though these works often extend our basic knowledge of many fringe theatre companies, not all of them provide comprehensive or lengthy discussions of the artistic process of creating the work. Neither do they all account for the administrative, social, or economic factors affecting the ability of these companies to present and tour their productions. Furthermore, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of companies that created and presented work during the 1970s and 1980s have vanished with no more than a line or two in *Time Out* or the *London Theatre Record* to record a trace of their existence.

A useful context for Shared Experience can also be constructed through the number of theatre histories focusing on the work of national and mainstream theatre companies. Although these studies do not specifically articulate information regarding alternative theatres, they do offer an opportunity to compare the administration, choice of season, financial organization, relationship to the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), and creative processes to those of the non-mainstream companies. Some of these analyses and explorations include Philip Roberts’ work, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, Simon Callow’s *The Royal National Theatre*, Sally Beaumann’s *A Decade of the Royal Shakespeare Company*, and Peter Hall’s *Diaries*, which also provides an insight the artistic leadership of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Even studies and biographies such as these are intertwined with the history of Shared Experience, since fringe theatre techniques have had a considerable influence on the artistic styles of mainstream work.
For example, the stage adaptation of Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* was a landmark production for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Yet, this production, and the style in which it was presented, might not have been possible or probable had it not been for an earlier breakthrough production of Dickens’ *Bleak House* by Shared Experience Theatre. This epic four part narrative production toured Britain and was widely hailed in critical reviews as a major influence on the Royal Shakespeare Company’s later production. In this way, the alternative and mainstream theatres are inextricably linked. The history and analysis of the Royal Shakespeare Company is incomplete without a more thorough understanding of the wider context of stylistic processes and influences.

There are also a number of studies that attempt to provide theoretical foundations for alternative work. These works specifically focus on and analyze the creative processes of alternative and radical theatre groups and companies. Gill Lamden’s *Devising: A Handbook for Drama Theatre Students* suggests working methods for groups wishing to create theatre through devising rather than through traditional playwriting. Baz Kershaw’s *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, Patrick Campbell’s (ed.) *Analysing Performance*, and Lizbeth Goodman’s *Feminist Stages: Contemporary Feminist Theatre*, not only offer articles on particular alternative artists and events, but situate the artistic work within an wider cultural context.

There are various reasons why so many alternative theatre companies lack a comprehensive investigation and analysis of their artistic activities. To explain this shortage, I must first address the plethora of articles and books attending the work of mainstream and national companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), The Royal National Theatre (RNT), or even the Royal Court (RC). Companies such as these
continue to receive substantial financial subsidy to support their operations. Along with this significant level of funding comes the ability to hire more support and administrative staff. Indeed, both the RSC and the RNT retain permanent archivists and other staff who gather, organize, and store the remnants of each production. For example, the RSC and RNT both regularly videotape every production for permanent video archives of the company’s work.

In consequence, it is relatively easy for a theatre historian to discuss the work of the RSC or the RNT. The visibility and prestige of the companies guarantee an amount of familiarity with their methods throughout the artistic and academic communities. All of these companies’ archives are fully accessible to the public. Any eager student, researcher, or academic may have access to these documents and materials from performances. In addition, archivists for these theatres recognize the demand for the materials, and consequently preserve, organize, and store materials with the needs of future researchers in mind. As icons of national artistic structures, these companies naturally attract a great deal of attention and patron attendance, and appeal broadly to theatre students, practitioners, and academics who site the work of these companies during conferences, as well as in papers, articles and books related to contemporary performance in Britain. Unlike touring companies that have no permanent visible edifice, and, therefore, no tangible identity, the very fact that these national companies are building-based institutions automatically increases the attention to the work produced within their halls. Further, because of the relative ease of accessibility to the archives, a theatre researcher may write a conference paper on the RSC’s latest production of
Richard III, deliver the information to conference attendees from around the globe, and still expect to engage with hearers familiar with the production, or at least the company.

In addition, the creative work of the national, subsidized theatre sector is, more often than not, focused on the merits of the text. Scripts are published and usually available at the time of performance. These theatres tend to highlight the work of the playwright, and thus the accessibility to scripts increases the ease with which one may discuss and disseminate information related to the activities of these companies, even if only on a more literary or dramaturgical level. It is the work of such prestigious, visible, familiar and accessible theatres that is, finally, most often recorded and preserved in a continuous cycle of attention and retention.

In contrast, it is much more difficult to document the work of companies whose creative output is characterized by the use of physicality, gesture, voice, and particular movement techniques. Shared Experience cannot be studied through text alone. Like many fringe companies, this group employs a layering of physical image and text. The study of the written text is inseparable from the study of the performance text of gesture and movement. Unfortunately, for the eclectic nature of creative work that is produced outside of the mainstream, there is also no coherent vocabulary with which to accurately describe physical and visual performance, or to communicate the extent of a production’s artistic influence or impact. New categories are continually emerging. Further, the funding of these companies is often given on contingency of the work being innovative; This area of theatre work thrives on the ability of a company to extend or revise the usual

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7 Both the Royal Court and the Traverse Theatre (Scotland) include scripts with their production programs.
“boundaries” of performance. While these risk-taking innovations produce exciting and invigorating theatre productions to attend, they inevitably make it difficult to find a common performance language or vocabulary through which to discuss the creative work.

My methodology is most strongly informed by issues and approaches articulated by Maria DiCenzo in the introductory chapter to her history of the fringe theatre company 7:84 (Scotland), *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)*. I have discovered that some of my aims and interests converge with those stated by DiCenzo. First, DiCenzo suggests that interests in text-based, mainstream theatre, and “high-culture” companies dominate the fields of dramatic criticism and theatre history. She highlights the difficulty of writing the history of fringe theatre, and points out obstacles imposed by external political factors. In her own study of 7:84 (Scotland), she found that the field of dramatic criticism was disproportionately reflective of an interest in the “product” rather than the “process” of theatrical activity. Due to issues of accessibility, many studies have been limited in focus to published plays; especially those produced in mainstream houses.

There has been a dearth of articles documenting the work of contemporary physical theatre companies, the companies that are committed to innovative and risk-taking rehearsal and performance methods. This absence suggests a significant gap in the accounts of contemporary British theatre history. Just as there are conditions promoting attention to mainstream and subsidized theatre practice, there are also significant and recognizable obstacles to the study and analysis of experimental theatre methods. Perhaps this is due, somewhat, to a lack of access to company rehearsal and performance
processes on the part of the researchers. It is a prevalent and continual obstacle in the academic community, since most researchers do not have easy access to the archive materials or rehearsal rooms. In some cases, it is a geographical impasse. Theatre company archives alone, if kept and archived at all may not be available and open to the general scholarly community.

Many alternative fringe companies operate with little administrative help. From the inception of Shared Experience in 1975 until 1980, the company had only a stage manager, and no other permanent administrative staff. Even now, the company retains only seven full-time staff members. Further, the company’s tours normally include no more than an average of eight actors. Due to the small size of the company, and the comparable lack of resources, companies like Shared Experience have no archivist on staff. Research access to a company like this one is severely limited and rare. My own access was the result of a process of building a professional relationship with Shared Experience, and was linked to the specific purpose of creating a thorough history and documentation of the entire company. No public archive exists for Shared Experience, or for many other similar companies. The financial, artistic, and administrative materials are routinely retained and preserved, but not for the purpose of reference for the use either theatre studies students or scholars. Within the past ten years, the coming has begun to keep archive videos of performances. Yet, again, this is for the purpose of re-mounting a production, rather than for the convenience of interested researchers. Even the most public and accessible of archives, such as the records of the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the archives of the Royal National
Theatre, or the British Theatre Museum of Covent Garden, are subject to physical proximity of the researcher to the archives.

Regarding rehearsal methods, theatre companies vary in the degree of generosity that they bestow upon academics or even on other practitioners regarding the sharing of their methods. Additionally, it is no small matter that rehearsal rooms are sacred spaces, where the most intimate emotions, experiences, and physical actions are offered up, explored, exchanged, and ultimately revised or discarded. The personal vulnerability and risk-level of actors, directors, and other creative artists to outside criticism is undeniable. Careful working relationships must be forged and nurtured in order to gain the trust and permission to undertake such a delicate task. Further, while some ensemble groups fear that their techniques and methodology will be misunderstood and, therefore, mistranslated to outside communities, others would prefer to write their own histories and biographies, leaving the scholars out of the picture altogether. Though maintaining a closed rehearsal policy, Shared Experience nevertheless welcomes the attention of scholars and practitioners. They provide a plethora of information on their rehearsal and performance style through the many educational and process workshops that they conduct for students and educators, as well as for professional actors and directors.

Fortunately, my relationship with the management of Shared Experience allowed me access to all possible records currently in existence for the company. From 2000 until 2003, I explored and gathered many of the following materials: board meeting minutes from 1976-2001; various development and business plan materials; marketing materials and programs; education packs; newspaper reviews for all twenty-five years of the productions; miscellaneous press articles on fringe theatre, Shared Experience, Mike
Alfreds, Nancy Meckler, Polly Teale, or designers; photographs from all productions; miscellaneous correspondence from funding bodies, venues, theatre artists, and audience members; financial and grant information; videos from various later productions; and a variety of scripts produced or created by the company. Further, this was an important time for me to conduct personal interviews with key members of Shared Experience, past and present. Interviews were conducted with the following artistic and administrative staff members: Mike Alfreds; Nancy Meckler; Polly Teale; Giles Havergal, guest director from the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre; Helen Edmundson, adaptor; Kate Saxon, education director; Jane Claire, administrator; and Liz Ranken; movement director. I have received responses to written interview questionnaires from actors Harriet Ashcroft, Penny Layden, Helen Schlesinger, and Simon Walter. Also, although Teale and Meckler run a closed rehearsal room, I was invited to participate in a “process” workshop, from which I have invaluable notes on the key values and rehearsal techniques used by Meckler and Teale. This experience is supplemented by several archive videos documenting international theatre workshops led by Nancy Meckler and guest director Mladen Materic.

Second, as DiCenzo suggests, there is no denying that the “relationship between historian and subject matter” is problematic. As the historian for this particular company, I carry with me certain assumptions, perspectives, and personal biases. In addition, I have a previous relationship with many of the novels that Shared Experience has adapted for the stage; this relationship is likely to influence my perspective of their

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creative approach to staging aspects of the texts. Further, particular biases and ideological interests are contained not only within the historian, but are also within the primary and secondary documents the historian investigates as well. Regarding the primary archival documents held by theatre companies, Richard Paul Knowles offers the following observations on the “contradictory discourses” of companies that must market themselves for a variety of “audiences”, including funding bodies, members of the press, audiences, actors, potential co-producers, and venue managers:

[...] the primary documents upon which the historian draws—that archival record of policies, minutes, grant applications, newsletters, correspondence, and press releases that together with its productions form the discourses of the company—are already shaped by the interests, investments, and narrative strategies of their particular authors writing for particular audiences for particular purposes.

Shared Experience construct themselves in a variety of ways for the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Westminster City Council, visitors to the company website, workshop participants, actors, board members, audiences, and a range of potential audiences. Part of my work is to highlight the constructed nature of the company’s image, to point out external and internal influences shaping this image, and to investigate or reconcile those areas in which the identity of the company is seemingly contradictory or incomplete. I consider the company as a kind of collective, a community of artistic and administrative practitioners. In this way, I investigate the identity of the company as evidenced in the responses of the artists themselves, in meetings, in workshops, in rehearsals, and in performances. Therefore, in addition to artistic factors, I also consider

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9 DiCenzo, 8.
the social and economic factors shaping the survival of the company and affecting the relationships between performers and audiences.

The chapters of the dissertation reflect a concentration on twenty-seven years of the work of Shared Experience theatre. The main areas of investigation include in-depth examinations of the three artistic directors—Mike Alfreds, Nancy Meckler, and Polly Teale—the administration and management of the company, financial strategies, relationship to the Arts Council, marketing and development, and artistic processes. Regarding artistic processes, I am including the initial rationale for the creation of the company, the choice of productions and presentational styles, and rehearsal methods and techniques.

Chapter Two provides an overview of fringe theatre in London and a context in which to consider the particular methods of Shared Experience. For instance, it is necessary to define ‘fringe’ theatre. ‘Fringe theatre’ refers to the theatrical activities happening outside of the mainstream commercial and subsidized theatres in London. This theatrical movement is characterized by a search for new approaches to the creation of work, new audiences and new places to perform. Companies experiment with new actor training processes aimed at breaking down the rehearsal hierarchies and developing collaborative techniques. New work is created through devising, rather than through traditional playwriting techniques. Companies break the fourth wall and pursue new relationships with their audiences. Many fringe theatres, especially since the 1960s, perform in spaces such as churches, warehouses, clubs, schools, streets, and other found spaces. Without the funding of the subsidized companies, many early fringe theatres experimented with a deliberate poverty of means, and produced theatre on a shoestring
budget. These artists often balanced creative work with full-time ‘money’ jobs in other markets to support their artistic endeavors. Changes in funding of fringe theatre have now altered the budgets and approaches to creating experimental work.

I also explain the importance of events occurring during the year 1968, and their subsequent impact on the growth and development of fringe theatre in the years following. The year 1968 is a significant year in the development of fringe theatre. This year of international political and cultural upheaval paved the way for the explosion of new artistic forms and practices that took place outside of the mainstream theatre. However, 1968 was the birth year for such remarkable political events as the ‘May Revolts’ of students and workers in France, the ‘Prague Spring’ and Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, escalating protests against war in Vietnam, race riots in the United States, and the first British National Women’s Liberation Conference. Yet, perhaps the most significant political acts affecting British theatre, were the 1968 Theatres Act and the Arts Council’s creation of a New Activities Committee. The Theatres Act finally abolished the function of the Lord Chamberlain as censor of theatre, while the New Activities Committee of the Arts Council investigated and instituted financial support for the new fringe theatre activities.

The turbulence, revolt and protests of these political events provided the fuel for the fire of a revolution in artistic events as well. In the arts, the first nude ‘happenings’ occurred at the Edinburgh Fringe, an international festival that provided a model for a new organization of theatre performance space. Visits from companies like Café La Mama and the Open Theatre brought new ideas for creative physical exploration and actor training. Finally, the abolition of censorship in 1968 cleared the way for the
development of the theatrical movement known as the Fringe. Further, I suggest possible ways in which to categorize the variety of companies producing alternative work. I discuss specific companies and ways in which these companies have helped to shape both alternative and mainstream London theatre.

The Third chapter introduces the examination and documentation of Shared Experience through a specific look at the work of the first artistic director for the company, Mike Alfreds, who led the company from 1975 until 1987. This investigation begins with a discussion of Mike Alfreds' attempts to explore the very nature of theatre for himself and his newly created theatre company, Shared Experience. Alfreds set out to oppose the (then) received idea of the director’s authority over the actors’ creative performance:

In the theatre…the only thing which it has to offer over the other media is that it has two live groups of people coming together at the same time, in which the acting group are transforming themselves into other people….If it’s about actors and audiences then you don’t need anything else; you don’t need scenery, costumes, proper lighting—you don’t even need a play.\(^{10}\)

What followed was an exploration of ‘the act of transformation’—the ability of an actor to transform himself or herself into someone else in the presence of an audience. For Alfreds, this required a concentration on the actor rather than scenic or technical effects. Hence, the early productions used no make-up, special costumes, lighting effects or scenery. The actors were responsible for providing their own sound effects. During performances lights were left on the audience and actors alike, and actors would be in the space as the audience came in to find their seats. Alfreds wanted to create a situation in

which the audience was constantly aware of being in a theatre, of watching actors, and of
the open relation between players and audience. He also aimed to emphasize the
presence of the audience and the importance of its pressure to the actors. Alfreds suggests
that, “By sheer strength of belief alone the actor can transform not only himself but the
space around him…It creates what isn’t there at all through the creative will of the actor
and the imaginative complicity of the audience.”11

Chapter Three also looks at some of the landmark productions of the early years
of Alfreds’ leadership: Arabian Nights and Bleak House. I look at the texts and the
artistic processes involved in creating these shows. I also consider the critical reactions
from the press, and the subsequent impact on future work with stage adaptation of fiction.

Narrative and the possibilities of storytelling have always characterized the content of the
work. The first show was an adaptation of stories from The Arabian Nights. They
produced this work in four separate and contrasting shows and experimented with
different ways of telling stories. The actors served multiple functions: host, narrator,
commentator on his or her character, as well as being the character itself. They
developed a highly physical style that involved actors not only miming objects but also
turning themselves into furniture and scenery. The Shared Experience shows could be
played anywhere, on any stage, in any space, and with any sort of audience up to about
400 people. There were no set moves, no fixed performances so that they could explore
the many ways that a particular show could go. The shows were a process, not a product.

According to Alfreds:

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I was interested in how the actor could create everything with nothing, how he could say…now I’m in a palace, now I’m in a desert and in one word make a cinematic cut. He could, with that word, wipe the stage of the image he’d created and make another one.\textsuperscript{12}

Chapter Four focuses specifically on the challenges of administrating Shared Experience from 1975-1987. In this chapter, I discuss the choice of work pursued by the Mike Alfreds and the company at various points in the company’s development. For example, I briefly remark on the first phase of narrative work that includes \textit{Arabian Nights}, \textit{Bleak House}, as well as \textit{A Handful of Dust} and \textit{Gothic Horrors}, a show based on gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This work was followed by a period of work in which the previously developed storytelling techniques and pared-down presentational style were applied to the creation of pieces completely devised by members of the acting company. The most uncharacteristic work from this period is \textit{Science Fictions}. Though Shared Experience had already made a considerable reputation for their work in narrative adaptation, they began to apply their techniques to already existing plays. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the company experimented with Shakespeare, Chekhov, and European classics such as \textit{The Maids}, \textit{La Ronde}, and several plays by Marivaux.

By the mid-1980s, Alfreds had been asked to guest direct for the Royal National Theatre, for which he produced a successful \textit{Cherry Orchard}. In Alfreds’ absence, Giles Havergal from the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre took over as interim director and continued the narrative adaptation work. Also during this time, the company was searching for a

\textsuperscript{12} Edwards 16.
more permanent base, and began raising funds to lease the Soho Laundry in London. This building was opened in 1987 with a new artistic director.

This chapter also discusses several subtopics focused on various aspects of the theatre’s administration, including relationship with the Arts Council, marketing, and audience development. The administrative process underwent huge changes during the Alfreds’ years, reflecting growing appreciation from the English press and the national funding bodies. However, the growing success of the company created subsequent problems for audience development. As a touring company, Shared Experience initially relied on a circuit of small-scale receiving venues throughout Britain. During these first few years of the company’s existence, audiences exhibited a voracious appetite for alternative theatre productions. However, after the initial cut-backs of the Thatcher administration, establishing an audience began to present more of a challenge. Shared Experience had very little control over the marketing for the small-scale venues in which the company would frequently perform. Subsequent actor and management frustration with the ill-run venues led to a realization that the company would have to develop the means to perform in higher quality mid-scale touring venues, and establish the financial base to support higher quality tours. This would also lead to changes in presentation style. Gone were the days in which the company would rely on the strength of actors alone to perform in any space, anywhere.

There have only been two major artistic directorships for Shared Experience throughout the life of the company. After Mike Alfreds left to pursue free-lance directing work, Nancy Meckler was chosen to become the second artistic director and visionary leader for the second phase of the company’s life. Chapter Five details the artistic
background and training that Meckler brought with her to her leadership position with Shared Experience. Like Alfreds, Meckler had a significant amount of American theatre training. Subsequent to her degree at Antioch College in Ohio, Meckler went to New York City, and became involved with the alternative theatre scene there, especially at La Mama Plexus, an offshoot of Ellen Stewart’s Café LaMama. Through LaMama Plexus, Meckler was exposed to the training methods of Jerzy Grotowski, and his interest in the ‘psycho-physical’ use of the body and intuition in the actor’s work, rather than a purely mental response to a literary text. Because of experiences such as these, Meckler became interested in a theatrical expression that was beyond ordinary every day experience.

After a stint of actor training at the London Academy of Dramatic Art (LAMDA), Meckler settled permanently in Britain, gaining directing experience on the London Fringe in the early 1970’s with Warehouse LaMama, and then with her own Freehold Theatre company. Her directing style for these companies was marked by a physical and image-based approach to the staging of classic texts. After Freehold, she expanded her talents directing new scripts for companies such as the Hampstead Theatre and Leicester Haymarket. Yet, she was frustrated by the responses from members of the critical press that were focused almost entirely on the scripts rather than the manner in which they were staged. This frustration led her to Shared Experience, where she was to establish an enviable international reputation for her physical and non-naturalistic methods of exploring dramatic texts.

Chapter Six outlines the progress of the company from 1987 onwards, under the artistic directorship of Nancy Meckler. The mid-1980s saw key shifts in both the company’s fortunes and direction. Meckler brought a unique vision to the company, but
carried with her the same conviction for exploring and developing the shared bonds between performers and audiences. Second, during this period, the company also underwent major changes in housing. The years 1985-1987 were preoccupied with raising funds to acquire the Soho Laundry in the Westminster district of London. With this move, the company finally found a permanent office space with two rehearsal rooms, and a more settled identity within a particular community of the city. This chapter considers the subsequent impact of the move on the artistic output of the company. One of the most considerable transformations involved the company’s relationship with governmental funding bodies. In Britain, arts councils strongly favor building-based artistic ventures. Even though Shared Experience continued to tour, and did not maintain the Soho Laundry as a performance space, the permanent administrative and rehearsal base was enough to create a productive relationship with the surrounding community. Soon after the move, Shared Experience also secured funding from the Westminster City Council for their efforts to improve the community in which they were based.

Meckler’s leadership began with early productions of Sam Shephard and Eugene O’Neill. Yet, Meckler found success, as Alfreds had, with adaptations of fiction for the stage. Though she offered new approaches to storytelling, Shared Experience again found acclaim for such epic productions as *War and Peace, Anna Karenina*, and *Mill on the Floss*. Many of these productions have focused on women’s lives and experiences. As such, chapters six and seven specifically look at the contributions and inroads that women directors, writers, choreographers, designers, and administrators, and visionaries have made to both Shared Experience theatre, and to the overall shape of theatre in Britain today, creating space for female experience and understanding of the world. A
consideration of these years of leadership would be incomplete without a consideration of the global impact of Shared Experience Theatre, made possible through several international tours to countries such as India, China, Japan, Brazil, and the USA. The company’s extensive touring schedule has received special response from audiences outside of Britain. For instance, regarding audience response to the tour of *Mill of the Floss* in India, the company explains:

The impact is not lost on the predominantly female audiences. Witches and Feminism are big issues in India. The stoning of women believed to be witches still goes on in remote parts of the country….There the images of a woman treated as a demon, witch and outcast because she dared to educate herself strikes an unexpectedly powerful chord.13

Chapter Seven explores the addition of Polly Teale as co-artistic director in 2000, through which union the artistic team fully developed a distinctive “expressionist” style of storytelling. In the autumn of 2000, Polly Teale, previously the company’s artistic associate, was appointed co-artistic director. Because there have been only two main artistic regimes for this company, the dissertation will explore the ethos for each artistic director’s period of leadership. The years for 1975-1987 under Mike Alfreds’ direction had been focused on the process and possibilities of storytelling. In those years, Alfreds began the exploration of the ‘shared experience’ between the actors and the audiences in the communication of a story. Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale continued this aspect of the work, but brought a different approach to the communication of a story. Together, Meckler and Teale brought with them a specific approach to the text and to the process of the actors. These two directors continue to emphasize what they call an “expressionist”

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approach to theatre—an exploration of what the story “feels like” rather than what it
looks like in reality. They are interested in:

  …creating theatre that expresses the inner life of a piece and the
character, rather than just telling the story of what happens on the surface
of life. It gets you into a whole area of the imagination and experience
which goes beyond what you can do if you are working naturalistically. It
is like being allowed to dream out loud.14

These directors believe that an expressionistic approach helps the audience to share in the
characters’ hidden desires, to share an understanding that we are not alone. Central to
Shared Experience’s approach is the desire to see into characters’ private worlds.
According to Polly Teale, “There will be moments on stage when we literally enact
whatever a character is secretly feeling or imagining.”15

An eighth chapter is devoted to an in-depth look at the creative ‘process’ of the
company. Using physical and non-naturalistic methods, the company explores a layering
of written text and performance text of physical gesture. The company explores this
sensory approach to drama by examining characters’ hidden, inner worlds through image
and movement. This chapter investigates the rehearsal exercises Nancy Meckler and
Polly Teale use to introduce actors to the means of expressing the heart of a theatrical
story for an audience. This process begins by unlocking the physical, intuitive, and non-
intellectual impulses of the actors’ bodies. Sensory activities designed to develop a
shared vocabulary of human movement include the following: awakening body impulses,
exploring emotional essences, partner answering and communication, and exchanging
energy. These are the core exercises used to build cooperative ensembles capable of

14 See Shared Experience Theatre website: <www.setheatre.co.uk>
communicating through words, but also effectively through movement and image. The rehearsal approach favored by Meckler and Teale is collaborative. Actors, directors, designers, movement coaches, and others all contribute to discovering the images of a piece. Meckler and Teale have gathered around them a pool of designers and actors who operate as a loose ensemble. The director’s focus is on finding ways to “release” people together to create a language to tell a story. An extended period of discussion and research is undertaken by all involved, and the physical explorations are conducted in a spirit of inquiry and shared discovery. Examples of many of these exercises and activities are recorded in Appendix A, a comprehensive case study of *Mill on the Floss* in production. Along with the case study, other appendices include a catalogue of cast lists and production credits during the years 1975 until 2001, as well as selections from interviews with key artistic personnel.

In summary, Fringe theatre methods and productions have had enormous impact on the way theatre is produced in Britain, and specifically on mainstream theatres. Yet the bulk of the creative work by alternative theatre companies remains undocumented; therefore, the plethora of published accounts of mainstream British theatres is incomplete. This dissertation is an effort to redress this imbalance with regard to one particular fringe theatre company. Shared Experience has survived and thrived as fringe theatre company from 1975 and continues strongly today. Though it began with only five actors and a director travelling together in a van, the company is now hailed as a flagship organization for the British Council, listed together with organizations such as

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15 Shared Experience Theatre website: <www.setheatre.co.uk>
the Almeida, Donmar Warehouse, Théâtre de Complicité, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Court and the Royal National Theatre.  

It is no accident that Shared Experience has managed to survive in an uncertain arts economy for over twenty-seven years when many other alternative companies such as Joint Stock, Foco Novo, Method and Madness, or Cheek by Jowl disappeared. Shared Experience’s interest in the physical and innovative exploration of novel adaptations has played a key role in the enduring popularity of the company with audiences, critics, and arts council members alike. Today, Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale are shaping this important area of novel adaptation, and extending the possibility of expressing multiple layers of human experience. Under the direction of Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale since 1987, Shared Experience has developed an international reputation for re-creating the novel on stage: they have appeared in countries such as Japan, India, China, Brazil, Israel, Czechoslovakia, Finland, and the USA. The success of certain novel adaptations has led to several re-mounts and subsequent questions about the next artistic direction for the company to pursue. The company continues to explore adaptations of novels, most recently through adaptations of more contemporary novels, such as Angela Carter’s The Magic Toyshop and an adaptation of E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India as a commercial venture in the West End.

The purpose of this dissertation is to fully document the artistic growth and production processes of the company. Specifically, Shared Experience is intriguing for its contribution to storytelling, imagination, communication, and that special and intimate

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relationship that occurs between actors and audiences in the unique event that is the live theatrical experience. Shared Experience has re-invented the process of adapting literature for the stage, and, as a result, has reinvigorated the hunger for storytelling on the British stage.

organizations are chosen according to status, experience, and quality.
CHAPTER 2
A HISTORY OF THE LONDON FRINGE

“For many of us, the fringe was where our theatrical hearts lay. It was our laboratory, our playground; it was where we made our statement, where our voices were heard. It was experimental by definition, in production, writing and acting. You had an idea for a play or for a production and you simply put it on.”

—Simon Callow

Defining the Territory

Trying to locate a rigid or precise definition for London’s fringe theatre is a dizzying, perhaps naively impossible task. For, the term ‘fringe’, at least in relation to the range of theatrical activities taking place in the city of London, does not refer to any discrete set of performance venues. Nor does it suggest particular theatre artists, working methods, or aesthetic philosophies. Yet, at the same time, the fringe encompasses all of these concerns. The term ‘fringe’ was first introduced into British theatrical practice when Theatre editor John Ashford added the category to the Time Out theatre listings in 1969, labeling it according to work performed on the ‘fringe’ of the official Edinburgh


2 The backgrounds of Fringe theatre have been discussed, argued, and debated in numerous publications. For a more detailed exploration of the cultural, political, or philosophical implications of the Fringe, see the following: Roland Rees, Fringe First (1992); Peter Ansorge, Disrupting the Spectacle (1975); Sandy Craig (ed.), Dreams and Deconstructions (1980); Steve Gooch, All Together Now (1984); Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution (1980); and Baz Kershaw, The Politics of Performance (1992).
Festival in Scotland. It is a general term that has expanded to include the broad range of theatrical activities taking place outside of dominant theatre practices in London. In essence, the fringe represents a challenge to the traditional, cultural, aesthetic values of the mainstream London theatre. It comprises a complex intersection of theatrical aims and activities, and is characterized by a plethora of new approaches to the creation of work, as well as the search for new audiences and new places to perform.

‘Fringe’ is a geographical term, in the sense that it refers to actual performance spaces: The fringe exists beyond the proscenium arches of the major subsidized, building-based companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), the National Theatre (NT), or the commercial theatres of the West End, and occupies a range of smaller buildings and ‘found’ performance spaces. A fringe theatre space can be created in a school, a dining hall, a community center, a prison, a church, a park, a street, or a railway station, as often as it occupies a purpose-built theatre structure. Often, many theatre groups operate by touring throughout different regions of England, as well as within the city of London itself. Touring, as well as performing in the variety of spaces in which a fringe theatre production may appear, has had the effect of discovering and developing new audiences for theatre. Historically, in addition to the primarily middle-class, university-educated audiences attending the mainstream and commercial companies, the fringe introduced theatre to a variety of new audiences, including

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members from working class, ethnically diverse, alternative sexual orientation, student, disabled, rural, and urban backgrounds.  

‘Fringe’ is also a philosophical term, expressing the artistic ideals of an eclectic mix of practitioners working in opposition to the objectives of dominant theatre practice. For instance, in the early days of the fringe, a number of productions sprang up in response to a perceived triviality, shallowness, and stuffy blandness appearing on the commercial and national theatre stages. Many of these fringe artists, through their productions, argued that the ‘purpose’ of theatre could and should be for social and political change, rather than for light-hearted entertainment or re-exhibiting worn-out theatre traditions. These theatre artists employ theatre as a tool for political or social change, using the content of their shows to bring awareness to issues such as working conditions, historical inequities against oppressed groups of people, the destructiveness of war, and race, ethnicity, or other special issues. In labeling themselves as ‘fringe’, they deliberately places themselves outside of mainstream practices and, supposedly, outside

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4 This is not meant to suggest that West End companies or the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre do not attract diverse audiences. Yet, the practice of actively seeking new audiences began with many of the fringe companies and was later absorbed by mainstream theatres. For example, Buzz Goodbody, exceptional for operating under fringe theatre aims and philosophies from within a larger, subsidized institution, exerted considerable influence as the Artistic Director for the Other Place, the small, experimental wing of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Not only was Goodbody the first and at twenty-three years old the youngest female director for the RSC, but Goodbody’s work in the tiny ‘hut’ of the Other Place, literally across the road from the larger, more lavish spaces of the main house or the Swan theatre, led to the implementation of the RSC’s community education programme in the early 1970’s. This programme has been affected by a variety of political and economic factors, and has gone through a number of sea changes, yet the RSC today still operates educational outreach programmes, as well as tours and residencies in regional cities such as Newcastle and Plymouth. In a later section of this chapter, I will return to a discussion of the merging of the fringe with the mainstream.
the lure of high profits, fame, traditional staging, and the dominant ideologies of the society that they believe are propagated through established or commercial stages. The content of many political fringe shows during the 1970s functioned as explicitly Left-wing criticism of Conservative government policies and activities. Consequently, through lack of government subsidy, most of these groups have not survived from their beginnings in the 1970s until the beginning of the new millennium.

Finally, ‘fringe’ is also an aesthetic term, describing the styles, forms, and working methods of the groups and individuals operating outside of, or in reaction to, mainstream theatre activities. Fringe artists focusing on the aesthetic aspects of theatre seek to explore, refine, and redefine the very meaning and possibilities of theatre as an art form, breaking down the fourth wall, and reconnecting with their audiences. The rehearsal and performances habits of the commercial and subsidized sectors remain disproportionately text-based, with a playwright who submits a finished script in advance of rehearsals. Furthermore, these are rehearsals in which a director and/or choreographer and design team impose pre-set, often rigid, movement patterns upon the actors, who are obliged to carry out these instructions in exactly the same manner during every performance. Within these productions, the primary production focus is often placed on extensive scenery, design, or lavish spectacle, at the expense of the craft of the performers.

An aesthetically based fringe group looks to break down and reconfigure the hierarchy of power and management structure, relieving the director-figure from absolute responsibility of the artistic details of a production. Instead, a more democratic and
collaborative arrangement is formed, in which the actors, director, and designers together develop the concept and structure for a production, often using physical and vocal exercises and workshops to discover images, gestures, or sounds to support the stylistic coherence of the piece. Different fringe theatre groups, depending on the overall ethos of the company employ this use of a collective, or ensemble, to varying degrees. For instance, some entirely non-text based groups choose to develop the artistic production collaboratively from the initial concept to the collective creation of a ‘script’, through to the actual performance. Other groups prefer to use a prepared script, making changes to it during workshops or exercises to collectively interpret, develop, and physicalize the given text. Within these types of rehearsals the designers are often present on the rehearsal room, delaying their final drawings or renderings to better suit the changing needs of the flexible production.

Most all aesthetically based fringe companies place primary emphasis and importance on the live presence of the actors within the performance space, and the unique, triangular relationship creates in each moment between actors and spectators sharing an experience within the performance space. Furthermore, fringe companies, whether politically or aesthetically focused, consciously reject the dominance of realistic or naturalistic production and performance styles, including elaborate and realistic scenery, and proscenium arch configuration, which seat audience members together on one side across from the performance. This arrangement frames the production, lending a certain amount of ‘fixity’ or stability to a performance, rather than more positively

5 ‘Production score’ might also be an appropriate term instead of ‘script’, since the text could consist of movement, sound, and image, instead of words alone.
engendering a sense of flux or creative spontaneity. Non-naturalistically based groups, instead, emphasize a continually expanding language of performance, a desire for instability and unpredictability, expressed through a unification the creative processes of the mind, body, and spirit. Rehearsals for these focus on the abstract, the intuitive, and the unconscious aspects of human experience.

**Background of the Fringe**

The year of 1968 is usually cited as the most significant historical year in the development of the fringe theatre in London. This year of extraordinary international political and cultural upheaval paved the way for the explosion of new artistic forms and practices. However, the events of 1968 did not occur in a vacuum, but were preceded by other theatrical experiments and innovations of previous decades, and specifically sparked by worldwide social and political developments during the 1960s. The growth and development of the New Left and youth subcultures, workers’ theatre movements, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s (CND) opposition to nuclear arms represent just a few select examples. First, I will examine earlier theatrical developments that paved the way for the growth of the fringe, then I will consider the immediate socio-political context that sustained the massive outpouring of theatrical energy during 1968 and the years beyond.

It is John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, first performed at the Royal Court on the 8th of May, 1956, that is most often cited as the seminal production in the making of the modern revolution in British theatre. Yet, as Dympna Callaghan astutely observed,
“in terms of its dramatic aesthetic, in terms of its form, this play was completely traditional.” Even earlier artistic innovations from J.T. Grein and his Independent Theatre (1891) or the J.E. Vedrene and Harley Granville-Barker management of the Royal Court (1904-1907) were more remarkable for their plays of ‘ideas’. These were productions of literary and artistic merit, valuable for their challenge to the comparatively light fare on offer from the commercial stages, rather than for experimentation in style or form. I would argue that regarding earlier aesthetic foundation of the fringe, one of the most valuable innovators of theatrical style and form was Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop at Theatre Royal, Stratford East during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Littlewood’s work with the Theatre Workshop was a direct challenge to the elitist aesthetic traditions on stage in the West End and elsewhere, and was, arguably, the first modern theatre director “to stop pretending that the audience did not exist.” Littlewood’s methods abolished the use of the proscenium arch and naturalism; and in so doing, she helped to alter the very nature of theatrical space and its possible relation to a wide range of audiences, especially working-class audiences. From working-class origins herself, Littlewood won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), then moved to Manchester where she and husband Ewan MacColl founded the Theatre Union, known for unconventional plays produced in unconventional spaces. Beginning in 1946, Littlewood and MacColl began Theatre Workshop, taking over the

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lease at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East in London in 1953. Though the content of Littlewood’s work was explicitly aimed at social reform, her working methods were thoroughly experimental, challenging the dominant aesthetic practices of mainstream theatre. With the Theatre Workshop, she was responsible for the success of productions such as *The Quare Fellow* (1956), *A Taste of Honey* (1958), *Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’be* (1959), and, after a few years absence from the company, *Oh What a Lovely War!* (1963). With all of these productions, Littlewood incorporated improvisation, games, experiments with rhythm, space, montage, and style—always preparing shows through extensive research to create living and exciting theatrical events.

Though she was unquestionably the leader of the Theatre Workshop, her methods supported the ethos of an ensemble collaborating together. Littlewood made the following admission of her personal artistic philosophy:

> I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor, or even the writer. It is through collaboration that this knockabout art of theatre survives and kicks…No one mind or imagination can foresee what a play will become until all the physical and intellectual stimuli which are crystallized in the poetry of the author, have been understood by a company, and then tried out in terms of mime, discussion and the precise music of grammar; words and movement allied and integrated.  

Within the interconnected structure of an ensemble, Littlewood offered theatre arts new forms of production. With extensive use of modern lighting rather than the limited possibilities of the traditional two-dimensional painted flats, as well as song, dance, music hall arts, montage, and social *gests* to create a flexible art with a focus on the

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performer’s presence and his or her physical means of expression. Although Joan Littlewood cannot single-handedly represent innovative non-mainstream theatre techniques prior to 1968, her work does present strong evidence to suggest the idea that the fringe did not suddenly appear out of nowhere in 1968, but was preceded by seeds of such experimentation in space, style, and form.

However, the socio-political events of the 1960s, and 1968 in particular, paved the way for the growth and expansion of the fringe. Peter Brook’s US (1966), a collectively devised piece, is another piece of evidence to suggest the interconnectedness of international theatre experiments with world cultural and political events during this time. As part of Brook’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ season at the Royal Shakespeare Company, a program of work primarily influenced by theories of Antonin Artuad and Jan Kott, Brook “requested that he be granted a dozen actors to prepare an experimental programme that explored improvisation, physicality, mime, and vocal techniques.”

The subsequent production was a sharp and critical response to the United States’ role in the escalating war in Vietnam. In addition, during 1967, abortion was legalized and the Sexual Offences Act had decriminalized homosexuality for consenting adults over the age of twenty-one. 1968, itself, was the birth year for remarkable international rumbles of discontent, unrest, and anti-establishment protests: the ‘May Revolts’ of students and workers in France, the ‘Prague Spring’ and Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, escalating protests against war in Vietnam, race riots in the United States, and the first British National Women’s Liberation Conference. Yet, perhaps the most significant

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political acts affecting the state of British theatre were the 1968 Theatre Act and the Arts Council’s creation of a New Activities Committee. The Theatres Act ended the 1843 Act and finally and officially abolished the function of the Lord Chamberlain as censor of theatre, while the New Activities Committee of the Arts Council investigated and instituted financial support for the new fringe theatre activities. The turbulence, revolt, and protests surrounding these cultural and political events provided fuel for the fire of a revolution in artistic events as well.

Influences from Home and Abroad

A variety of international, experimental theatre activities from around the globe, but especially in the United States and Europe, have helped to shape the development of the fringe in London. For example, Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble visited London twice during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, they performed shows such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the Palace Theatre. In 1965, the Berliner Ensemble again performed in London, this time at the National Theatre (The Old Vic). Joan Littlewood, during a visit to Paris in 1955 where the company was visiting at the time, was deeply influenced by Brecht’s anti-naturalistic work, and the Theatre Workshop subsequently presented the first English production of *Mother Courage* later during that same year. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, several other key theatre directors and visionaries experimented with theatrical training and performance methods in New York City during the 1960s, often touring their most successful shows abroad in England and throughout Europe. The visits back and forth between England and

10 Shellard, 136-7.
countries overseas created an exchange of ideas, and had a profound impact on London theatre groups forming and developing during these formative years. Sometimes, new collaborative teams were formed when American directors left the United States to settle and work permanently within Britain.

The social and political upheaval in the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s gave rise to experiments in a variety of art forms including music, visual art, dance, sculpture, film, and theatre. The vitality of visual art in New York City at this time spawned collaborations between artists of different forms, resulting in a wealth of performance experiences such as happenings, installations, and events. As suggested by Roland Rees, this outpouring of experiments changed many artists’ “ways of seeing.” He continues: “The Abstract Expressionist tradition, the massive use of colour, the sheer quantity of canvas, the destruction of the barriers between painting, sculpture, and performance all gave me a visual education.”¹¹ One outgrowth of these events and cultural re-visioning was the Off-Off Broadway theatre movement, in which experimental theatre activities took place outside the dominant American culture, specifically the commercial forces of mainstream Broadway productions. Like the fringe in London, these explorations provided new working methods, visual rather than text-based performance techniques, and found new audiences who were hungry for an alternative to the light fare offered by typical Broadway programming. Many of these

¹¹ Roland Rees, 17.
alternative theatres sprang up in unconventional spaces, often in cafes and in the front rooms of businesses.12

Some of the most important and internationally influential theatre groups working in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s were the Living Theatre, led by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and the Open Theatre, run by Joseph Chaikin. For the present purpose, I will focus primarily on the work of Joseph Chaikin and the Open Theatre, a company interested in aesthetic experimentation as well as social and political reform. Chaikin deeply impacted contemporary theatre through his development of new performer training methods, his experimentation with creative processes and languages for performance, abstract and illusionist explorations, and his fostering of live encounters between audiences and performers through the ‘presence’ of the actor.13 For Chaikin, the term ‘presence’ suggests “that quality that emphasizes the liveness of the actor and the sense of shared experience between audience and performer.”14 Dorinda Hulton suggests that the idea of ‘presence’ relates to the work and transformation of the actor in response to certain imagery and other stimuli.15 Further, Chaikin’s search for new performance

12 Two of the most significant of these café theatre venues were Café Cino and La Mama Experimental Theatre Club.

13 For further explanation of this term and Chaikin’s artistic philosophy, see his book, The Presence of the Actor.

14 Arnold Aronson, American Avant-Garde Theatre. New York: Routledge, 2000. An affinity between the artistic aims and philosophies of the Open Theatre and Shared Experience Theatre is unmistakable here. Yet, the degree to which Chaikin’s work affected later explorations conducted by Shared Experience is impossible to determine.

languages led to non-literary theatrical experiments. According to his biographer, Eileen Blumenthal, Chaikin searched:

…for ways to transmit conditions that have no adequate expression in life or art; feelings too extreme or elusive to have a vocabulary, too complex or subversive to have a forum. Fascinated by problems that seem unsolvable, he has tried to extend the boundaries of what we can communicate.¹⁶

Chaikin began his career by working with the Living Theatre, but left to found and run the Open Theatre from 1963-1973. He had spent time training with Viola Spolin in Chicago, learning the importance of games and improvisation. Though, with teacher Nola Chilton in New York City, he explored the non-naturalistic and non-illusionistic demands of absurdist plays. Eschewing the psychologically-based American naturalism, Chilton and Spolin encouraged physical interactions between performers themselves. Chilton specifically guided performers to follow the physical and vocal ‘transformations’ that are “appropriate to the demands of the moment.”¹⁷ When Chaikin founded the Open Theatre, several of Chilton’s previous pupils joined him to explore more non-naturalistic and collaborative creative processes. The focus of the Open Theatre was on physical and vocal transformation of the performer—the dialogue between inside and outside, body shifting-balance, or dialogue, between body and mind, in listening to and watching for the emerging form, the emerging image, and is able, moment to moment, to come into alignment with it. In such a case, there is a perceptible quality of ‘presence’, moment to moment within the process of change and transformation, this quality of ‘presence’ having more to do with the actor in operation with imagery rather than uniquely with the actor’s ‘self’.


¹⁷ Aronson, 88.
and mind—rather than the character study and psychological consistency so prevalent in the work of the Group Theatre and elsewhere in American theatre.

The activities of the Open Theatre were primarily intended to be workshop projects, rather than public performances, though they did inevitably produce productions, several of which toured through Europe. The main projects produced by the Open Theatre were *The Serpent* (1969), *Terminal* (1969), *Mutation Show* (1971), and *Nightwalk* (1973). *The Serpent* may have had the most immediate international impact, as it toured the United States and Europe in 1969. This production explored mythological, non-illusionistic, and non-literary aspects of the Book of Genesis. It was devised over the period of a year, and incorporated ensemble-created physical imagery, sound, and gesture. It toured through Europe in July of 1968, before an official premiere in the USA at Harvard University in January 1969.

Joseph Chaikin’s work with the Open Theatre also contains cross-currents with the work of another theatre visionary: Jerzy Grotowski and his Polish Theatre Laboratory. Grotowski made important visits to New York City during this crucial time period, conducting a series of workshops in both 1967 and 1969. Though not affecting Chaikin’s earlier theatrical training and experimentation, his subsequent contact and discussion with Grotowski himself during some of these foreign visits inextricably entwined the paths of these two artistic giants within the larger arena of aesthetic exploration in the late 1960s. Grotowski, like Chaikin, was equally in search of physical and vocal exercises in aid of unlocking the internal creative processes of performers for more abstract and intuitive approaches to the creation of theatre. Grotowski’s ‘poor
theatre’ has had an immeasurable impact on subsequent artists interested in non-verbal acting processes, inner truth, and physicality on stage.

Countless subsequent experimental theatre companies and projects have been influenced and shaped by values, innovations, and training methods of these two directors, along with other influential artists and groups such as the La MaMa, Bread and Puppet Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and others. Both Mike Alfreds and Nancy Meckler, two of the artistic directors who have led Shared Experience Theatre the longest, developed their early careers in the United States, with significant exposure to the east coast and the alternative theatre scene in New York City. The aesthetic ideals and aims prevalent in NYC have undoubtedly influenced Meckler and Alfreds’ work in the London fringe during the early 1970s and beyond during these early years.

**Making Connections at Home**

Countless artistic paths have been crossed, intermingled, and re-arranged between Europe, the United States, and Britain since the 1950s, the early years of the fringe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and continue to intersect today. Along with many influential British fringe theatre practitioners, important international theatre voices have also found expression and continuation/nurture within the city of London itself. A significant number of American expatriates influenced the development of fringe venues and groups. For example, American Jim Haynes first helped found the Traverse Theatre in Scotland (1963), a venue dedicated to the production of new works. He then opened the Drury Lane Arts Lab (1968), “a warehouse at the top of Drury Lance for exhibitions, eating,
drinking, theatre, music, and cinema."\(^{18}\) Appearing at this venue was a number of artists who had rejected conventional theatre structures and institutions: Portable Theatre, Freehold, Pip Simmons, and the People Show. Thelma Holt and Charles Marowitz, another American expatriate, began the Open Space (1968) as an outlet for new writing from both Britain and America. Ed Berman, also an American, started the lunchtime theatre phenomenon, Inter-Action. Nancy Meckler was associated with Warehouse La Mama, until Meckler left to begin Freehold in 1970. Freehold, through Meckler’s background with the New York City based La Mama Plexus company, incorporated many exercises from Polish director Jerzy Growtowski: “[Freehold] was not language based, but deployed physical and non-naturalistic methods of existing texts. An important company.”\(^{19}\)

Within and without the city of London, both British and foreign performances contributed to the growth and expansion of fringe venues, groups, and ideals. Within the greater London area, a number of venues were created and run for the purpose of promoting new work by British and international playwrights, innovative performance styles, new collaborations between artists, and experiments with performance genres. One of the most important spaces was the Oval House (1968/69) in Kennington, run by Peter Oliver and showcasing new theatre groups, workshops, and educational programs. It was used as a performance base for groups such as Ken Campbell, Steven Berkoff’s London Theatre Group, Pip Simmons, Freehold, La Mama Repertory, and for a number


\(^{19}\) Roland Rees, 19.
of visiting companies and touring groups. The Bush Theatre (1972), located at first above a pub in Shepherd’s Bush gained an important reputation for presenting new work by visiting companies such as 7:84, Hull Truck, and Foco Novo. It currently continues to be a vital outlet for new writing. In particular, the Bush houses transfer productions from other venues such as new Scottish plays from the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Other important performance venues, from early fringe days in London include the Soho Poly, the Half Moon in Aldgate, the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), the King’s Head Pub in Islington, the Warehouse in Covent Garden, the Open Space, and the Roundhouse. Several fringe spaces are currently operated as studios attached to larger, mainstream venues. These include the Cottesloe at the National Theatre, The Other Place at the RSC, and the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court.\textsuperscript{20} The aim of the Theatre Upstairs is to “present new work faster and cheaper, and provide a bridge between traditional and experimental theatre.”\textsuperscript{21} It is not recognized as much for supporting innovations in acting, as it is for innovations in writing. Indeed, this space is writer-centered and has

\textsuperscript{20} The Other Place, a tiny warehouse space, was first called The Place in 1970. It was renamed The Other Place (TOP) in 1974. It was in this space that the RSC has conducted many successful experiments, pioneered by Buzz Goodbody in the early 1970s, which have their origins in the smaller companies operating within the fringe. For example, in Trevor Nunn’s famous production of \textit{Macbeth} (1976) starring Ian McKellan and Judi Dench, the action of the play was choreographed within a black circle on the floor of this intimate space. Actors, during scenes in which their characters did not appear, sat around the circle and observed the action. The props and set for this production were strictly limited, focusing the audience’s attention on the intensity of the actors’ interactions, and the simple theatricality of the event. All of these devices were in constant use by many fringe theatre companies who did not have the budgets to support larger, more elaborate productions; yet, mainstream theatres in search of fresh approaches were slowly absorbing these techniques.
launched the careers of playwrights such as Howard Brenton, Howard Barker, and David Edgar.

In addition, several theatre festivals have been instrumental in increasing the international exchange of ideas and practices within fringe theatre in London, and subsequently being absorbed by mainstream theatres as well. For a variety of reasons, including the obvious language barrier, many of the works brought in from European and Asian theatre groups are inspired by movement-based rather than language-based theatrical experimentation. The earliest of the international theatre festivals is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which began in 1947, and continues to flourish today stronger than ever. This fringe festival is a remarkable resource for witnessing theatre, and for communicating and sharing a range of international theatre practices, working methods, performance styles, and artistic philosophies and ideologies. During August of every year, the Edinburgh Fringe takes place in a wide variety of purpose-built as well as created theatre spaces around the city of Edinburgh, and brings in work from around the world. The most successful work continues for an additional run down south in London venues.

East European influence has impacted this festival largely through the work of one individual producer, Richard Demarco. This man has been instrumental in bringing over East European visual and performing artists since the earliest days of the Edinburgh Fringe in the late 1940s. He continues to be the largest propagator of East European theatre in Britain. It was Demarco’s support of the director Mladen Materic that led to

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the dynamic partnership between the Yugoslavian-born director and the London-based
Shared Experience Theatre in the early 1990s. Materic’s background with the East
European proclivity for ‘Action Design’ has had enormous impact on Shared
Experience’s approach to theatre, and through workshops with London theatre artists this
influence has filtered through to many surrounding London theatre groups as well.22

Other international arts festivals focus specifically on inviting the best of world
theatre for residences within London venues. London International Festival of Theatre
(LIFT) was started in 1981 by directors Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal, and recently
celebrated their twentieth anniversary in 2001. LIFT is a biennial summer festival that
brings international artists to London, but has also created lasting connections between
London and the rest of the world. LIFT events, often more than twenty in a two week
period, are presented in dozens of venues across the city in streets, parks, open spaces,
disused buildings, as well as more conventional buildings in areas such as Hammersmith,
Battersea, King’s Cross, Islington, and Sloane Square.23 The Festival has been
instrumental in introducing innovative British and international work through
performances, education programs, and a gathering place where audiences, participants
and artists alike can talk, eat, and share their experience of theatre together.

22 Thorough discussions of Shared Experience Theatre’s connections with Mladen
Materic, including an explanation of ‘Action Design’ appear in a later chapter.

23 Recently, this festival has switched format to a rolling program of work presented
throughout the year, rather than for a concentrated period of time in the summer season.
The central dramatic questions suggested by Fenton and Neal are ‘What is theatre?’ and ‘What can it be?’ Some of the most noteworthy and interesting productions presented in response to these questions include Deborah Warner’s St. Pancras Project, produced at St. Pancras Hotel. The audience, or rather participants in this case, followed a painted line on the floor through the hotel, leading to an empty room where a pianola was playing itself. Additionally, Critically Black was a series of performances and discussions that explored issues of black identity in British theatre and culture. Furthermore, LIFT also presents a decidedly international response to the above questions regarding the purpose and possibilities of theatre, one which the directors hope to use to ease cultural misunderstandings, clashes and prejudice. According to Fenton and Neal, “What is needed is a safe place where those conflicts can be explored and recognized.” Lucy Neal continues:

It always comes back to hospitality. It’s something which is inherent in many cultures—eating together, talking together. Within a value system of generosity you create a specific something beyond yourself. You’re inviting somebody—a guest or a stranger—to sit at the table. We invite people; enter this imaginary world, and partake. LIFT isn’t something that happens to you. It’s something you create.

Some of the international performances presented recently through LIFT include a Kathakali dance drama called Khol Do (1999) from India, Journey to the East (1999) which deals with issues of the Chinese Diaspora, and The Theft of Sita (2001). This last example was an Australian-Indonesian production involving the “traditional arts of

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24 More information on this LIFT can be found at the organizations web site: <http://www.liftfest.org>.

Indonesian Wayang Kulit shadow puppetry and Gamelan music, jazz improvisation, digital screens, video projections, and film footage.”

Another significant arts festival affecting the life of both fringe and mainstream theatres in London is the Barbican International Theatre Event (BITE). Louise Jeffreys, Head of Theatre, manages the festival, presented within London’s Barbican Centre. From its first year, the festival has attracted a reputable following; 60,000 people attended the inaugural season. Beginning in 1999, this annual festival is a more recent event than LIFT, and it, too, hosts new as well as famous theatre, dance, and music performances from Britain and around the world. During 2002, BITE has hosted performances such as Tanztheater Wuppertal’s Kontakthof; Formalny Theatre of St. Petersburg’s School for Fools; Theaterhaus Stuttgart’s The Maids, with “African ritual, Brazilian carnival, and mid-Eastern exoticism”; Storm, a British circus show; and U Theatre’s The Sound of the Ocean, incorporating rhythm, movement, and Taiwanese arts. For this production, there was “no narration, only the binding theme of water and the continual sounding of twenty-eight primordial drums.”

Creating Categories

Since the late 1960s, in response to political, economic and social upheavals, the definition of theatre has expanded to include new functions and structures. As a result, many fringe theatre companies are frustratingly difficult to categorize. Regardless of


27 For more information on BITE, see the following web site: <http://www.barbican.org.uk/theatre/index.asp>.
which overall term is used to describe theatrical practices occurring outside of the mainstream subsidized theatre, these terms are too broad to accurately describe the wide range of creative work produced by the alternative theatre movement. These structures allow for new and innovative ways of rehearsing and performing, such as devised, movement-based, or collaborative methods. Scholars are debating the significance of these ways of producing creative work and are charting the changes in the art form.

There are a few categories that I believe allow a closer look at the aims and values of individual theatre companies.

The first category I would like to discuss involves issue-based theatre companies. These are companies whose work is characterized by specific content rather than by a particular production process. In the late 1960s and 1970s, this category mainly included the work of Leftist political companies, such as 7:84 (Scotland), Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (CAST), and Red Ladder. Much of this type of work flourished while the Labour-oriented Greater London Council (GLC) impacted funding decisions. Under the Thatcher administration, many Left-wing political theatre companies suffered or closed their doors when the demise of the GLC removed sympathetic financial support. Later, this category expanded to include the concerns of gay and lesbian, feminist and women’s, theatre of disabilities, theatre of color, multicultural theatre, and youth companies. Examples of these companies include Gay Sweatshop, Women’s Theatre Group/Sphinx, Scarlet Theatre, Paradise Theatre, Tara Arts, Tamasha, and Talawa.

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28 Originally, 7:84 had groups working in both England and Scotland. 7:84 closed due to budget cuts in the Thatcher years, and only 7:84 (Scotland) remained.
Jatinder Verma, Artistic Director of Tara Arts Theatre notes the value of cultural and ethnic diversity in his theatre. Tara Arts draws on different artistic sensibilities and challenges the conventions of the English stage by offering multi-cultural forms of presentation.

The second category relates to ‘physical theatre’ companies. The term ‘physical’ is, in itself, problematic—most theatre is, by definition, physical. Practitioners and scholars alike disagree on the best way to define this approach to theatre. The term itself originates with Grotowski’s ‘psycho-physical’ exercises, and, according to Lloyd Newson, was first put to use in Britain by the group DV8. Pat Keysell, Co-ordinator of the Scottish Mime Forum offers a useful definition of the physical approach to creating theatre:

The physical actor responds to the world intuitively through his senses—so sense impressions precede conscious recognition of emotion. The response is spontaneous and because it preceded thought, it therefore precedes language. ‘What is sought is the gestural rendering of the essence of reality that may be beyond the tangible. In short, the essential is not intellectually deduced, but primarily experienced.

Although this is certainly not the only possible explanation of the term, it does touch upon several key areas of the creative methodology that are central to the work of most groups in this category. For instance, most groups who classify their work as ‘physical

29 Lloyd Newson, “Ten Years on the Edge,” *Bound to Please* programme, 1997. DV8 (Dance Video Eight) Physical Theatre was formed in 1986 by “a collective of dancers who had become frustrated and disillusioned with the preoccupations and directions of most dance…DV8’s work is about taking risks, aesthetically and physically, about breaking down the barriers between dance, theatre and personal politics.” For more information on the company, see the DV8 Physical Theatre web site: <http://www.dv8.co.uk>.

theatre’ emphasize the importance of the performer at the center of the creative process. It is the performer’s physicality that is the basis for expression. Physical theatre approaches look to heighten the performer’s awareness of his or her own body and its expression on stage. Further, the expression of the body is integrated with the voice, mind and imagination. Explorations are not limited to the quotidian, or every day experience of being human, but stretch further into abstract, unconscious, non-literal gestures and images. These are companies more focused on the process of production. They may experiment with improvisation and choreography, actor/audience relationships, and actor training, collaboratively creating original movement, sound, and music scores and texts. These groups generally disregard Aristotelian notions of narrative, character and dramatic action. The text is fragmented or displaced as the organizing element in favor of a visual or aural score as the signifier of meaning. The physical presence of the performer, his or her body, is highlighted as an important ‘text’ in and of itself.

We can break this category down into four further sub-categories. For instance, some physical theatres explore new approaches to existing texts, whether classic or contemporary. British theatre has been notoriously text-bound. These fringe companies acknowledge the power of the ‘word’, but explore physical and visual languages as well as a written text. This may include individually authored or devised work. Examples of companies that blend movement with text include Freehold, Shared Experience, Joint Stock, and Cheek by Jowl. Another physical sub-category describes the work of movement-based companies. These companies create work through specific movement training techniques. Theatre de Complicité, for example, is a Lecoq-trained physical theatre company. A third subcategory comprises performer-based companies. The
identity of the artist and the performer’s body itself become the key locus of meaning in this kind of work. Here the emphasis is not on any form of traditional text, but on the discovery of individual images, impulses, and obsessions. Also, the identity of the actual performer is more strongly emphasized than that of a fictive character. Sheffield-based Forced Entertainment could be considered an example of a performer-centered company.

Finally ‘New Circus’ and ‘New Dance’ are emerging new physical theatre sub-categories. Both traditional new circus companies are attracting new audiences, and circus skills are being incorporated into a wide variety of forms of performance, from dance to street theatre. One of the explanations of the emergence of this new form suggests that:

During the late 1970s and early 1980s a new style of circus performance began to emerge in countries such as France, Canada, and Australia. Determinedly experimental and ‘alternative’, it was dubbed ‘new circus’ to distinguish it from the shows produced by the traditional circus sector. Leading exponents of new-circus performance, such as Circus Oz from Australia and the French company Archaos toured internationally during the 1980s and generated considerable interest within the UK…. 31

Circus Arts Forum is a new community of circus artists hosted by Total Theatre Network and directed by Annabel Arndt. The aims of this forum are to raise the profile of circus as a cultural activity and to promote the training and sharing of skills. Some of the emerging companies include Skylight Circus Arts, Zippo’s Circus, and Zin-Lit, a multidisciplinary blend of dance, circus, theatre, and visual arts side by side. Companies like Chipolatas bring new approaches to circus skills and acrobatics.

31 <http://www.culturaltrends.org.uk>.
The term ‘New Dance’ appeared in the publication of the first issue of *New Dance* magazine in 1977, though the movement had been developing since the late 1960s and early 1970s. The creation of the magazine was the result of a collaboration of a group of London dancers, the X6 Collective: Emilyn Claid, Maedée Duprès, Fergus Early, Jacky Lansley, and Mary Prestidge. According to Stephanie Jordan, as soon as the magazine appeared, the term ‘New Dance’ was immediately applied to the work of the dancers listed above. There is no agreement as to what New Dance actually means, though Fergus Early emphatically concluded that, “The one and only essential concept to New Dance is Liberation.” Still, Early’s quizzical statement does little to clarify the matter. Judith Mackrell offers some common aims and ideas that bind this type of work: the validation and legitimization of a wide variety of dance forms; the freedom to work within and outside of mainstream dance companies; individual access to expression through dance regardless of age, shape, or color; issue-based dance reflecting current politics, economics, and societal relationships; and, finally, the desire for equal status and funding with artists working within mainstream forms. Artistically, this movement emphasizes alternative approaches to movement, choreography, and staging, the use of non-linear and symbolic plots, new incorporations of music and other art forms, and collaborations between artists of different disciplines. Some important examples of new

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34 Mackrell, 2-3, 55-65.
Dance groups include DV8, Extemporary Dance Theatre, Second Stride, and The Cholmondeleys.

A third category of fringe theatre work involves interdisciplinary companies. Here again, there are a variety of subcategories to consider. First, ‘Live Art’ is a term increasingly favored by companies whose work challenges the “recognisable limits and distinctions between media.” Live Art has become more popular since the 1980s as a way of describing an attitude towards performance or a way of looking at work. It could be considered as a “frame through which presentations generated in relation to sculpture, installation, dance, music, or ‘theatre’ present themselves as time-based ‘live’ activities implicitly sharing some vocabulary, interest or aesthetic.” Also, there are ‘New Media’ artists and companies such as Stellarc, Robert Lepage and Franco B. These artists explore new media and technological approaches to theatre. This is a constantly changing field as new technology continues to develop. Finally, the use of music is a third area of interdisciplinary approach within fringe theatre. For example, Theatre de Complicité recently co-produced a show with the Emerson String Quartet, The Noise of Time (2001), based on the life of Dimitri Shostakovich. This show was reviewed separately by theatre and music critics.

Many fringe companies resist easy categorization. The categories I have described do not have clear boundaries, but sometimes share similar concerns or approaches. The fluid and shifting nature of contemporary creative work eludes absolute definition. For example, Théâtre de Complicité produces devised works as well as adaptations of

existing literature. Shared Experience adapts well-known classic novels, but seeks an experimental, physical language that is equally as important as the written text. The company considers itself unique in the ability to offer a balance of text and movement-based approaches to the creation of new theatre pieces. Forced Entertainment is a performer-based physical theatre company that is interested in live art. Many companies experiment with physicality and new media. Yet, the categories here suggest a way to at least make sense of the recent trends and developments.

**Merging with the Mainstream**

Although much work produced during the early years of the fringe was the result of artists’ conscious and deliberate decisions to create an alternative to mainstream theatre work—to offer new ideas, styles, structures, collaborations, and venues for new audiences with an appetite for the unusual, unconventional, and the unpredictable—the lines between these areas of work are becoming increasingly blurred. It is increasingly common for fringe theatres to be asked to produce shows in connection with the mainstream subsidized theatre. In order to attract a younger, hip audience, mainstream theatres look to the fringe theatre to inject new life, new methods, and innovations into their stages. Certainly it is a reasonable attraction for the fringe theatres—everyone likes to be paid appropriately for their creative work. Still, it is an interesting development in the history of fringe theatre. Changes in theatre advertising reflect a major shift in the categories of theatre to be found in London. In the early 1960s and 1970s there was a wide gap between fringe and the two major kinds of theatre found in London, the

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36 Kaye, 1.
subsidized and the commercial. Now, there exists a middle ground between these extremes. This is evidenced in an additional category in *Time Out*: ‘Off West End’. This new category refers to the building based experimental theatres such as the Almeida and the Donmar Warehouse.

The artistic directors of the mammoth houses of the subsidized sector have made intense efforts to incorporate the vitality of fringe theatre techniques and approaches within the programming for their own venues. For instance, the RSC has looked to the fringe since the 1970s when Buzz Goodbody used the intimate space of The Other Place and community education initiatives to excite new audiences with radical approaches to classical theatre. Shortly after Goodbody’s influence took hold, at least within that particular space, Trevor Nunn began to experiment with the frugal staging techniques that were long in practice within the more impoverished and constrained fringe venues.

Earlier in the chapter I discussed Nunn’s shockingly exciting, yet extremely pared down version of *Macbeth* in The Other Place (1980), starring Judi Dench and Ian McKellan. In 1981, Nunn appropriated the Swan stage of the RSC with a form already in use in England by Mike Alfreeds and his Shared Experience company: the adaptation of a nineteenth-century epic novel for the stage. Nunn directed an adaptation of Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby*. Due to a comparatively greater production budget, the show involved a large cast and an elaborate set. Yet, this production incorporated many of the same production values and devices used by Alfreeds for his fringe production of Dickens’ *Bleak House* that had toured earlier in 1979: a simple storytelling style, extensive use of a novel’s narrative, doubling of characters, and minimal props. And, like Alfreeds’ production, *Nickleby* also emphasized the theatricality of transformation, as
actors’ movements and gestures helped to make transitions between the scenes of the sprawling nine-hour epic.

Perhaps the prestige of the Royal Shakespeare Company company lent establishment approval to these unconventional staging practices during the early 1980s, while the experimental techniques gave the RSC a needed ‘breath of life’. Although explorations of this level have been infrequent over the past twenty years at the RSC, the company is once again looking to bring in new audiences through fresh and non-traditional approaches. The latest effort in 2002 has been the decision to offer a selection of productions at London’s Roundhouse off Chalk Farm Road.

The Royal National Theatre on the South Bank in London has made important strides in the incorporation of innovative companies and methods within their schedule of programming. During the 1980s, they invited well-known fringe directors to guest-direct productions on the stages of the National. Nancy Meckler, director of both Freehold in the 1970s and Shared Experience from 1987 onwards, was the first woman to direct in the regular season on the Lyttleton stage. Mike Alfreds directed a critically acclaimed production of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* before leaving Shared Experience to pursue free-lance directing. Shared Experience, Théâtre de Complicité, Trestle Theatre, Tara Arts, and Cheek By Jowl are a few of the fringe companies who have been asked to present productions at the National.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the artistic directors of the National Theatre have been interested in bringing in innovative visiting companies. Recently, under Trevor Nunn’s artistic directorship, the company made major alterations to its operating procedures and even its physical spaces in order to undertake its 2002 “Transformation
Season.” In a project developed through the NT Studio—the National’s lab for new work and writing—the Lyttelton, the company’s most traditional space, was “transformed by a sweep of seats from circle to stage to create a new intimacy between actor and audience.” In addition, the National created a new space for this season, the ‘Loft’—a hundred seat theatre to allow a flexible space for the presentation of new work. The content of the work presented in the transformed Lyttleton included novel adaptation, masked-based visual theatre, a devised piece based on fiction, a physical piece based on a Greek classic and circus skills, and a dance/theatre collaboration. Though, interestingly, the more traditionally word-based plays were all allocated to the most flexible ‘Loft’ space. To go along with the adjusted spaces and cheaper ticket prices, the National created a supporting program of work of outdoor performance and music events.

It is apparent that fringe theatre techniques are becoming absorbed into the mainstream theatre vocabulary; so much so, that some fringe directors, such as Mike Alfreds, have recently suggested that there is no longer an alternative theatre in Britain. Alfreds claims that now everyone wants to be part of the mainstream. It is debatable, but certainly poses an interesting question. Alfreds’ recent production of *Cymbeline* (2001) at Shakespeare’s Globe theatre is a fitting example. Alfreds description of the rehearsal process for the most recent show reflects a remarkable similarity to the directing techniques he used for the 1979 fringe production:


38 Mike Alfreds, interview with the author, 19 July 2001.
I have approached all the richness and playfulness of the piece in a spirit of exploration...by treating the production as an adventure in storytelling on the Globe with only six actors and two musicians. The actors play every role and create every environment of the play without the help of scenery or costume. The stage is an empty space. The only other element is percussion. We hope the audience will collaborate in an act of shared imagination by which we suggest what’s there and the audience sees what isn’t there at all—the essential nature of theatre.39

The choice of Alfredu as a director at the Globe is fascinating at the present time when Globe administrators have moved beyond the idea of historical accuracy, and are now attempting to explore the boundaries of performance in the Globe space.

There are several ways to consider the shifting categories of contemporary theatre in Britain. Some theatre critics, administrators, and even practitioners themselves express concern over the absorption of fringe theatre artists into the mainstream sector. Some fringe groups, generally the earliest ones during the 1960s and 70s, deliberately separated themselves from all mainstream and conventional work, including commercial, traditional practices, and establishment ideology. Other groups wearied of their perceived position ‘outside’ the financial and culturally recognized benefits of the mainstream sector. Today, the merging of fringe and mainstream companies has brought increased understanding of both mainstream and alternative practices; this merger provides a two-way street of opportunity. While established companies receive the benefits of experimental, cutting edge, and innovative performance, fringe companies benefit in turn from national recognition, prestige, and greatly increased resources.

Funding the Fringe

Fringe theatre activities exist within an overall structure of national subsidy for the arts in Great Britain. The fate of subsidy for fringe theatre companies cannot be separated from the general life of drama subsidy at a national level. The role of the government in arts subsidy on the whole has a complex and ever-changing history.

National subsidy for the arts was originally allocated through the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), a post-war outgrowth of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). The ACGB, set up by Royal Charter in 1946, was the national body for arts funding in England, “distributing public money from the Government…to artists and art organizations.”40 This organization followed two main guiding aims: “to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding, and practice of the arts;” and “to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain.”41 The grants, distributed to buildings and groups, were intended to be allocated according to artistic rather than political criteria. Yet, questions surfaced regarding the artistic criteria by which the work was judged, since the grants were primarily given to support buildings rather than artists, literary rather than aesthetic values, and groups operating with the same production standards as the already established theatres. Further, concerns developed regarding many groups’ dependency on the government grants. According to Maria DiCenzo, writing specifically on political fringe theatre, “because the Arts Council was, in many cases, the main or sole source of funding, there developed a problematic

40 Please see the web site for the Arts Council of England: <http://www.arts council.org.uk/funding/>.

41 Sandy Craig, Dreams and Deconstructions, 178.
level of dependency. It could give life, but it could also take it away; non-renewal of a revenue grant could mean the end of a company’s work.”

On 1\textsuperscript{st} April 1994, the ACGB was restructured as three separate funding bodies: the Arts Council of England (ACE), the Scottish Arts Council (SAC), and the Arts Council of Wales (ACW). The ACE became the national body for funding the arts within England. Another major change occurred in 2002, when on the 1\textsuperscript{st} April, ACE and ten supporting Regional Arts Associations (RAA) joined to function as a single funding organization for the arts in England. Through this jointure, the ACE inherited one hundred funding schemes from the regional boards. The goal of this simplified organization was to allow the Council to make more funding awards for as many people as possible. By the year 2002/03, the British government had allotted the Art Council a sum of £297.3 million for subsidy awards.

The activities of fringe are intertwined with the growth and direction of the Arts Council’s fortunes. As early as 1968, a sub-committee of the ACGB, the New Activities Committee, was set up to support the new fringe movement. With this first year, £7,000 was allotted for these performances; this amount increased to £15,000 in the following year. By 1973, the funds had jumped to £162,000, though no group was receiving more than £10,000, and eighteen out of thirty-six fringe companies received less than £1000.\footnote{This figure was published in the magazine \textit{Time Out}. Frank Lipsius in the January 1973 issue of \textit{Plays and Players} suggested a conflicting amount of £75,000: 56.}

fledging groups, had been given only £165.44 During this same year, 1973/74, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the Royal National Theatre (RNT) were receiving substantial larger sums: The RSC received £420,000 while the RNT got £450,534.45

The Conservative Party’s election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister had an incalculable effect upon the direction of Arts Council policies. The Thatcher government ushered in a whole new vocabulary of market economy standards into cultural practices, and in the arts in particular. Business methods were applied to the arts across the board, initiating the assessment of theatre companies as ‘clients’ rather than artists, subject to the vagaries of market forces, and threatened with “deselection” if the companies did not comply with these new economic and administrative standards. Avowedly political theatre companies disbanded or marketed themselves in a fashion less threatening to the arts policies of the Conservative government. Other companies, since they had received only vague indications of the kind of quality sought by the Arts Council, began to market themselves in Arts Council approved terms as “original”, “innovative” and “accessible”. Companies were pushed to locate plural funding bases through box office income, and commercial as well as private sponsorship.46 However, early in Thatcher’s administration, business sponsorship for the arts was not forthcoming. It provided only two percent of the total arts support.


46 The Boyden Report, conducted through the ACE in 2000. As suggested by the Report, these initiatives all added created increasingly complex administrative structures.
Following these changes in approach to government funding for the arts, a series of ‘behind inflation’ funding agreements and “inflation driven increases in fixed costs” combined to adversely affect the work appearing on Britain’s stages: “The work was often driven towards the chimerical pursuit of a ‘safe’ programme which could minimize box office risk on shrinking production budgets.”47 These changes affected mainstream and fringe theatre companies alike. However, a report published by the Arts Council in 1984, *The Glory of the Garden*, announced the new “few but roses” campaign. This was an effort that effectively cut down on the funding for new and experimental companies, while assuring the continued existence of the monolithic national companies, and others like them that produced work acceptable to the Conservative establishment.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, standstill funding, reductions, and removal of arts grants steadily pushed theatres further towards a state of crisis. Theatre companies had to find ways to adapt to the current economic climate, or face the potential for closure. Many theatres spent extraordinary amounts of time and money on the search for business and private sponsorship, adding staff in order to bolster marketing and development campaigns. Eventually, these efforts strained the resources of many small fringe companies, drastically reducing the time available to spend on production and innovation. Some companies chose another option—co-productions and joint ventures with larger repertory or commercial companies. Though these collaborations provided the option for expanded resources—including publicity and recognition—often they also forced a compromise in the company’s artistic vision or production schedule, at the very least.

Even still, several popular fringe companies had their Arts Council grants diminished or withdrawn entirely, forcing an abrupt canceling of production. For example, in 1988, the important Foco Novo and Joint Stock companies both had their grants withdrawn on the very same day. Arts Council policies sometimes required theatre companies to produce work in a manner not “congenial” for the experimental and spontaneous approach adopted by various artists. Companies who would not adapt to the market-oriented structure of the Arts Council did not survive. In 1997, Cheek By Jowl lost their annual revenue funding when they declined to submit a three-year advance plan to the ACE. They were reduced to project funding status, required to apply for money on a show by show basis.48

In 1999, a sign of relief came in the form of a rigorous review of the whole theatre sector of the ACE. As a result, in May of 2000, the Boyden Report announced ‘The Next Stage’, the Council-funded paper reporting on the future of theatre provision across the country. This Report observed the under-funding of theatre over the past twenty years, draining talent and resources, and limiting the range of creative experimentation and risk. It also noted that fewer than twelve non-building based companies had received grants that had either matched or exceeded inflation since 1994/5. In July of 2000, the Council published their National Policy of Theatre in England.49 The Arts Council had received an extra £100 million a year for the arts from the government for 2003/04. £25 million of


49 For further information on the Theatre Review, the Boyden Report, “The Living Theatre”, or “The Next Stage”, see the publications located on the ACE website: <http://www.artcouncil.org.uk/funding/>.
this amount was allotted specifically for theatre. Following this new policy announcement, the Council also revealed the companies and artists to whom the new grant increases had been allocated. The extra funding impacted the lives of 194 theatre companies across England, and amounted to the largest increase in public funding on record. The total budget for theatre jumped from £40 million to £70 million, including a £5 million increase from already existing budgets. Many theatre groups received greater than percent increases in the core funding of their revenue grants. Although the RSC and RNT remain the companies with the greatest funding, a great number of fringe companies benefited from the outcome of the theatre review.\footnote{The RSC received £3 million, a 29\% increase by 2003/04; The RNT received £1,525,941 million, a 115\% increase by 2003/04.} Below is a sampling of the allocations of funds provided to fringe theatre companies in England, with a concentration of London-based groups:\footnote{For a full list of funding allocations consult “A Living Theatre” on the ACE web site: <http://www.artcouncil.org.uk/nextstage/living_theatre.html>.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Grant (By 2003/04)</th>
<th>Percentage Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forkbeard Fantasy</td>
<td>£52,400</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improbable Theatre</td>
<td>£70,000</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Joint</td>
<td>£50,000</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paines Plough</td>
<td>£44,215</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Experience</td>
<td>£100,000</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.1  London Fringe Theatre Arts Council Grant Increases for 2003/04

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soho Theatre</td>
<td>£328,546</td>
<td>130%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphinx Theatre</td>
<td>£38,469</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talawa Theatre</td>
<td>£124,128</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamasha Theatre</td>
<td>£71,580</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara Arts</td>
<td>£71,985</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre De Complicite</td>
<td>£113,529</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trestle Theatre</td>
<td>£49,325</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gerry Robinson, Chairman of the Arts Council announced: “Last year we said that theatre was on the edge of crisis and that £25 million was needed to pull it back from the brink. Today we are providing that £25 million.” Debates remain over who should be funded, and for what kinds of activities. The allocations exhibit the Arts Council’s preference for the work of producing theatres, touring companies, ethnically diverse groups, children’s theatre, and new writing. It remains to be seen how these extra funds will affect the growth and development of the fringe theatre as a whole.

### Conclusion

Scholars continue to debate the significance of the London fringe, and attempt to create new categories that best reflect the true nature of an area of theatre work that is ever-changing and expanding. Though the two areas may converge at times, fringe
theatre artists continue to work outside of the mainstream to develop new forms, approaches, and to re-define the nature of theatre in Britain today. Further, most fringe companies, like Shared Experience, persist in looking for ways to expand the languages of performance, employing new working methods—visual as well as text-based approaches—and continually promoting a spirit of experimentation and innovation.

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/>.
CHAPTER 3

THE MIKE ALFRED'S YEARS:
THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN THE THEATRE

“Theatre is essentially human beings. Scripts and scenery, and all the other elements are incidental to that: they’re extensions of the actor.”¹

-Mike Alfreds

On November 20, 1975, Shared Experience Theatre came into existence as a “storytelling” fringe theatre company with their first performance of An Arabian Night at the Crucible Theatre Sheffield. The project, based on Sir Richard Burton’s sixteen volume translation of The Thousand and One Nights, was expanded into four separate touring shows during the following year. The company’s work was an immediate success, achieving a Fringe First award at the Edinburgh Festival in 1976, and—more importantly to the future of the company—an Arts Council grant.² In many ways this production displayed key characteristics that were to define the Shared Experience ‘style’ for years to come. Yet, the production also demonstrated ways in which Shared Experience occupied their own unique category of theatre on the fringe.

² The Arts Council of Great Britain broke with normal policy and awarded the company a grant of £18,000 after they had been in existence for only five months.
According to Mike Alfreds, the founder and artistic director, the company set two primary goals for themselves: “to take stories straight off the page without adaptation; and to create everything through the actors without recourse to technical effects, scenery, props, costumes or make-up. Our premise was that an actor comes into an empty space and says directly to the audience “Once there was….” The content of these stories was vastly different from the usually imagined, and highly censored, children’s folk tales. In fact, in the unexpurgated translated by Burton, they are a collection of “historical epics, erotic romances, moral fables, dirty jokes, shaggy-dog stories, chauvinistic propaganda, picaresque anecdotes, learned debates, social realism, lyric poetry, tales of horror and brutality, of magic, and the supernatural…all interlocked in a complex system of Chinese Boxes.” The script itself was in constant flux; stories were added, or dropped, re-arranged or re-interpreted in response to the audience of any particular evening’s performance.

For the newly created Shared Experience, the actor, not the set, was the focus of the performance. Without the restrictions of cumbersome technical effects, performances

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3 Bob Pennington, “Funny, sweaty Arabian Night.” The Toronto Sun. (13 May 1981). Although Alfreds was one of the few directors working with narrative theatre in this manner in Britain, his work bears many similarities to the American narrative theatre tradition, which developed out of the theatre program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Notable directors, adapters that were influenced by the training in this particular program include Frank Galati, Gloria Baxter, and Mary Zimmerman. Zimmerman, a professor of performance studies at Northwestern is an adapter/director for the Chicago ensemble, Lookingglass Theatre Company. Her most recent adaptation, Metamorphoses (1998), successfully toured on Broadway from 2002-2003. Frank Galati’s The Grapes of Wrath and Gloria Baxter’s Eudora Welty: Mississippi Stories are scripts exemplary of the American narrative theatre tradition.

4 Miscellaneous archive notes and publicity information for An Arabian Night tour.
could achieve the maximum flexibility, especially in the area of actor-audience relationships; the production could be adapted to fit any space, and for nearly any size audience. The actors themselves would use their bodies to become the props or the scenery, adapting their voices to provide any needed sound effects. All actors would remain on stage during the entire performance, observing the action when not directly participating in the scene.⁵ Further, as the company were interested to spontaneously explore a variety of spatial relationships between actors and audiences, there were no set moves or pre-conceived ‘blocking’ for any performances. This was to become a controversial, but highly identifiable, hallmark of Alfreds’ directing style; a practice he continues in his freelance directing career today.

The manner of presentation that characterized *An Arabian Night* was the result of months of exploratory storytelling exercises under the direction of Mike Alfreds. Moreover, the existence of the company itself was the result of several years of Alfreds’ own attempts to come to grips with what the medium of theatre had to offer, a theatre he feared was becoming stale or even obsolete in the face of the ever-growing popularity of film and television. To understand the significance of this first production by Shared Experience, it is necessary to consider the path by which Mike Alfreds arrived at his particular ‘vision’ for the theatre.

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⁵ This is a fringe theatre innovation that was quickly taken up by mainstream theatre directors, most notably by the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Trevor Nunn with his minimalist production of *Macbeth* at The Other Place in 1976. The production starred Ian McKellen and Judi Dench.
Background on Mike Alfreds

Five years into the development of Shared Experience as a thriving fringe theatre company, Clive Barker compared Mike Alfreds’ directing style to the work of such theatre revolutionaries as Peter Brook and Joan Littlewood. This comparison, in many ways, reflects the eclectic and non-traditional nature of Alfreds’ background and training. Unlike directors such as Peter Hall and John Barton, who practiced artistic leadership in the mainstream nationally subsidized companies, Alfreds did not pursue an Oxbridge education, rooted in traditional literary scholarship. He was first exposed to theatre by his parents who took him to see West End shows. Nevertheless, he did not immediately pursue a theatrical career. After leaving school, Alfreds found employment as a management-trainee at Marks and Spencers. It was not until after a stint in the National Service that Alfreds made any real connection with the entertainment industry. He left the RAF in 1955 and boarded a cargo boat from his post in Singapore to Los Angeles where he landed a job at MGM studios as a messenger. According to Alfreds, “I was working in the animation department, where they were making Tom and Jerry cartoons. They promoted me to the publicity department, and I finished up taking VIPs on guided tours around the studios. I got to meet all the stars.”

While still in California, Alfreds directed his first play for a community theatre, even though he was initially more interested in the craft of acting rather than directing.

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Even at this early point he recoiled from the traditional assumptions regarding the authoritarian role of the director: “Directors were more like traffic cops telling everyone where and when to move.”

Alfreds has always maintained a certain disdain for directorial approaches which hamper the creative choices and performance of the actor.

Following his experience directing amateur theatre, he pursued a rigorous program of training in directing at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for which he has expressed the highest adulation. The training for the degree at Carnegie-Mellon imbued Alfreds with an appetite for craft, technique, and discipline. It is the lack of these qualities, Alfreds has suggested, that has lead the craft of the actor to be neglected in Britain: “Actors are expected to get up and do their thing, while the director comes on with an idea and directs traffic. The whole idea of creating an organic world on the stage seems very alien to most of them.”

His own directing training has been heavily influenced by the theories of Constantin Stanislavski, which he believes have been largely misunderstood, as well as the movement techniques of Rudolf Laban. The result of Alfreds’ study of Stanislavski and Laban is an overriding interest in ‘physical actions’. For example, Alfreds always asks his actors to define what the characters want, as well as what the characters do in order to achieve their objectives.

Through the focus on objectives and actions, Alfreds learned to build a common language

8 Smurthwaite.

9 Established in 1914, the program at Carnegie Mellon University is the first degree-granting theatre program in the United States.

10 Rea, 5.

11 Rea, 6.
for rehearsal purposes, rehearsals built on strictly guided techniques and study of the language and structure of the text; an intense exploration of the world of the character. Though his rehearsals are very structured, they have also been considered “non-interventionalist.” Rather than prescribing his actors movement patterns or vocal choices, Alfreds prefers to set up improvisational situations in which the actors discover the possibilities for themselves. He finds that he does not need to judge or censor the actors’ choices: “The actors automatically eliminate things which aren’t right.” Alfreds comments on his approach:

> When you’re talking about decisions, you’ve got to distinguish between result decisions (How are you going to play this moment, or say that line?) and decisions about your character’s attitude to life. You quite literally live with the character and look out at the world through the character’s eyes. Then the choices the actor makes when he’s playing will be truthful and right, and whether they’re different every night doesn’t really matter. They’ll be true to the moment.

During his summer vacations from the directing program, Alfreds worked as a director of summer stock theatre in Maine. Through these first professional experiences, Alfreds learned the grueling mechanics of directing a musical, opera, or operetta per week. Following the work in Maine, Alfreds became the artistic director of the Cincinnati Playhouse-in-the-Park at the young age of twenty-six years old. During this time, Alfreds battled with the young actors who, obsessed with the Method, were pretending to be Marlon Brando. He stayed in Cincinnati until 1962 when he returned

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12 Rea, 7.

13 Rea, 7.

14 Smurthwaite.
to Britain. Back in Britain, he struggled to establish himself as a director: “I had not
come from Oxbridge, but from America, which was then considered a distant and strange
place.” Finally, he landed a teaching position at the London Academy of Music and
Dramatic Art (LAMDA), which gave him the opportunity to solidify and ground himself
in the techniques he had learned in America.

In 1970, the husband of one of his students offered him a directing job in Israel.
It was an enormously fruitful period for Alfreds to develop his own directing methods
and philosophy:

> I stayed there five years doing Chekhov, political documentaries, Biblical
story theatre, commedia dell’Arte—you name it—it was quite radical stuff
and I made a reputation for myself. It is easier to make an impact there
because it’s smaller than Britain and more far-reaching. There is a great
enthusiasm for live theatre in Israel.

He directed in both Tel Aviv and Haifa, and formed a Hebrew-speaking company at the
Khan in Jerusalem. It was this work that afforded Alfreds the possibility of moving
towards a more “physically aware theatre” rooted in the primacy of the actor’s
creativity. While still in Israel, Peter James suggested that if Alfreds came back to
England, he should bring a show to James’ theatre—the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield.
So, when Alfreds returned to Britain in 1975, he gathered together former students from

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16 Smurthwaite.

17 Julia Pascal, “Mike Alfreds—a man in search of great characters,” *Jewish Chronicle* 18
April1986: 19.

18 The Crucible Theatre is a mid-size regional theatre located in Sheffield, England. It
remained an important launching point for many subsequent Shared Experience
productions.
LAMDA and launched what would be Shared Experience’s first project, An Arabian Night, at the Crucible Theatre. This was no chance gathering, nor a spur of the moment enterprise. It was at this crucial point in his career that Alfreds was hungry to invest all his previous training and experience, and his love for stories, with the hope of reinvigorating this area of theatre practice.

**The Beginnings of Shared Experience Theatre: A New Vision for Theatre**

“The core of Mike Alfreds’ theatre philosophy is that the actor is paramount.”¹⁹

-Kenneth Rea

In the early 1970s, prior to the founding of Shared Experience, Alfreds was re-forming his vision and definition of the theatre. He set himself a key question: What did theatre have to offer that the experience of film, television, or literature did not? Certainly the technology involved in camera work could tell a story in a more fluid way than theatre could ever manage. He was deeply concerned that theatre might be “imitating television and film through lack of confidence in its own function.”²⁰ This timidity appeared most often in what he felt was a misplaced reliance on the director’s interpretive function, and elaborate sets and costume designs rather than the flexibility of the actors to adapt their performances, to create anew each night. Alfreds observed that, like film theatre was attempting to ‘fix’ performances into a reliable product to be sold and repeated each night with dangerous consistency. In addition, Alfreds was frustrated

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¹⁹ Rea, 6.

²⁰ “Don’t be afraid to sit in the front row—we won’t touch you!” Sunday Independent 18 May 1980.
with his own experience of going to the theatre, one in which the social or political message was so dominant that he rarely felt he could believe the actors: “I think that, particularly in my basic idea of what comes first, which is the actors, I’m probably unique;…and I hate being told what to think. With a lot of [theatre] you find good material distorted, arguments slanted ‘to make a statement’.”

In contrast, Alfreds was excited by the process rather than the product of theatre and decided it was time to get “back to basics” and rediscover the uniqueness of theatre. In search of an answer, he sat down and made a list of what he felt was exclusive to this particular medium:

In the theatre, the only thing which it has to offer over the other media is that it has two live groups of people coming together at the same time, in which the acting group are transforming themselves into other people…..If it’s about actors and audiences then you don’t need anything else; you don’t need scenery, costumes, proper lighting—you don’t even need a play….If I believe this then I must actually take the plunge and do something where I just have actors coming into a space and performing.

First, Alfreds’ re-evaluation of theatre lead him to explore the transformational quality of theatre, the power of the actor to transform himself or herself into something else in front of a live audience. Alfreds relates, “I was interested in how the actor could create everything with nothing, how he could say…now I’m a palace, now I’m a desert…. He

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21 Christopher Edwards, “Behind the Fringe.” *Plays and Players* (January 1982): 16. Alfreds, is, of course, making his own ‘statements’ through the Shared Experience productions. Yet, I think the point that he is attempting to highlight is his interest in the highly changeable and relational nature of theatre practice, in which discoveries made in the rehearsal room tend to vary greatly from the more literary or dramaturgical research conducted alone in the study. Alfreds wants to leave room open for the actors to put their own discoveries into action, and not just receive prescriptive actions from the director.

22 Edwards, 15.
could, with that word, wipe the stage of the image he’d created and make another one.”

He was fascinated with the possibility that actors could use just their bodies and their voices to tell a story. Still, Alfreeds was aware of the vulnerability he asked of his actors who were left with nothing but themselves and a space. They had nothing to hide behind. Yet, it was necessary to strip away all the traditional accoutrements of theatre practice that obstructed the actors and the audience from true communication with one another.

Indeed, Alfreeds was excited to have Shared Experience break down the barriers separating actors and audience, but the company was not to be about ‘audience participation’, an alternative theatre technique used to get the members up out of their seats and to take on an unexpected and non-traditional role. No, Alfreeds did not wish to frighten the audience. He simply wanted to strip away the technical encumbrances such as the lighting, dark wings, costumes, make-up, dressing rooms, and green rooms.

Instead, Alfreeds desired a performance that would allow the audience to witness theatrical process of transformation. To this end, Alfreeds decided to have his actors greet the members of the audience as they came in to see the show. The actors would remain on stage during the entire performance, observing the action from the sidelines when not directly involved. The lights would remain up on actors and audience alike.

One of the most vital outcomes of transformational theatre is, for Alfreeds, the “shared act of imagination,” an interaction that brings actors and audience into constant mutual awareness. The quest was to not only allow the actor to transform himself or

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23 Edwards, 16.

herself in the presence of the audience, but to allow the audience to experience the metamorphosis at the same time with the actor: “The actor said, in effect, ‘I am both me, here, now and someone else in some other place and time’….The audience had to be made aware of this duality.” In this shared interchange is an implicit agreement to release the creative power of the imagination.

Along with transformation and shared communion between actor and audience, another inherent quality of Alfreds’ new approach to theatre was “change”. As mentioned earlier, Alfreds has constantly pitted his work in opposition to media such as film and television that seek to ‘fix’ a performance. He acknowledges a certain security in the traditional approach to the actor who is programmed to repeat the same performance, the same vocal and movement patterns, night after night. However, in contrast, Alfreds has always maintained that theatre should run in the opposite direction: “There’s something innately rough about theatre: it can’t be a perfect event, because you’re dealing with human beings.”

For Alfreds, the live interaction between human beings produces inconsistency, variation, and change on a daily basis. This lack of perfection is a positive opportunity in Alfreds’ perception, as it allows for spontaneity and surprise. Performance is governed by the vagaries of time. Each time they perform, the actors must create the event anew. In recognition of this “roughness” of theatre, therefore, Alfreds insists on the need for directors to create the conditions under which actors have the right to fail, to explore, and to make new discoveries. Within this approach, only through acceptance and nurturing of human changeability can you arrive

at genuine authentic performance. In essence, he was concerned with the ‘living’ process of theatre, rather than a pre-fabricated product assembled for an audience’s consumption. Consequently, Alfreds needed to develop a more flexible, open-ended approach to rehearsals, one that would allow the actors as much freedom as possible to respond to new audiences, new spaces, and new revelations about themselves.

As a result of these conclusions, Alfreds encouraged the most flexible rehearsal and performance process possible: there were no set moves, no blocking, and no definitive performance:

> It’s a different journey each night. You start off at the same point; you’re trying to arrive at the same end. But as things sort of shift between people, new revelations and insights come to you. A partner is slightly different. You respond to that difference because that’s the truth of that moment.\(^\text{26}\)

He is insistent that he did not ‘stage’ anything. The actors were responsible to create a fresh, new, world with each performance. Finally, Alfreds concluded that the rehearsal process must be about locating the boundaries, and defining the rules of the world they would create. In order for this to work, rehearsals must be focused on uncovering a clear inner structure for the story, and, therefore, Alfreds spent an extraordinary amount of time helping actors to become entrenched in the world of the play they were creating, exploring the language, circumstances, characters, actions, and objectives. Alfreds suggests, that through this approach, he was looking to dispense with the traditional barriers that tell the audience what to think, rather than release the power of the audience’s imagination. He wanted to impose as few pre-conceptions on the

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\(^{26}\) Rea, 7.
audience as possible. Rather than overwhelm the audience with a “brilliant interpretation”, or get them to look at a production in a particular way, Alfreds wanted to “provide hints” and let the audience fill in the rest with their own imaginations. Rather than impose limitations, Alfreds worked to create possibilities by releasing the imaginations of the actors and audience and encouraging their freedom to explore.

Alfreds has likened his rehearsals to an analogy of a football team, in which you “study the conditions, your place in the team, the form of your opponent, and you know what you want to do.”27 In the end, all the moves are created fresh in each moment because you do not know how the other actors—or the audience—will respond.

Alfreds was determined to take this vision for theatre and delve into his own process to see where it might lead. It is crucial to note that the above statement reflects the result of careful thought, and these ideas became a kind of mantra Alfreds that voiced in many newspaper and magazine interviews. It is a statement of theatre philosophy that anchored him during the years he headed Shared Experience, from 1975 until 1987. Even though the structure of the company, the technical accoutrements, the financial situation or amounts of Arts Council subsidy were to vary through those years, the underlying approach to rehearsing and creating theatre has remained solid, and informs his freelance work still.

The Artistic Process: The First Season

Mike Alfreds and his young company set out to create new work with these newly discovered aims in mind: to delve into the transformational nature of theatre; to explore the actor’s freedom to create within each performance; and to establish a shared

communication between actor and audience. They searched for a form that would best lend itself to this kind of approach. They knew they did not want to start out by producing a traditional play, as this form would not allow the variety of explorations they were eager to begin investigating. They made the decision, instead, to explore stories, for this form seemed to hold the very origins of theatre and appeared to provide the ideal opportunity to explore the desired equation of actor, audience, and empty space. The nature of the ‘story’ has always been an irresistible attraction for Alfreds. In contrast to many alternative theatre companies whose work explores the fragmented narratives of the disorder and chaos of the human experience, Alfreds prefers the linear aspect of storytelling: “Without the form which story creates, theatre merely echoes our confusion rather than seeking for a sense in it.” He suggests that stories reflect a natural human experience—the need to follow something through to its completion. Alfreds asserts that theatre, like stories, must function in this accessible way and offer a sequence which gives meaning to what is happening on stage: “As long as the story is there, it holds everybody and everything together, although the audience may be experiencing it in totally different ways.” At times during An Arabian Night, the company would drop away from the main story and introduce totally new stories and characters without first

28 The actors involved with this first production were Celia Booth, Christian Burgess, Steven Crossley, Pam Ferris, Bob Goody and Raad Rawi.

29 Mike Alfreds is an admirer of Peter Brook. I have deliberately chosen the phrase above in order to highlight the similarity of these ideals to those contained in Brook’s The Empty Space.


explaining the links. Yet, because the company had already established the frame of the story, the audience trusted the actors to take them on the journey. Eventually the structure would become clear and “the audience would have this wonderful reaction of ‘Oh, there it is!’.”

Although the company never intended to limit their creative efforts to storytelling alone, the ‘here and now’ and ‘then and there’ aspects of prose seemed the logical place to begin exploring theatrical possibilities. Storytelling brought actor and audience into immediate, unforced contact, and provided freedom for the actor to explore questions regarding their potential roles: actor as narrator, actor as actor, or actor as character.

Prior to creating Arabian Nights, Shared Experience spent an extensive amount of time together conducting workshops and exploring a variety of different ways narrative might be used to tell a theatrical story. As a result of their workshop efforts, they discovered three basic approaches to narration: 1) narrator outside the action; 2) first person narrator within the action; and 3) Actor as both character and third person narrator. These approaches to narration will be referred to as Mode 1, Mode 2, and Mode 3.

In Mode 1, with the narrator outside of the action, the narrator normally stands on stage in the down right position while the main action is played by others in the center stage position. While this could become a fairly tedious convention, the company made


34 This process and its discoveries are explained in more detail by Alfreds in “A Shared Experience,” Theatre Papers 6 (1979-80): 11-20.
some interesting discoveries about this mode of presentation. They improvised situations involving both physical placement and emotional vantage points of the narrator. The emotional perspectives of the narrator could be limitless: angry, sympathetic, satirical, and so forth. Some unusual physical placements they tried included seating the narrator downstage in front of the action, behind the audience, behind the action, and moving among the actors and action. When the actor narrates from center stage in front of the action, “it appeared to be a manifestation of his thoughts or dreams.”35 Or, if the actor narrated from downstage to the right or the left of the action, “he tended to take on the role of a lecturer, pointing out fairly objectively the behaviour of the characters; precise but not too impassioned.”36 If the actor narrated from behind the audience his relationship to the audience became more intimate, and he could help the audience focus on specific points of the action. Finally, the narrator’s position from behind the action allowed him to be “cooler, more critical, even disdainful of what occurred,” and from there he could focus the audience’s attention more directly by being so visually prominent: “He became a puppet-master, a prosecutor, a propagandist, a ‘Brechtian’ moralist.”37

In Mode 2, in which a first-person narrator works from within the action, they discovered that the narrator must both participate in the action and comment on it. This gave rise to some intriguing challenges, as the narrator encountered the need to ‘straddle’ two time sequences. Additionally, this dual function produced a second challenge related

35 Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 11.

36 Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 11.
to the narrator’s emotional attitude: “In his narration he could either relive the emotional state of his past experience or experience the emotional response of observing past events and his former behaviour from the distance of time.”\(^3^8\) This mode led to the exploration of personal behavior, private dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and other psychologically based tales. The company concluded that in both the first and second modes of presentation, the characters were, to a large extent, “locked in the attitudes imposed on them by their narrator.”\(^3^9\)

Mode 3 involved actors who would play both their own third person narrators, and also characters as well. In this mode, the actors found that they had the most opportunity to make contact with the audience. They found a number of acting choices that might help the actor: “He could narrate as himself and then make a sharp transition into character; he could give his narration totally in character.” In this mode, the actors developed the ability to both ‘be’ and ‘show’ their characters. Alfreds describes this combination as both ‘Stanislavskian’ identification and ‘Brechtian’ distancing.\(^4^0\) In The First Arabian Night, one particular way they found to cope with the narration, was to have the actor/narrator begin as himself and make a gradual transition into character. At the end of the narrated passage, the actor would be completely in character, but it would be impossible to mark at which point the transition occurred.

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\(^{3^7}\) Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 11.

\(^{3^8}\) Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 12.

\(^{3^9}\) Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 12.

\(^{4^0}\) Alfreds, “A Shared Experience” 12.
All three of these major modes of narration forced the actors to continually re-evaluate their views of themselves as actors and as human beings; and to expand and flex their powers of imagination and transformation. Further, the actors would have to be very sensitive to the needs of the audience, and guide them along the journey of the story. At times, the actors would have to know when to coax or urge the audience, or when to let the audience know that the actors were in control of the performance. This workshop period uncovered many of the narrative and performance techniques that would take Shared Experience through their early exploration of adaptations of prose, devised performances, and finally a traditional play, with their production of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*.

**The Creative Process of *The Arabian Nights***

The Shared Experience narrative techniques were then applied to the creation of their first show, *An Arabian Night*, first performed in Sheffield in 1975. Scheherazade’s tale about the very nature of storytelling itself became the wellspring from which Shared Experience gleaned their creative source material. In the earlier part of the 1970s in Israel, Alfreds had first begun working on some Arabian Nights stories. Initially, he was attracted to this material because it provided a rich canvas that was legendary, epic, and folk-like all at the same time. They were a popular cycle of stories originating in Ancient India, Pre-Islamic Persia, and Egypt. Further, they provided a myriad of different conventions, narrative devices, and interweaving structures and links. The show was structured to be flexible in every possible way. They developed five hours of performance material, so that they could add, drop, re-arrange, or re-interpret stories at
each performance. They played in any space available, from schools, colleges, hospitals, prisons, community centers, to actual theatre spaces, for an audience anywhere from four to four hundred people.

There were, however, a couple of restrictions that they had set for themselves. First, they had wanted to take the stories straight off the page without adaptation, and so retained all “he said’s” and “she said’s” from the text. Second, as mentioned earlier, they wanted to create the world of the play without the aid of technical effects: no scenery, props, costumes, make-up, or special lighting effects. As such, Burton’s translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* might appear like a strange choice for an approach of this nature, and Alfreds acknowledges that “it seemed perversely satisfying for us to create a lush and exotic world by such stringent means.”

There were only six performers, but these few actors, played a myriad of characters including, “courtiers, eunuchs, gardeners, unfriendly Chinese Islanders, friendly Ebony Islanders, duennas, night spirits,…mountains, valleys, thrones, doors, a well, a raft,” and more.

One of the most exciting revelations the company uncovered during the rehearsal and performance of this show was the economy with which they could create these lush images and exotic characters for the audience:

An actress might say, ‘the princess wept in her chamber and then ran into the desert’. As she says, ‘she ran into the desert,’ she is there. There is nothing to get in the way of her making that transition. No need to wait for a change of light to come up in a different area (will it or won’t it?), or for a piece of scenery to come down, no costume changes, or prop or get

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rid of, no cube to push around […] The less an actor does to create the changes, the more exciting it is […] These discoveries were thrilling and allowed us to paint huge canvases, to move from slums to stately homes, from palaces to deserts with great ease.⁴³

The company continued to work on *An Arabian Night* during the run of the performances, questioning, re-evaluating, and refining it throughout the year. The material they had adapted from Burton’s *The Thousand and One Nights* was developed to the point that in 1976, the company presented the show in four installments, which they collectively titled *Recitals of Mystery, Violence and Desire: Three Arabian Nights Entertainments*. The fourth show was a special performance created for children. For each of the three main productions, the company worked in a different storytelling convention.

*The First Arabian Night: The Loves of Kamar and Budur* involved both the “comic and erotic adventures of a prince and two princesses” as their paths intertwined “in the search for an Ideal Lover.”⁴⁴ This show revised and refined material Shared Experience had used for *An Arabian Night* to develop a particular theme about love and its sexual variations. The guiding subject matter was sex, and since the text was replete with sensuous imagery, the company determined that the physicality of the piece should be extreme, flamboyant, and extravagant. They worked in dark, loose flowing, everyday clothes, transforming their bodies into scenic objects, with sound effects provided by the ‘offstage’ actors observing from the edges of the acting area.


⁴⁴ Specific information regarding this production is taken from the company publicity material created for 1976/77.
In this show, the company worked in Mode 3 with the action flowing between narrator and characters. The particular challenges of the narrative that they investigated were the abrupt changes of focus required for these leaps between narrator and action. They worked with what Alfreds calls “trampoline” words to spring from narration to dialogue. Alfreds was concerned that the actor needed to approach the line of dialogue with a great deal of energy and emotion. Consequently, they tried using “the previous sentence of the narrator as a sort of run up, knowing that when he gets to [the trampoline word]…he literally has to bounce himself on that word and it can give him the time to change his focus from the audience to his partner in the scene.” By practicing this technique, the actors learned to cope with the changes of focus rapidly and smoothly within the performance. Alfreds stresses the crucial nature of the actor’s ability to animate the text and guide the audience through the story. If the actor does not manage to create the images, the audience is left with nothing. Most often, his actors chose to enrich the text by creating a counterpoint to what was said, rather than merely illustrating the text.

Alfreds watched the company develop The First Arabian Night during the first fifteen months of performances. It seemed there was no end to the way that the scenes could be performed: “One moment contained the possibility of almost every experience….It meant that no moment could ever be called definitive or could exhaust its power to surprise.” At some moments, there were many layers of experience colliding simultaneously. At these times, Alfreds recalls, “the acting space seemed quite literally,
to vibrate.” He continues, “If anything further were needed to convince me of the
deadendedness of neat interpretations, this was it.”

Throughout the production of the various Arabian Nights stories and material, the
company continued to explore a range of narrative and performance devices. The second
Arabian Night has been described by Alfreds as a “keystone cops chase,” and allowed the
company to expand their comedy and improvisation skills as each actor created his or her
own humorous narrative and interacted with the audience through this comic persona.
The third Arabian Night, in stark contrast, provided an austere and serious framework
through which to explore darker psychological aspects of first person monologues. In
Mode 1, as the narrator recounted past experiences, the ensemble, appearing behind the
narrator, created violent images to coincide with crisis points in the story. The placement
of the ensemble gave the effect of images being conjured up in the narrator’s
imagination. Throughout all the Arabian Nights productions, the company focused on the
immediacy of the narrative and, through the transformative style of performance, made
room for an unknown future, imbuing every performance with a sense that anything
could happen.

Bleak House—The Next Experiment (1977-78)

After the success of the Arabian Nights, Shared Experience was inspired to take
on an equally complex prose project—the novel. While in Israel, Alfreds had become
interested in Dickens, and read nine of his novels in quick succession. In 1977, he

decided that Dickens’ *Bleak House* would be the company’s second adaptation project. Although Shared Experience has never been a fringe company in support of a particular political viewpoint, Alfreds found the story of *Bleak House* achingly appropriate for British society at the end of the 1970’s: “It’s about caring in a way that seems highly relevant now. It knocks all the systems which society constructs to take care of itself.”

He was even more excited to try the company’s pared down methods on material that usually became a lavish costume spectacular in the hands of television and film producers.

*Bleak House* was truly a company project, as all members went through the novel chapter by chapter, selecting and compressing the text. It took nine months to complete and the company ended up with a text that, although only one-fifth of the entire novel, was presented in four parts for a total of ten hours. This epic was presented as minimalistically as *Arabian Nights*, with only the addition of seven black folding chairs to help outline the more modern Victorian interiors. The eclectic variety of textures in the novel offered a chance to dig into the sentimental, the satirical, the political, the journalistic, and the grotesque.

It was to have a profound impact on both the direction of the company and the shape of mainstream theatre in Britain as well. It has been widely acknowledged in the British press that Shared Experience’s *Bleak House* was the landmark production that sparked British interest in novel adaptations and paved the way for The Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Nicholas Nickleby*. Though the RSC’s approach to adaptation

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47 *Arabian Nights* company publicity material.

included a huge cast and grand spectacle, Shared Experience’s work had given mainstream companies the courage to tackle the epic scale of the novel, and the courage to explore the narrative aspects of a prose text.49

Press Response

Although Shared Experience gained a valuable reputation for their spare, intimate, and imaginative performance style, the early shows coincided with lively debates in critical circles regarding novel adaptations in general. One of the most vocal and persistent critics was Michael Billington, who, throughout the 1980’s, voiced his reservations about the use of novels as theatrical or filmic source material. He expressed complete disdain for those serials generated by the BBC.

Billington’s objections stemmed from his belief that the genres of novel and drama were irreconcilable: “No adaptation, however intelligent, can ever be more than second best.”50 His objections and classifications reveal some of the current thoughts and ideas about what the stage was capable of illuminating, and help point up where Shared Experience was beginning to expand those definitions. Billington considered that the narrative flow, the texture, the growth of character, and the passing of time are ingredients exclusive to the novel, and beyond the capacity of the stage to deliver: “What the novel supremely gives one is the stream of time: the gradations of growth in a

49 There have been a number of film and television adaptations of Nicholas Nickleby. In addition to the RSC stage production, which was also filmed for television presentation; a BBC television serial and several films have appeared. The most recent film version, written and directed by Douglas McGrath, was released in the United States in 2002.

character over a long period. What the stage puts in its place is a telescoped view of people. The one concession he gave was to those companies who make use of actual narrative material or who attempt to select certain elements of the novel, rather than try to represent it in its entirety. He did support productions that made the audiences re-think the value of the book: “one doesn’t just put a novel onto the stage. One places it in a context, holds it up to the light to examine both the values it expresses and our attitude towards it today.” Benedict Nightingale, however, offered a viewpoint in favor of adaptations—specifically in favor of adaptations of works such as Dickens, whose “page is often like a stage in which people are ostentatiously parading their personalities, flaunting their peculiarities [...].”

Further, the press and critical response to Shared Experience’s early work was enthusiastic and remarkable. Chief among the characteristics that were recognized by the British press was the company’s imaginative prowess. The company was noted by The Financial Times for, “a sustained exercise of imaginative narration unique in the recent history of the London Fringe.” Interestingly, several critics have compared their work to that of Peter Brook, Freehold Theatre, and La Mama. It is worth noting the

55 A further account of Freehold will be discussed in a later chapter on the work of Nancy Meckler.
comparison, not only because these artists and companies exhibited extraordinary physical and vocal capabilities, but also because the artistic director for Freehold was Nancy Meckler. It was Meckler who would eventually take over from Mike Alfreds as the leader of Shared Experience.

It is not that other fringe companies were not imaginative; certainly they were, but Shared Experience was especially recognized for their ability to use nothing more than their bodies and voices to stimulate an audience’s imagination. The show worked to effectively stimulate the imaginations of the audience in a very fertile way. Alfreds has recounted incidents in which a members of the audience would come up to him after a show to tell him all the things they had “seen” during the show; all the places and events the performance conjured up in his mind’s eye. In addition, this show made an impact on critics and Arts Council officers alike. One critic’s comment reflects the especially vivid imagery and even smells that the performance evoked for him: “They conjured up burnished domes of palaces gleaming in the sun, rooms soft with cushions and reeking of incense, endless dunes of Sahara sand.”56 For the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) radio program, Kaleidoscope, Brian Morris reflects on the sensory nature of the narrative in performance. These particularly vivid, yet grotesque images from the performance made the hair stand up on the back of his neck:

…There was one moment, when a girl squats at the back of the stage and eats the head of a corpse. There’s no head. There’s no corpse. There’s no

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grave. There’s nothing, and I found that one of the most horrific moments I have ever known in the theatre, and there was nothing there but that one girl with her back to the audience and her performance.  

Throughout the beginning years of the company, when they were producing productions in installments that would tour in different areas of the country, there were coach-loads of theatre-goers following Shared Experience around the country in order not to miss part of the story. Critic David Allen compares the phenomenon with that of football fans travelling to away matches. Comments such as these provide a fascinating thermometer reflective of a new appetite for storytelling theatre in Britain. They made this impact without the personal aggressiveness towards the audience or political stratagem that characterized many fringe theatres of the time. They simply engaged the audience, and shared in a common humanity with them. They had already begun to shape a new direction for the theatre. And, as one critic put it, albeit with more than a touch of hyperbole: “If somebody who did not know what theatre was asked me to explain it to him I should utter not a single word but take him to see a group of players called Shared Experience.”


CHAPTER 4

ADMINISTRATING THE MIKE ALFRED'S YEARS

“Ours was almost a perfect touring company…”

-Mike Alfreds

The Burden of Administration

The goal for Alfreds’ young company was to achieve both artistic and administrative flexibility. In the beginning, the creative emphasis upon the transformative powers of the actor alone, freed the company from costly and burdensome technical considerations. They were lightweight, immediate, and could perform just about anywhere—and frequently did. Early shows such as Arabian Nights (1975), Bleak House (1977), Science Fictions (1978), Gothic Horrors (1979), and Cymbeline (1979) were presented in such unconventional places as schools, hospitals, prisons, community centers, and more traditional studio theatres. All the actors needed was an audience and a space—preferably an intimate one. The Shared Experience actors, “learnt to create a

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strong sense of space on a bare stage,” Mike Alfreds reflects on his observations of *Bleak House* performances. He continues:

> You could suddenly feel that it was a small dark space, although the stage was brightly lit and open. The actor would contract your eyes somehow in the space by the way he moved and his power of suggestion, which is greater than any physical set...then he creates for you. And the audience responded so excitedly. Because their imaginations were released....

Alfreds, at this point, was adamant about the creative drawbacks of using scenery and other technical accommodations: “Even the most modern computerized scenery is lumbering compared with the flexibility of the actor’s imagination.”

The company’s pared down approach allowed them to tour extensively, taking the shows all around the country, even internationally. Perhaps this would aid them to be seen by significantly more people than if they had been confined to a home base. Whatever the case, working in this way reaped several tangible benefits for the company. First, the theatre-on-a-shoestring approach kept them in the good graces of the Arts Council. Mike Alfreds’ creative philosophy meant that they could operate on almost nothing. As a result, they cost the Arts Council very little. The popularity and accessibility of the company kept them in good favor, and the Arts Council raised their grant to £25,000 by 1977.

Second, they did indeed achieve a flexible administration. In the early days, Alfreds had only the actors to pay, and he administrated the company from the front room of his home for the first eighteen months of their existence. From that point through the next five years, they did not even have a stage manager. They had only five actors,
Alfreds, and an administrator. Because of their performance style and absence of technical requirements during the early years, they had no need for a stage manager; the actors performed under the same general wash of light that met the audience as they entered the performance space. In addition, Alfreds traveled with the actors around the county: “All the money I had went into the people, not the bricks and mortar.”

Additionally, the low overheads allowed for longer rehearsals than most conventionally-run companies could ever consider. Alfreds was adamant about the necessity of a lengthy rehearsal process: “You cannot do great work—even with the most talented people—in four weeks rehearsal.” Shared Experience typically spent a year on each project, involving three months of workshops and rehearsals to explore the particular nature of the actor-audience relationship. Then, they undertook extensive tours in which the show was constantly re-examined, explored, and amended. Alfreds suggests that all the attention to the show in performance means that “it grows and becomes so rich it’s coming out of the actors’ pores.”

In many ways, Alfreds’ unconventional approach necessitated a longer rehearsal process. Not one for dictating blocking and gestures, Alfreds preferred to allow his actors to explore all possible levels and layers in the material. On the other hand, their performance methods and touring activities took their toll on the ensemble of actors. Unlike traditionally rehearsed plays, the actors worked fresh every night to make direct contact with the audience and to create an experience spontaneously and imaginatively.

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4 Rea, 5.


6 Edwards, 17.
with each performance. Regarding *Science Fictions*, the company’s first originally-devised show, actress Pam Ferris admits, “It’s not a show you can just turn up to the theatre and do.”7 John Dicks, reflecting on the early performances, observes: “I was conscious of how vulnerable the actor is in work of this kind. The audience surrounds you, you feel totally exposed, terribly insecure, you have no make-up, no props, scenery or costumes. All you’ve got is self and that is the thing you have to project.”8

By 1980, the schedule of workshops, performances, and continuous rehearsals had placed considerable strain upon everyone involved. Repeatedly during the year, board meeting minutes reflect the need to find ways to alleviate “pressure on the company.”9 The directors of the company considered solutions such as joint productions with the studios of larger theatres, more collaboration, or even the possibility of running two small cast shows simultaneously. A second ensemble was created to allow rehearsals for both *Science Fictions* and *Gothic Horrors*.10 This also offered a break for Alfreds, as John Dicks was given the opportunity to direct *Gothic Horrors*.

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9 Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes (1980).

10 The cast for *Science Fictions* included Ruth Seglow, Anthony Naylor, Pam Ferris, Raad Rawi, and Sam Cox. The cast for *Gothic Horrors* included Sue Rogerson, Liz Brailsford, Neale Goodrum, Ken Drury, and Michael Garner. *Gothic Horrors* was directed by John Dicks.
During 1980/81, the pressures continued to mount and the company headed in a new direction with the production of *The Merchant of Venice*. The company made the shift towards the middle-scale venues through a collaboration with the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, and some major technical additions. This company broke away from the early focus on the actor only and hired a designer, built a set, and added sound and costumes. The changes reflect Alfreds’ determination to *not* get trapped into re-tracing the same path over and over: “You can get trapped in your own creation…There is a temptation to say, ‘we have found our little niche; we know what we are doing.’ Actors repeat themselves and the energy dies out, but the formula goes on.”

Possible explanations may be found in Alfreds’ desire to create larger works, which require bigger budgets, or as Claire Armistead put it, “partly because he got tired of finding 101 ways around a small studio space.” They had found themselves in a circular and unforgiving pattern of rehearsal and performance imposed by a yearly cycle. Further, Alfreds had wearied of spending another six months on the road, and desired to work with older, more experienced actors—who required higher salaries and shorter tours. Finally, the constraints of the bare stage forced Alfreds to re-integrate the elements he had shunned so vigorously a few years previously: “After five years’ work, I felt that we had painted ourselves into a corner—we’d stripped away so many theatrical elements

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11 The cast for this production included Peter Ackermann, Stephen Warbeck, Philip Osment, Jonathan Hackett, Mia Soteriou, Anthony Naylor, and Holly Wilson.


that it wasn’t possible to strip down any further; there was no other route but to think about how we might begin to use some of those elements in a selective way.”

The company had tried exotic Arabian Nights stories, novels, science fiction, gothic horror stories, even a five-actor Cymbeline. The production of The Merchant of Venice marked the end of one era of storytelling for Shared Experience and the beginning of new experiments with middle-scale venues such as the Bloomsbury Theatre, and the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. These venues provided access to new audiences, bigger budgets, designers, and, most importantly, allowed for new approaches to telling their stories.

**Merchant of Venice and After**

Not only did The Merchant of Venice mark the shift into larger venues and more technically complex work, but it also provides a key example of the beginning of a new conflict for the company. Shared Experience had built a reputation based on intimate, direct, and spontaneous interaction with their audiences. Now the Shared Experience approach to storytelling would come up against the peculiar eccentricities of middle-scale venues. How would the company ‘style’ play in larger venues? Would the sheer physical magnitude force a shift in performance approach? As far as economic advantages are concerned, the size of the venues provided the possibility for the company to enlarge its audience. However, the company would also face the challenge of finding a new audience. The kinds of audiences who frequented the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, studio theatres, pub theatres, and community arts centres were not necessarily the same

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audiences who might attend the Midland or the Warwick Arts Centres. Many of the mid-size venues the company booked during the early 1980s were primarily inhabited by middle-class patrons—audiences accustomed to more traditional programming and performance styles. Though the company sought to expand its audience base, they aimed to continue experimenting with ways to present stories in non-traditional approaches. The mismatch of audience and performance style was to become a source of continual conflict and frustration, for actors and administrators alike.

The seeds of this conflict were already germinating in the response to The Merchant of Venice. Mike Alfreds had been intent to steer away from social realism and, instead, to emphasize what he believed to be elements of Romantic Allegory. He found, in the plot of Merchant, elements resembling scenarios of the commedia dell’arte. Perhaps this was an approach “within which Shylock might bridge the contradictions between his allegorical function as villain and Shakespeare’s more sympathetic creation.”15 Commedia, which requires a heightened, more aggressive playing style, strong physical archetypes, and the use of half-masks, also forced the company to incorporate elements of costumes and props into their minimalist performances.16 As such, this approach was, seemingly, a useful vehicle to help ease the company’s transition to larger auditoriums, and the accompanying actor-audience configurations.

15 Alfreds, Shared Experience, 37.

16 For all of Mike Alfreds’ earlier railing against heavy-handed directorial concepts, this production of Commedia-style Merchant of Venice certainly exemplifies a move towards the incorporation of just such interpretive concepts he had earlier dismissed as too prescriptive for audiences.
However, veteran audiences missed the intimacy of earlier productions. Critic Robert Cushman pointedly remarked in The Observer that “the full, direct acting that was always this company’s strength has been thrown away and...nothing has replaced it.”

The masks, in effect, seemed to downplay the impact of the words and the text, which had been one of the company’s key defining traits in their imaginative stagings of Dickens and the Arabian Nights stories. In addition, the response by regional critics also suggests the risk Shared Experience had taken by introducing such a radical approach to the works of the “national poet.” The conservative mindset is apparent in comments that repeatedly suggested that the production was “not for purists,” or “a great deal of fun—even if not always Shakespeare’s.” Further, many critics were confused about the choice of Merchant of Venice as the subject of Commedia experimentation. For instance, why layer the grotesque caricatures of the Commedia types with Shakespeare’s most famous Jewish character, the often misunderstood and misrepresented Shylock? Many critics and audience members alike seemed uncomfortable with the racial uneasiness resulting from the stylistic choices and interpretation of this script. In the immediate future, the company would find increasing resistance to their productions of already existing drama. This resulted in more of a difficulty in finding an audience for the company’s productions of existing English and European drama than for their work

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17 The Observer November 1979.

18 Desmond Christy, Birmingham Post (3 Dec. 1980).

19 However, one audience member actually praised the production because, “Shylock was for once played without false sentiment, as the unpleasant villain he actually is in Shakespeare’s play.” This comment, submitted to The Birmingham Post (15 December
on their own prose adaptations. Perhaps this resistance suggests the length to which audiences, critics, and even arts councils, ‘label’ theatre companies according to a particular category of work.

During the mid-80s, there is evidence of a persistent confusion over the artistic identity of the company. This confusion is apparent in the gap between the company ambitions and the fragmented way in which they often worked. Rarely did the company come together to officially discuss and define the goals they were pursuing, and more importantly, to question why they continued to pursue their goals.

The move upstage of the proscenium arch at middle-scale venues became a continuing source of conflict for the administration of the company in a variety of ways. Alfreds remained interested in an artistic and administrative flexibility, and board meeting minutes reflect concerted efforts to achieve this goal. Middle-scale venues and partnerships with the larger and more financially-secure venues offered the possibility of fulfilling one of Alfreds’ artistic ambitions: a permanent company producing work in a repertory manner over a long term, perhaps three-year project. It was now Alfreds’ vision to apply the company’s performance techniques to existing scripts; to create new ways of staging dramatic scripts, to stage a variety of playwrights, and to create new and beneficial relationships with venues.

However, artistic ambitions sometimes claimed priority over sober estimations of actual financial resources. For Alfreds’ work, the desire to experiment with the storytelling process remained a constant motivating force. Yet, the financial means

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1980) by Margaret Horsfield, amply demonstrates the potential danger inherent in the combination of a Commedia playing style with a script rife with racial stereotyping.
necessary to support the kind of ensemble Alfreds had in mind remained slightly out of reach. Alfreds was weary of the one-project-per-year pattern in which they found themselves. In 1983, Alfreds approached the Board and the Arts Council of Great Britain with the idea of creating a three-year project that would allow a permanent ensemble to explore four new productions per year. It was his dream to develop a unified ensemble that would experiment on a more permanent basis. He had a hunger for expansion, and for more lavish work that would need the support of generous budgets. They did, in fact, achieve this ambition for a short while. 1983-1984 saw the company through four productions over eighteen months. All four were productions of existing dramatic scripts from the classic European tradition: The Comedy Without a Title, Marivaux’s False Admissions and Successful Strategies, and Gogol’s Marriage. However, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was unable to continue the subsidy past 1984. Still, it was more work than the company had produced in the course of a year.

Unfortunately, the sharp increase in artistic output had brought more than a few new problems to the company’s administrative doorstep. It appears that although Alfreds had wanted to expand the company’s repertoire, there was no firm consensus on the best way to achieve this goal. In consequence, the choice of shows were sometimes delayed or changed altogether. The production of Gogol’s Marriage was not decided until quite late. As a result, it became a difficult show to book into venues. Furthermore, two weeks of the tour remained unbooked, which ultimately added a deficit of £10,000 to the year’s financial outcome. The problem was not confined to the 1984 season. A late decision about the tour of Three Sisters in 1986 suffered a similar fate. Because the booking was done on very short notice, a production with sixteen people went to venues
with very little to no guarantees. The outcome was not a constructive one: there was precious little time to cultivate relationships with the receiving venues, publicity was rushed and resulted in poor attendance at the shows. These circumstances, coupled with overspending on the shows left the company with a deficit of £15,500.

Once the company was aware that the funds for the three-year project would not be continued by the ACGB into 1985/86, they were left without a clear, realistic, alternative plan. What followed was a pattern of late and indecisive action regarding the choice of productions. The General Manager observed in late 1986:

> We lurch from production to production, without stopping to wonder whether the company is still creating fresh and innovatory work, whether it really wants to create such work any longer and, if it does, whether this muffled hankering to ‘make it’ is either justified or creative—whether in fact we’re not undermining our own creative raison d’etre as we go along.²⁰

This confusion in artistic direction opened up a gap between the style of productions and potential for audience development. However, many administrative decisions made by the company, specifically by the artistic director and general manager, did not support success with the venues that the company secured for its touring performances. For instance, the atmosphere of many of the venues in which Shared Experience appeared was ill suited to the company’s experimental performance approach. Many venues the company played in during the early 1980s were visited by predominantly middle-class patrons who were comfortable with ‘safe’ and conservative programming. Often, this mis-match is reflected in the attitudes of staff at receiving venues, or poor houses during the runs. For the former concern, venues with little

²⁰ Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes (7 August 1986).
knowledge of, or support for, Shared Experience's approach spent little effort to accommodate the company’s needs, or to publicize the company’s residency at the venue.

The mismatch between the company’s performance style and the attitude or atmosphere of the receiving venues at the middle-scale suggests an ongoing struggle for Shared Experience during the 1980s to develop and project a firm sense of their own artistic identity. The mismatched relationship between the company artistic identity and the atmosphere of the receiving venues is epitomized in the disaster that occurred with the appearance of the company at the Riverside Studios, London during their tour of Shaw’s *Too True to Be Good* (1986). As the result of rather poor attendance for the show, a disagreement ensued between Jonanthan Lamede, General Manager for Shared Experience, and John Baraldi, Chief Executive of Riverside Studios, regarding the publicity for the show. The root of the problem, however, seemed to involve the difficulty of selling a Shaw play at this particular venue. Again, Shared Experience was forced to confront the issue of their own artistic identity and concluded that they needed to develop a unique artistic approach. The production of a Shaw play was not “an event unique to the company, while the production of a new adaptation of a literary work could be.”21 Once again, Shared Experience found themselves returning their energies to the adaptation approach that had brought them success in the first place.

Angela Samuel, the publicist for the company’s 1986 production of *The Three Sisters*, highlighted some of the issues that she believed the company would have to resolve if they were to market themselves towards a stable future and assure their

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21 Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes (26 November 1986).
continued survival. At this point in their development, there were key problems with the structure and the running of the company. Reflecting on the disappointing range in attendance at the various venues from houses 90% full at Bracknell to only 22% full at Peterborough, Samuel set out to alert the company to her findings following her job publicizing the show. One of her key conclusions concerns the company’s lack of forward planning. While the artistic flexibility for the company allowed them to create vigorous and exciting work, this same spontaneity made day to day planning, the gritty, real need to sell an artistic ‘product’, a frustrating challenge, and according to Samuel—a ‘virtual impossibility’. Samuel suggested the crucial need for Shared Experience to get into a habit of planning ahead. At that point, the company was not planning far enough ahead to secure worthy venues. As a result, according to Samuel, “most of the tour seemed to consist of venues that only had spaces in their seasons because no other company wants to use them.”

One of the venues they finally secured for *Three Sisters* was the Key theatre, a venue attracting a predominantly middle-class, conservative audience; It is a venue more known for supporting pantomimes, sex farces, and musicals, rather than innovative physical productions. Shared Experience’s presence at this venue provoked a shocked response from the Arts Council: “What on earth are Shared Experience doing there?” She notes that forward planing would aid the company in achieving their goals of more substantial sponsorship, and co-productions with reputable receiving houses. On the tour for this production, Samuel indicates that the only houses

22 Angel Samuel’s notes to Board following *Three Sisters*.

23 Angela Samuel’s notes to Board following *Three Sisters*. 

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“worthy” of Shared Experience’s work were theatres in Winchecster and Bracknell, and that a quality middle-scale tour would have to involve securing space at venues such as Newcastle Playhouse, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and Cardiff, Sherman Theatre. The other venues that could be booked for the tour either did not have adequate audiences of their own, or did not have the “right” sort of audiences to be attracted to the experimental work being produced by Shared Experience. The General Manager notes for this period suggest the inexorable demand of a market that tends towards the safe and undemanding.24

Samuel’s comments are especially relevant to highlight the relationship between the artistic product and the context in which it is produced. No matter how exciting the work and discoveries made by Alfreds in the rehearsal room, theatre does not exist in a vacuum. The survival of Shared Experience and their ability to continue to present new work would ultimately be related to their ability to recognize and deal with problems in the structure of the company at this key point in the company’s development. The artistic innovations appeared to be excelling at a rate the structure of the company could not support.

The presence and purpose of Samuel as part-time publicity worker is, in itself, a warning sign of administrative growing pains. In the early years, Shared Experience traveled anywhere and everywhere, usually in smaller venues. At that time, it had been possible to run the company on the back of Alfreds, the actors, and a lone administrator. With the move into the larger houses of the middle-scale venues, this would no longer be a workable arrangement. Shared Experience and their innovative approach would need

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24 Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes (7 August 1986).
publicity and solid relationships with the various venues in order to attract the audience numbers to fill these houses. However, Samuel’s note appeared after she had had time to reflect on her role in the publicity process and her observations of the directions of the company. She had been engaged to publicize the run by working one and one half days per week, and only one month prior to the opening. Shared Experience would need to expand the administrative team to support the size of the artistic vision.

This small fringe company would also find themselves in need of reevaluating their technical knowledge and resources. In the mid-1980s, they had only a two person administrative staff, and were behaving as though they were a large building-based company, with extensive resources and personnel. This tendency is evidenced in the way the company budgeted their finances and made artistic decisions. With the shift in scale of the productions came a shift away from the focus on the actor alone. Now, the sets and costumes became more important. High technical costs were added to the company’s increasingly stretched resources. The later productions of 1984 including, Comedy Without a Title, Successful Strategies, False Admissions, and Marriage had suddenly accelerated the technical complexity of the performances. This escalated with the following production of Beckett’s Happy Days. They had been mounting elaborate shows with a tiny technical crew, creating enormous strain on staff, but had also necessitated the hiring of a number of part-time auxiliary staff. Since 1984, part-time staff included musicians, composers, choreographers, costume cutters and makers, tailors, wigmakers, set builders, and technical backup.

There were few management checks and balances to oversee these expenses, and many of these costs accumulated outside the bounds of the approved budgets. Many
expenses had been recorded in global figures alone, leaving the company without a
accurate picture of their true financial position. After the resignation of Luke Dixon as
General Manager in 1985, an even more dire situation was discovered. Dixon had been
responsible for serious failings in the company’s operation and management, especially
in the area of budgetary control. The company was hampered by a deficit of £34,753 in
1985, and a minimum of unbudgeted expenditure of £23,268 had been revealed in
1985/86.

This lack of accountability in the financial records was just one symptom of a
larger strain in the overall company structure. To a large extent, the problem rested with
the administration and the Board. From 1976 until January 1986, Mike Alfreds had
acted as the Chairman of the Board. At that time in 1986, the company began reviewing
their goals and structure, and discovered the pitfalls of having an artistic director who
was also the Board Chairman: “He wears two hats rightly belonging on two quite
different heads.” They admitted that the Chairman, “should be independent of any
vested interests and capable of guiding the company in preserving a balance between the
different elements of the organization.” At the time of the Annual General Meeting

25 Private non-profit corporations must retain a board of directors. These individuals
ensure that the company operates according to sound fiscal and legal management
principles, and therefore must remain objective about both business administration
matters and the company’s artistic objectives. The artistic director functions under this
board, and conflicts may arise if there are disagreements between the intentions of the
board and those of the artistic director.


(AGM) during January 1985, the board, comprised entirely of past and present company members, recognized the need for independent perspective.

**Looking Back and Looking Forward—Alfreds Takes a Sabbatical**

From the mid-1980s, Alfreds role as the artistic director and visionary for Shared Experience underwent a kind of transformation. His style and approach to creating theatre had won him considerable artistic and critical recognition. Almost inevitably, Alfreds began to receive offers from other theatre companies interested in the benefit of his directing capabilities. Mike Alfreds’ work was developing and changing, and when the National Theatre came calling in 1984, Alfreds took a sabbatical from directing at the company he had nurtured for the past ten years. He spent the time between 1984 and 1985 primarily involved in work at the National.

Why was the National Theatre so appealing for Alfreds, or for any fringe theatre director? Was not this looming establishment part of the director and interpretation-driven purveyor of deadly theatre that Alfreds had so firmly resisted ten years ago? Perhaps, yet by 1985 the mainstream theatre companies had been significantly influenced by the alternative staging methods of companies like Shared Experience, Cheek By Jowl, and Théâtre de Complicité. The extension of a guest director offer to Alfreds is an indication of the extent of his influence as a director and the desire from the national companies to infuse their stage practices with new life and innovative approaches. Far from being denied his freedom to continue his explorations of the transformative powers of the actor, he was hired because of it.
Ten years into the life of the company, the Board members were aware of the benefits of ‘Establishment’ approval. The General Manager’s report for August of 1986 reflects the extent to which Shared Experience, and many fringe theatre companies, yearned for the resources and recognition available to mainstream companies in receipt of major subsidy:

Ten years into the world of touring and ‘non-establishment’ theatre can engender their own resentments. There’s a feeling that you’re treading the same ground with inadequate recognition from the world around you. There’s an understandable hankering to come in out of the cold, become more ‘accepted’ and earn a better living….It leads to a perpetually dissatisfied yearning from within what is perceived as the non-established to become established, without ever quite achieving it.28

“…Chekhov with a Shout!”29

The invitation Alfreds received from Ian McKellen and Edward Petherbridge to direct a production at the National Theatre marks a major shift in Alfreds’ career from fringe theatre to a new association with the ‘Establishment’. It coincides with a new development in Alfreds’ artistic pursuits: directing Chekhov. In 1981, Alfreds had directed a production of Chekhov’s The Seagull for Shared Experience. Although The Seagull is part of a tradition of existing drama well-known to British theatre-goers, Alfreds firmly planted his particular directorial stamp on the production. For his efforts, the production earned a British Theatre Association Drama Critics Award for Best Production of a Revival for 1981.30


29 Tim Brown, Sheffield Morning Telegraph 16 Sept. 1981.

30 The award was shared jointly with the Royal Court’s production of the same title.
Alfreds’ production of *The Seagull* challenged traditional expectations about staging Chekhov on the British stage. *The Seagull* was to be Shared Experience’s first realistic play, and before beginning rehearsals, Alfreds investigated the possibilities of how the actors might share the performance with the audience without recourse to narrative, soliloquy, or asides. He explains:

> There is a huge body of work which is not presentational, which is very much closed in, and which doesn’t present a way of talking directly to the audience,…so I thought it would be a good idea to do a play which…turned away from the audience, with no direct contact, and see if we can still maintain the special relationship of doing it for those people on that night in that space….  

Alfreds’ approach was to replace the traditional Anglo-Saxon mode of expression for a more extrovert Slavic one. Alfreds was wary of the English tendency to underplay, and feared the approach would limit the extreme emotional range of the characters. Alfreds argues: “With Russians, emotional release is more available. It is not a matter of one nationality being capable of more or less feeling than the other, but of how an emotion is expressed.” He continues, “It’s a sort of volatility that is not English and English actors as a rule want to smoothe out their emotional shape….You cannot bring English attitudes to these plays. I think what happens with Chekhov, and most other foreign plays in this country, is that they all become subtly anglicized.”  

What he wanted to do with his production involving a cast of English actors, on the other hand, was to create a ‘world’ in which he could foreground these extreme emotional transitions and expressions. And, in the Shared Experience style, he wished to create this Chekhovian world using minimal

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scenery and effects, and to transform a nearly empty space into specific locations. As a result, Alfreds exploded many of the presumptions and misconceptions surrounding what might be possible with Chekhov.

In rehearsal, the acting company explored bold and energetic physicality and heightened emotional states as means to convey the inner states of characters—at the same time maintaining the threads of a particular social reality. Actors accentuated elements of the absurd in certain aspects of the character’s physical behavior.

Furthermore, Alfreds was dissatisfied with the available English translations of the play and felt that the ‘literary’ flavor of most of them had suffocated the texts. In contrast, Alfreds worked in collaboration with Lilia Sokolov to create a new translation. In addition, he offered his actors “alternatives” for most of their dialogue. It was hoped that the actors would have the freedom to choose dialogue that was faithful to the meaning of the original text, yet was most comfortable and the suited the occasion of a particular evening’s performance. And, like Shared Experience had established with earlier productions, there was no fixed blocking or staging. Additionally, the production emphasized the transformation of actor into character: There were no ‘wings’ to hide actors’ entrances and exits. When not directly involved in stage action, the actors sat and observed the action from the perimeter.

The success of the production forced a reassessment of the possibilities of producing Chekhov. Some critics reverted to their firmly entrenched traditional expectations surrounding naturalistic scripts. These critics suggested that there is a

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‘correct’ way of producing Chekhov. Reviewing Alfréd’s production, John Elsom suggested: “The community atmosphere obliterates everything that we commonly imagine to be ‘theatre’ and it denies that sustaining of a naturalistic illusion which is central to Chekhov’s art.”33 On the other hand, critics such as Robert Cushman observed that, “we are beginning to learn that Chekhov can take tough handling.”34 Alfréd succeeded in opening up a debate in what had been considered a well-established performance tradition, and he was getting noticed for it.

**Breaking Conventions Again: Rehearsing Chekhov**

“A lot of mythology creeps into the evaluation of most classic texts: there is an accretion of half-truths which need to be periodically scrubbed away.”35

This obsession with re-visioning Chekhov on the British stage sustained Alfréd over three more productions while he was still at the helm of Shared Experience. In 1982, he was invited to direct *The Cherry Orchard* at the Oxford Playhouse. 1985 brought the invitation to guest direct at the National Theatre where Alfréd tackled *The Cherry Orchard*, this time with the new company formed by Ian McKellen and Edward Petherbridge. Finally, in 1986 Alfréd returned to his own company for a production of *The Three Sisters*.

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For his first production of *The Cherry Orchard* for the Oxford Playhouse, Alfreds again worked with the actors to explore a ‘heightened’ level of performance and to take them out of naturalism. The actors developed strong inner lives for their characters, and focused on and exaggerated certain physical elements. The critics were not overly supportive of Alfreds’ efforts to achieve a heightened playing style, and Michael Billington suggested that, “by treating the play as laborious farce…it misses Chekhov’s *detailed realism* and sense of despair emerging through the *interstices of daily life.*”\(^{36}\) Alfreds strongly disagreed with the view that there was anything “daily” about the play: “…it is not ultimately realistic. Of course it has a level of realism—a psychological realism which is a basis for its characters. But it is very heightened, highly selective—and it is written in comic terms.”\(^{37}\) With a shorter rehearsal period than he would have liked, Alfreds himself felt that the performance did not fully realize the “balance between farce and feeling” that he was aiming for.\(^{38}\) He explains, “The performances grow and become subtle and multi-layered. Perhaps this was a stage we did not reach.”\(^{39}\)

The 1985 *Cherry Orchard*

Alfreds would have the opportunity to explore the *Cherry Orchard* script again, this time with “strong, comic and individualistic actors capable of very bold performances.” Alfreds had been invited to direct at the National Theatre, and he again

\(^{36}\) Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 322.

\(^{37}\) Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 324.

\(^{38}\) Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 322.

\(^{39}\) Allen, *Performing Chekhov* 191.
chose to tackle *The Cherry Orchard* because he had been alerted by the critics to the dangers of overstressing the farcical elements of the script; with the McKellen-Petherbridge company he felt that with the maturity and boldness of these actors, he “would not need to stress the farcical elements too much.”\(^{40}\) For rehearsals and performances of *The Cherry Orchard* at the National (Cottesloe) in 1985, the Shared Experience ‘style’ successfully made the transition from small and middle scale touring theatre venues to the mainstream subsidized houses of the Royal National Theatre on London’s Southbank. *The Cherry Orchard* was a success and Alfreds’ vision for ‘actor’-centered performances made an indelible impact on National artistic leaders, actors, critics, and audiences alike.

Like all the productions he had directed for Shared Experience since 1975, Alfreds was keen that National rehearsals and performances should be freshly created each night. This is not to say that he intended the production to be loose or undisciplined. On the contrary, during rehearsals, each actor was grounded in a thoroughly detailed exploration of aspects of his or her character’s inner nature, reflecting Stanislavski-influenced objectives, obstacles, and actions. His continual mantra has been and continues to be that no two performances should ever be the same. According to Alfreds, “You cannot say of a great play, by which I mean something complex, multi-layered and ambiguous, ‘I want you to do the line this way’, or ‘This is what this scene is about’.”

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\(^{40}\) Allen, *Performing Chekhov* 191.
Each night the “actors should be free to go wherever they want, physically and emotionally.”  

This approach had worked with Shared Experience, as he had nurtured the company for ten years, often working with many of the same actors. But, how would it work on the stage of the National Theatre, with actors who were, on the whole, reared in mainstream houses, and previously unacquainted with such an unorthodox approach? Alfreds expressed some fear that the actors might not allow themselves the right to so much freedom. Sheila Hancock, who played Ranyevskaya, was also cast that season in a production directed by Philip Prowse, another non-‘Establishment’ director, who was on loan from Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre in Scotland. Hancock suggests the comprehensive nature of rehearsals during which the actors prepared and developed their characters:

> We had to know everything possible about the person we were playing as well as the others in the piece, allowing at the same time for the unpredictability of human nature, to be so inside our characters that if someone else on stage did something different we would respond in the spur of the moment exactly as our character would. We had, in short, to be the person.  

She notes the difference in directing styles between Prowse and Alfreds, and the subsequent atmosphere created for the actors:

> One could not find two directors more different than Philip Prowse and Mike Alfreds….With Philip it is wiser to set what you are doing and stick to it, for if one night you should decide suddenly that your emotion called for a new move down-right or a collapse into a chair, the chances are you would get out of your meticulously pinpointed light and do your emoting in a black-out….This kind of pre-planning necessitates a very structured approach. The feeling of a scene has to be discovered at rehearsals and

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41 Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 325.

then analysed and worked out in terms of gestures, moves, inflection, pace and tone of voice which can be repeated nightly.\textsuperscript{43}

This structured approach, according to Hancock, was “thrown to the winds by Mike.”

She continues, “with him nothing was to be set. No moves, no inflection, no approach to a scene, no climaxes, no gestures, no moods, no relationships.”\textsuperscript{44} In a way, Hancock’s notes on the production reflect the extent to which this was largely a ‘new’ way of working for many of the actors in the production. At the same time, her notes suggest the overall success of the experiment:

After two shows and nine months to come together, the company was well able to take advantage of these methods and do the various exercises without being inhibited by the fear of looking foolish. There were one or two dissenters who did not find the approach very productive for them; but I was in my element—it was perfect for me.\textsuperscript{45}

The scene design also reflected a major departure for Chekhov on the mainstream British stage. Working with designer Paul Dart, Alfreds employed set design to help push the production beyond naturalistic expectations, or Anglocized notions of Russian men in “sinister bowling hats and dark overcoats.”\textsuperscript{46} To remove this dated notion, the costumes were created in a palette of pink, yellow, red and mauve; “none of your ‘traditional’

\textsuperscript{43} Hancock, 201.

\textsuperscript{44} Hancock, 201.

\textsuperscript{45} Hancock, 203. Hancock’s notes reaffirm, from an actor’s point of view, the worth of Alfreds’ continuing desire for, and insistence on the value of having one company together for an extended period of time. The National Theatre financial resources make this ore of a possibility than do Shared Experience’s more limited budgets. The Arts Council’s refusal to provide subsidy for a three-year project for Shared Experience continued to be a stumbling block for Mike Alfreds’ further performance experiments with his own company.

\textsuperscript{46} Hancock, 203.
Chekhovian sepias and blacks.” 47 Alfreds’ stylized vision for the play was also apparent in Dart’s set design. 48 Dart hung bright blue and white curtains above the stage to create a ‘box’. These curtains, according to Stuart Young, lent a “lightness, lyricism, and fragility” to the world of the play, while banishing “any suggestion of the pseudo-Chekhovian ‘misty landscape’.” 49

Critics responded enthusiastically to Alfreds’ re-visioning of Chekhov’s text, and especially to the exuberant and obviously ‘Russian’ approach. In the Sunday Times, John Peter announced that, “Bit by bit, the British theatre is discovering that Chekhov was a Russian.” 50 In The Guardian, Michael Billington admitted:

> I have seen The Cherry Orchard in Paris, Moscow, Chicago, and at least nine times in Britain over the last two decades, but I have never seen such an emotionally full-blooded or deeply affecting version as Mike Alfreds’ new production at the Cottesloe. This is Chekhov with the gloves off. 51

Michael Ratcliffe commented especially on the impact of and freedom provided to actors who were not confined to any particular set of blocking or gestures. He notes Ian McKellan’s performance as Lopakhin on two consecutive evenings:

> The grieving triumph of the peasant Lopakhin at the purchase of

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47 Hancock, 203.

48 Here again, regardless of his protestations otherwise, the highly stylized vision for the production including extensive set and costume designs, do represent the employment of the kind of director’s concept that Alfreds had been keen to avoid in the past.


50 Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 326.

51 Allen, “Exploring the Limitless Depths” 326.
Ranyevskaya’s estate was the more moving when…the victorious and the defeated fell weeping into one another’s arms, but it made equal theatrical sense within Chekhov’s character and McKellan’s characterization for the boorish Lopakhin to whirl the keys to house around his head like a cowboy, kick over the daybed, and scatter the vase of scarlet flowers, together with Ranyevskaya…to the very edge of the white room.  

Mike Alfreds’ *Cherry Orchard* at the National Theatre, in the small space of the Cottesloe Theatre, amounted to a successful debut entry into the world of mainstream British theatre. Alfreds was pleased with the results, though he would have preferred to ‘spread his wings’ on the Olivier stage after directing in confined spaces for the previous ten years. He was about to get his opportunity. The National was ‘pleased’ as well; enough to invite Alfreds back to direct again in 1987: an adaptation of Eugène Sue’s novel, *The Wandrering Jew* in the Lyttleton Theatre in August, and *Countrymania*, a triology by Carlo Goldoni in a new version by Alfreds in the Olivier Theatre in December of the same year.  

With guest appearances at the Oxford Playhouse, and theatres in Heidleberg, Germany, and Toronto in 1984, now at the Royal National Theatre in 1985, Alfreds was spending an enormous amount of time away from Shared Experience. What had lured him away from the company he formed ten years previously? At Shared Experience, where the Arts Council had repeatedly blocked Alfreds’ efforts to increase the subsidy needed to implement his three-year project, the frustration was showing. Alfreds was ready to expand the image of the company just at the same time the Arts Council’s bank doors had closed. He had wanted a permanent ensemble working together and taking

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risks over a longer period of time than the Arts Council would support. Working within the available funding their subsidy structure would allow, Alfreeds felt that his work with Shared Experience had begun to resemble a production machine, churning out production after production. At that point, in his mid-fifties, he felt he had done what he wanted to accomplish at Shared Experience, and after years of struggling with low budgets and poor wages, he was ready for new and bigger artistic challenges. Alfreeds explains: “The reason why I haven’t yet explored some of the things I deeply want to—like using live music—is because of time and money.” He describes the situation at Shared Experience in the mid-80s: “I had always been wary of getting ‘top heavy’. Now we’ve got an administrator, we’ve got an office, we have to have a technical director and a stage manager….But practically, because of the financial situation in this country, and the state of subsidy, it’s very difficult to leap forward.”

In contrast, the National Theatre, at that point for Alfreeds, represented more recognition, better facilities, and more subsidy. The Royal National Theatre was the way forward for him at that point in his career: “I’m being invited there because of the way I work. I’m not being asked to stop my ways of working to go there. In a way, we all get sucked in by the establishment. That’s not necessarily bad, as long as one can do one’s work. There’s no reason that it should be deadly. In fact, it might even refresh me and stimulate me into a whole new level of work. Besides, where else do you go?”

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54 Rea, 8.

55 Rea, 8. The apologetic tone of Alfreds’ justification for his move away from Shared Experience requires some further comment and exploration. There is some implicit understanding here that the heavily subsidized houses of mainstream theatres such as the National, while affording greater recognition and prestige for the director, also represent
Looking Forward, Moving on

Mike Alfreds’ absence from day-to-day leadership and creative direction of Shared Experience, beginning in 1984, certainly had an enormous impact on the development of the company. During the period of 1984-86, direction of Shared Experience productions was shared amongst Alfreds and key guest directors. Clare Davidson stepped in on Beckett’s Happy Days, and Giles Havergal, Artistic Director from Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre, brought the emphasis back to novel adaptations with productions of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, and Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day. Still, the Board meeting minutes during 1986 reflect ongoing discussions of how best to plan for the artistic survival of the company. At one point, the Board discussed the possibility of joining forces with Havergal’s Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre in Scotland.56 Yet, in that same year, the Board acknowledged the need for a full-time committed artistic leader for the company, while Alfreds made plans to move on with his career as a free-lance director.

an artistic compromise, or the possibility of one. Alfreds defends his choice, stating that there’s no reason the work has to be ‘deadly’; yet this admission betrays his underlying fear about the work at these monolithic establishments. Perhaps, his comments invite a comparison between the ways of working in fringe theatres and ‘establishment’ houses such as the Royal National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company. The lengths to which Alfreds goes in order to justify his move, suggests the importance of the gap between these artistic entities in such areas as audience, conservatism of play selection, set requirements, working methods, artistic freedom, or even simply artistic tastes. The number of fringe directors who have eagerly appeared at the National also further supports the notion of the appeal of financial resources, staff, power, and national recognition.

56 Giles Havergal, interview with author, 31 July 2001. Havergal mentions several possibilities of combining the resources of Shared Experience with those of the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre. The most specific idea had been the potential for having Havergal take on Shared Experience as the ‘southern’ arm of his Glasgow theatre company.
MADE IN AMERICA: BACKGROUND ON NANCY MECKLER

“For me [theatre] is about expressing things that we don’t always connect with, the things people don’t know are there or have lost touch with…Spiritual theatre….”

-Nancy Meckler

The appointment of Nancy Meckler as the new Artistic Director and visionary leader for the next phase of Shared Experience’s lifespan, assured the company of a continuing artistic existence along the path begun by Mike Alfreds in 1975; a risk-taking, innovative approach centered on the technique of the actor. Strangely enough, for two directors who have led one of the longest-running touring companies in Britain, both Alfreds and Meckler share the early influence of an American style of training. Meckler was born and raised on Long Island, New York. During her youth, Meckler initially longed for the life of an actress, rather than that of a director. She was attracted to the expansive emotional expressiveness of the actor’s art. “The emotions and feelings you were allowed to express in life didn’t seem to be enough. I wanted to express things in a

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big way,” observes Meckler.² Even at this early stage, it is easy to see the seeds of what would become one of the hallmarks of the Shared Experience ethos under Nancy Meckler’s direction: that longing and desire for a theatrical expression that is larger than and beyond that of ordinary life.

An early playgoing experience had a remarkable impact on Meckler’s subsequent vision of the power of theatre. She saw a production of *The Crucible* in New York City when she was only eighteen; it was a production that unsettled her notions of the probable and possible in human behavior. As a result, she concluded that, “theatre can’t change people. But it can communicate a way of feeling or thinking that you might otherwise never come into contact with.”³

Meckler’s formal drama training includes an undergraduate degree from Antioch College in Ohio, under the mentorship of a professor named Meredith Dallas. It was a program that emphasized practical participation, rather than academic studies. After the degree, she went on to study acting at the HB Studios in New York City where she gained a “basic way of talking to actors, approaching actors, and understanding their process of acting.”⁴ This experience was followed by a year of specialist training in classical acting at the London Academy of Dramatic Art (LAMDA) in London. Although she had originally intended to be an actress, her youthful shyness kept her from auditioning. In an effort to stay involved in theatre, she turned her hand to every possible

² Mary Brennan, “No Compromise is the order of the day as Meckler shares her experiences in a big way,” *Glasgow Herald* 29 August 1988.

task from lighting and costumes to directing: “I certainly didn’t know I wanted to be a
director. I was just a woman who wanted to work in theatre who was too shy to act, and
directing was something I just gradually fell into…”

Yet, perhaps the biggest influence on Meckler’s future development as a director
was her immersion into the New York City avant-garde scene; there she worked with a
group called La Mama Plexus. Stanley Rosenberg, director of the group, had worked
abroad with Eugenio Barba, director of the Odin Theatret. Barba himself had studied
with Jerzy Grotowski in Poland in the 1960s, and so Rosenberg was able to bring back
many experimental Grotowski exercises that, “have a lot to do with starting from the
physical and taking it to a mental state—almost a kind of trance—before they explored
the space and the material.”

The influence of Polish-born theatrical giant, Jerzy Grotowski, on the alternative
practices of the New York theatre scene cannot be overstated. Not only did his
experiments and theories impact the work of Nancy Meckler, but they affected scores of
groups such as the Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s Living Theatre, Joseph Chaikin’s

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6 Barba founded the Odin in 1964. Jerzy Grotowski founded the Teatr Laboratorium in
Opole, Poland in 1958.
7 Nancy Meckler, interview with author, July 2001. Information on Barba’s study with
Grotowski can be found in Ian Watson’s “Training with Eugenio Barba,” Twentieth
8 Grotowski conducted workshops in New York City in both 1967 and 1969. For further
background information on Jerzy Grotowski see, Towards a Poor Theatre, London:
 Methuen, 1969.
Open Theatre, Ellen Stewart’s Café La Mama, and the entire New York City avant-garde. Many of these artists crossed paths in the United States, Great Britain, and in Europe through touring shows, workshops, and festival appearances. These cross currents made an enormous impact on creative artists throughout the British fringe in the 1960s.9

The ‘poor theatre’ of Grotowski took the creative emphasis off of the external mis en scene and instead placed it on the art of the actor, who he believed to be “at the centre of the theatrical event.”10 Like the Russian Meyerhold before him, Grotowski held a strong disinclination for naturalistic theatre that they believed simulated only the surface aspects of daily existence. Rather, Grotowski was most interested in the impulses preceding physical actions. He explains this as the “In/pulse—push from inside,” the impulse from deep within the actor’s body that is then responded to and made visible to the audience as physical action.11 Grotowski himself suggested the term ‘psycho physical’ as a way of describing this mind-body process, the aim of which was to develop the actor’s ability to physically and imaginatively respond to both internal and external stimuli. ‘Psycho physical’ is a term popularized by the plethora of subsequent practitioners who are interested in starting the rehearsal process from the intuitive, spiritual, and expressive experiences of the actor’s body, rather than from an intellectual, rational, mental response to a literary text.

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9 For a more extensive discussion of the connections between the American alternative theatre scene and the British fringe theatre movement, please see Chapter 2 of the dissertation.


11 Wolford, 199.
La Mama Plexus, an offshoot of Ellen Stewart’s Café La Mama, incorporated many of Grotowski’s experimental exercises, and Meckler was deeply influenced by things she saw happening in this group. She was fed by a new awareness of the capacity of plays to explore, “the biggest possible emotions about the nature of existence, rather than…a reproduction of the mundane.”\textsuperscript{12} She first worked with La Mama as both an actor and as an assistant director of sorts. In all events, the focus of workshops and rehearsals was not on creating productions or performing, but on exploring a theatrical process. While at La Mama Plexus, Meckler shifted her focus away from her earlier training and experiences: “I realized there was a whole different way of working that was more organic, that wasn’t so dependent on the director. Where the director was used differently, as a guide or a catalyst, choosing from what people were doing.”\textsuperscript{13} Like Mike Alfreds, Meckler appears to share a similar frustration with over-directed, over-conceptualized productions in which the director is god and the actors merely puppets on a string. Meckler took these ideals with her when she left her New York City home to settle permanently in the Britain.\textsuperscript{14}

Nancy Meckler arrived in London in 1968, a crucial time when the influx of Americans onto the British theatre scene forever altered the British approach to creating work. Many American groups, working largely outside of mainstream practices, brought a new focus on the body of the actor; a practice antithetical to much of the text-dominated


\textsuperscript{14} Meckler moved to Britain to study classical acting at the London Academy of Dramatic Art (LAMDA). She remained in the country after her subsequent marriage to British producer, David Aukin.
London theatre. These artists arrived just as a new fringe theatre was developing and emerging in London, and helped to provide an alternative to stale offerings in mainstream and national theatre venues.

Several significant visits from American alternative theatre artists ignited the quick explosion of the Fringe in London. Between 1968 and 1973, Joseph Chaikin and the Open Theatre made several visits to London, performing in European tours. During this period, Eileen Blumenthal, Chaikin biographer, notes that Chaikin spent a summer in London working with both Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. The Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill hosted Café La Mama’s *Futz* (1967), and the Vaudeville presented the same company’s *Tom Paine* (1968). Very soon after, also in 1968, American manager, Jim Haynes, opened the Arts Lab in Drury Lane. This popular and flexible space hosted such British fringe groups as Freehold, Pip Simmons, and The People Show. It became one of the few, if not only, experimental centers in London. In the same year, several more American influences spawned new spaces and ensembles. American theatre artists such as Ed Berman began Interactive Lunchtime Theatre, and Charles Marowitz created the Open Space out of a “Tottenham Court Road cellar.”

Nancy Meckler was at the center of this idealistic boundary-breaking nucleus of theatre practitioners dedicated to innovation, ensemble playing, risk-taking, and bold,
physical explorations. Although originally from the United States, Meckler quickly became one of the leaders of the innovative activities that were developing the London fringe. In London in 1968, Meckler became associated with another La Mama group. With Beth Porter, she formed Warehouse La Mama, and worked again as a director. With this group, Meckler was able to offer and incorporate techniques and exercises she had learned during her time at La Mama Plexus. Soon, Meckler founded her own company—Freehold, an offshoot theatre company she formed with a group of actors from Warehouse La Mama. With Freehold, Meckler developed a particular style with many of her Grotowski-based exercises, and she made use of physical and non-naturalistic methods of exploring texts. Freehold eschewed the traditional emphasis on literary re-interpretations of texts, toppling the conventionally-trained actors’ confidence in language-based practices.

Stephen Rea, an actor who worked with the company, suggests a way to describe the working practices of Freehold during its production of Antigone: “It’s kind of like trying to blow open texts…it worked enormously well because the physicality of it was what made it immediate and powerful. That was the American influence. No doubt about it.” 19 Although the company was short-lived, it was undoubtedly, as suggested by Roland Rees, “an important company.” 20 Peter Ansorge extends the praise so far as to

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20 Rees, 19.
assert that Nancy Meckler’s creation of Freehold had, at that time, “generally been recognized as the most successful exponent of ‘physical theatre’ in England.”21

Freehold, with its emphasis on ‘poor theatre’, highlighted the use of the body as the principal means of expression. This method, just as Alfreds had demonstrated in Arabian Nights, required a greater period of time to experiment in workshop and rehearsal than conventional productions that focused primarily on text. The rehearsal period employed by Freehold was, in many ways, typical of Fringe methods at the time. Perhaps, it also relates to the relative abundance of funding available in the early days of the Fringe, as well. It was a luxury that was short-lived, even though Meckler was, and continues to be, a strong advocate for the funding needed to support a necessarily, time-consuming way of working. Freehold normally spent three months in rehearsal for a show. This period allowed the director and cast to be flexible enough to devote two hours every day to physical and vocal training, and “to use the results of this to explore new ways of acting, of presenting, of finding an expressionistic style.”22 Stephen Rea suggests the impact that these physical regimens have subsequently had on the rehearsal practices of mainstream theatre: “For a start, young actors now are keen to do a physical and vocal limber up that actors in regular theatre in the sixties would have dropped down dead at the thought of. As a result of our work, in the seventies and after, it had become acceptable to do that.”23


23 Rees, 39.
Freehold’s first, and most well-known, production was Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The idea for this show, presented during 1969-1970, came from Meckler’s New York City workshops on a scene from *Oedipus Rex*. The aim for that experiment had been to work without limitations. Meckler indicates the scope of the freedom and exploration sought during the *Oedipus* rehearsals:

> People were free to do whatever they liked with the scene. They could use the entire room if they wished. They’d try things which were absolutely amazing. I always thought Greek tragedy would make marvelous material for Freehold.24

Here again, Grotowski’s exercises exerted an influence on the rehearsal discipline for the entire cast of *Antigone*. According to Meckler, Grotowski’s much misunderstood ‘Cat’ exercise was one of the main starting points for rehearsals:

> It’s a very difficult thing to do physically. But in the end it requires no strength—all you need is balance….You master a physical discipline—through complete control and relaxation, with no gymnastic tension. Only then does it become possible to use it together with a mental point of concentration.25

For Meckler, the ‘Cat’ introduced a new way of working. This Grotowski exercise, involving “an extremely complicated series of movements, legs balanced perilously, feline-like activity—a still and hushed concentration,” is infamously difficult to explain, and most acting teachers or directors do so by demonstrating it themselves.26

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26 This is Peter Ansorge’s description of Nancy Meckler’s demonstration of ‘the Cat’, in “Underground Explorations—2: Made in USA,” *Plays and Players* 19.6 (March 1972): 18-19.
Stephen Wangh, writing specifically about Grotowski’s physical approach to acting in his book, *An Acrobat of the Heart*, characterizes the ‘Cat’ exercise in the following way:

The Cat acts as a *container* for your inner life. In other words it is a physical form that evokes thoughts and feelings while at the same time providing safety and permission for their expression. In fact, the Cat is a very strong and a very safe container; there is no thought or feeling that is too powerful for it to hold. Since it keeps your hands and feet rooted to the floor, it creates a vehicle through which even an emotion like rage can be safely expressed. All you need to do is let yourself know what you are feeling while it is happening, and give yourself permission to allow that feeling to inhabit the form.²⁷

Meckler considers that the exercise releases a kind of energy that is then available to be used by the whole group. The level of concentration required for an actor to execute the ‘Cat’ can, in turn, be used as the springboard to evaluate his or her concentration at any point in rehearsals.

In the beginning of the 1970s, the use of “the body as a supersensitive instrument,” Meckler admits, was a “peculiar American thing.”²⁸ This practice emerged from the American interest in self-analysis and an obsession with self-expansion and personal consciousness. Meckler suggests the extent to which this approach to creative work existed in New York City and was explored without the imposition of a particular form. For example, rehearsals might be focused around a spontaneous exploration of an actor’s personal experiences. She is, however, critical of the tendency of certain actors who express themselves, yet do not become better actors. This kind of American exploratory process had a strong influence on the other side of the Atlantic and was one

of the strongest instigators of using the self as a starting point for rehearsal in British theatre ensembles, as well. Yet, Meckler confirms that this focus on the self was not the primary focus in her work with Freehold. In fact, she distances herself from what she perceives as the American over-reliance on pure self-exposure that was common with groups such as the Living Theatre. In Freehold workshops, in contrast, work involved “exposing yourself through material—or through an image.”29 This combination of body, text, and specific visual images was a hallmark of Nancy Meckler’s directing methods in the early days of Freehold, and continues to be a central aim of the Shared Experience vision today. Critics praised Freehold’s production of Antigone both for its distinctive visual sequences, and for the beginnings of an expressionistic style that had “obviously evolved through constant rehearsal together instead of being rigidly imposed from the top.”30

**Life After Freehold**

Freehold folded in the early 1970s, when Meckler left to have her first child. However, it was not a goodbye to the world of theatre; far from it. Furthermore, the eclecticism of her subsequent theatre work firmly established her reputation as a director in Britain. Not long after her break with Freehold, Meckler became the Associate Director at Hampstead Theatre, where her husband, David Aukin, was also working. For Hampstead, a London theatre that has earned a national and international reputation for

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the development of new and emerging writers, she had the opportunity to turn her hand to a variety of new plays. She directed the work of such writers as Pam Gems, Dennis Potter, and Sam Shepard.

Meckler began her friendship and professional acquaintance with Sam Shepard when she directed his *Icarus’s Mother* (1969). They formed a mutual admiration for each other’s work: His “intuitive, strange writing” was well-matched with her “non-intellectual approach.”31 This earlier acquaintance and friendship with the American playwright/actor led to her directing several world premieres of his plays including *Action* (1975) and *Killer Head* (1975) at the American Place Theatre in New York City, and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) at the Royal Court Theatre, London. Additionally, she staged the British premiere of his Pulitzer Prize winning *Buried Child* at Hampstead Theatre (1980).

What she discovered in working on scripted plays, however, was an artistic limitation to the direction of new plays in particular, in which she found little scope for the kind of directorial ‘expansion’ Meckler is keen to pursue. In an environment that nurtures new playwriting, the writer is the key. Meckler found that the critical press responded to the merits of the script she was directing, rather than the creative process, or the method of presentation: “Everything is done for the play, and it is judged on the play, not of the work.”32 Meckler has commented on the difficulty of maintaining her innovative physical methods of working within the contemporary British theatre.

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32 Martin, 18.
structure. Her observations of theatre in the early 1980s are telling: “British traditions work against such physicality and experimentation…. British theatre always reverts to the spoken word because we are in a verbal, not a physical society. I long to push back the boundaries and ‘go for broke’.”

In 1984, Meckler and husband, David Aukin, made the joint decision to move on to Leicester Haymarket, a large regional theatre. According to Meckler, “We both felt that we needed to leave London, that we’d got into the trap of only being able to do very small things. He’d been running a small theatre for eight years and I’d been directing small plays.” Going to Leicester gave Meckler the opportunity to devote time to the works of such playwriting giants as Shakespeare, Chekhov, Moliere, Ionesco, and Euripedes. Although she was still experimenting with scripted plays at Leicester, she hoped to break creative patterns, to give classic plays a more visual force, and to find material that would allow more room for the “huge dynamic” that Meckler so hoped to explore.

Though she has often been associated with several well-known theatres, Meckler has also done an enormous amount of work as a freelance director. On her own, she has experimented with a range of realistic, non-naturalistic, and avant-garde productions at the Royal Court Upstairs, the Cambridge Theatre Company, the Oxford Playhouse, Monstrous Regiment, and the Royal National Theatre. She was, in fact, one of the first

33 Martin, 19.


35 Martin, 19.
women to direct on the Lyttleton stage at the National Theatre when she presented *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1981). Many of the plays that she presented as a freelance director involve stories of strong, challenging women—from Antigone, to the Duchess of Malfi. It is a trait that would become another hallmark of subsequent work at Shared Experience Theatre.

**Moving on to Shared Experience**

Nancy Meckler’s early training in the New York City alternative theatre scene, and her participation in the beginnings of the most fruitful years of the London fringe parallel the years Mike Alfreds was forming and shaping his artistic vision and philosophy that would eventually guide the creation and development of Shared Experience in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1987, Shared Experience was in need of a strong leader to take over as Artistic Director and resident visionary for the company, and Nancy Meckler, uncannily, proved herself as the ideal candidate. Although she did not initially possess the same affinity for storytelling and adaptation that had driven Mike Alfreds’ work, Meckler possessed that same commitment to performance, physical transformation, exploration, and ensemble playing that had distinguished Alfreds’ style.

With the appointment of Nancy Meckler as Artistic Director in 1987, Shared Experience was assured a continued life as a theatre company devoted to the exploration of different ways theatre. They were not a writers’ but, decidedly, an *actors*’ company, employing physical and vocal techniques to develop a common rehearsal vocabulary.

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36 Julia Pascal was the first woman to direct at the Royal National Theatre, presenting a platform performance on Dorothy Parker.
Like Mike Alfreds before her, Meckler was adamant that Shared Experience should be about exploration and investigation, and the very nature of performance. Given her observations of western theatre as dominated by a “mental, verbal” starting point, she was eager to guide Shared Experience’s exploration of texts by using the actors’ physical, intuitive, non-intellectual impulses. With these aims in mind, Meckler was “intent on putting Shared Experience’s resources behind a physical approach to explore the boundaries of performance.”

CHAPTER 6

THE MECKLER YEARS: THE RETURN TO STORYTELLING

“Shared Experience’s reason to exist is to take artistic risks.”¹

The New Administration: Women at the Helm

Since the transference of artistic leadership from Mike Alfreds to Nancy Meckler in 1987, the women of Shared Experience have utilized the stage as a forum for examining women’s lives and experiences. The impact of Polly Teale’s contributions to the artistic path of the company have been felt since she first participated as Meckler’s assistant director for *The Bacchae* in 1988; Teale later returned to the company to serve as Associate Director, before officially receiving the title of Joint Artistic Director for Shared Experience Theatre along with Nancy Meckler in the Autumn of 2001. In contemporary Britain, a woman in a leadership position for a theatre company is still relatively uncommon—a duo of women at the helm is both rare and extraordinary. Too often, the work of women directors has been side-lined in favor of the work of the men who head the major subsidized theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and the Royal Court. Yet, despite this endemic problem, the

¹ Nancy Meckler, Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes, 5 Oct. 1989.
women of Shared Experience have transformed stage practice, the craft of storytelling, and affected the lives of many through their innovative touring productions of adapted novels. Through an estimable presence in the Westminster neighborhood of Soho, London, Shared Experience have spread their influence close to home through community and education work, and farther afield through national and international tours. Shared Experience have certainly expanded the performance vocabulary for working within both physical and text-based theatre. They have also found new possibilities for exploring the questions surrounding who we are and what we experience and express as human beings during the last decade of the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century.

As the new artistic head of an already well-known fringe company, Meckler would have the sizeable task of locating a fresh identity with which to distinguish her own creative energies and purpose. Fortunately, Meckler immediately inherited a key tool for establishing a forceful presence in their Westminster community—the Soho Laundry. ² After a long public appeal to raise £100, 000 of funding for the refurbishment of the disused Laundry in their Soho neighborhood of Westminster, Shared Experience finally had a permanent place to call home. Though they would remain a touring company, the building offered space for administrative offices and rehearsal space for their own productions. Two studio rehearsal rooms are also available for rent by other companies, and have become much sought after spaces for the use of many other London

² London is divided into thirty-three city councils, each with local governing bodies. The Soho Laundry is located in the Westminster borough of London and receives some local council funding for the work the theatre company does to enrich the cultural life of the community.
theatres, film, and television companies. The rental fees bring in a substantial yearly income for the company. Significantly, this building, more than any other aspect of the company’s administration, has helped to assure their financial survival during a decade when many smaller, less permanent companies floundered.

The Soho Laundry allowed Shared Experience to quickly establish a definite identity in London. Shrewdly, Meckler immediately took advantage of this space to entrench the company within the life of the Westminster community by offering youth theatre opportunities for area students during the summers and holidays. She also organized community plays for all interested Westminster residents. In June of 1988, the Shared Experience Youth Theatre presented *A Visit to Medieval Soho*, and in October of the same year, *The Drury Lane Ghost* was presented using local amateur actors from the local Westminster community. No less important, this recognizable benefit to the community afforded the company additional recognition and funding from the Westminster City Council and from independent private or corporate sponsors such as Citibank, Shell, and the Soho Society.3

**Finding Her Feet: 1987-1988**

Shared Experience Theatre experienced a variety of bumps, bruises, growing pains, discoveries, and celebrations on its way to developing and strengthening its own

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3 In 1989, Shared Experience Theatre received £29,000 from the Westminster City Council.
recognizable style. After many years directing for the Hampstead Theatre and Leicester Theatre—both small regional theatres specializing in the production of new scripts—Meckler was excited to experiment once again with theatre on the London fringe, much like the adventure of her earlier years with Freehold. As the new Artistic Director in 1987, the first period of Meckler’s tenure was characterized by attempts to re-invest in methods similar to her earlier experimental work by applying physical approaches to classic texts. She was eager to reinvigorate familiar texts with new interpretations; to overthrow, question, or re-invent tired and worn-out approaches to drama by ancient and contemporary playwrights.

Nancy Meckler’s first production for Shared Experience was a return to ritualistic roots with a small-scale tour of *The Bacchae* in 1988. The show opened on the 29th of August, 1988 at St. Brides as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The national tour ended in London for a sold-out run at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith Studio. This first production is noteworthy for several reasons beyond being the inaugural staging under Meckler’s direction. First, some critics, loyal to the tradition of stylized narrative storytelling established by Mike Alfreds, were wary of Nancy Meckler’s suitability to her new position. They suggested that her strengths lay, rather, in her reputation for “high-focus, intense examinations of characters and relationships.” However, Meckler quickly

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4 1988 witnessed an enormous revival of interest in ancient Greek dramas and adaptations, including the following: Cheek By Jowl’s *Philoctetes*; Deborah Warner’s RSC production of Sophocles’ *Elektra* (Pit Theatre); Garry Hynes’ production of Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Love of the Nightingale* for the RSC; and Donald Sumpter’s production of Ted Hughes’ adaptation of Seneca’s *Oedipus*.

demonstrated her ability to ground productions within a physical base. With *The Bacchae*, she provided ample proof of her ability to “release text on a cerebral and physical level.” Meckler explains her intent to use physical expression as the means of providing a contemporary audience accessibility to the mythological spirit of the Bacchae: “Essentially, I believe that understanding an old text depends on creating a physical world to which an audience can relate, on making people realise it’s not so foreign to them.”

The kinds of experience with which Meckler wanted audiences to relate were not the everyday social frustrations and trivialities of modern Britain, but the expansive sweep of the nature of existence; huge metaphysical concepts such as “the nature of male and female, good and evil.” Second, the seeds of interest in women’s experiences are immediately apparent. Discussing ideas implicit in the text of *The Bacchae*, Meckler suggests the value of a broad definition of feminine qualities: “Euripides is saying, not only do we all have what are called female and male sensibilities within us but, more importantly, it is dangerous for both individuals and society to subjugate one in favour of the other.” Finally, with *The Bacchae*, Meckler was already guiding Shared Experience towards an aesthetic interest in the power of emotional repression and release. For this particular production, she was attracted to the idea of finding physical gestures and

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9 Peter Whitebrook, “Sharing an Experience with the Ancients”
expressions capable of suggesting the danger and consequences for a society that tries to repress its own “natural forces.””

1989-1990

Over the next couple of years, Meckler and her creative teams continued to take risks and explore ways of ‘opening up’ classic drama and rarely staged contemporary drama through the use of movement, gesture, visual tableaux, music, and silence. During these years the company produced a range of scripted dramas including Sam Shepard’s True West (1989), G.B. Shaw’s Heartbreak House (1989), Maria Irene Fornes’ Abingdon Square (1989), and Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party (1990). Though it took time to establish a reputation and recognition from arts critics and journalists, elements of a distinctive style began to emerge in these early productions. In response to True West, Claire Armistead commented that “it has a physicality not in great abundance on the English stage….” Heartbreak House was noted by Jane Edwardes as a “potent reminder that Shared Experience…has always been interested in a powerful physical presence as much as working with words.” Robin Thornber observed Meckler’s success in taking her actors “beyond naturalism into larger-than-life emotional

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10 Jean Nicholson, quoted in Nichola Robertson, The List. August 8 1988. This preoccupation appears even more strongly in later productions such as Anna Karenina, Jane Eyre, War & Peace, House of Bernarda Alba, and Mill on the Floss.


expression….”

Press articles were unusually effusive in response to Maria Irene Fornes’ Abingdon Square.

**Sea Changes: Influences from Abroad**

During the final years of the 1980s, two crucial events occurred that would considerably alter the artistic path of Shared Experience Theatre. Both of these incidents shaped Meckler’s use of movement and imagery within her productions for the company. First, Meckler met Eastern European theatre director, Mladen Materic, in 1987, when his production of Tattoo Theatre was presented in 1987 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland. His unique approach to the creation of new, wordless performance texts made a deep impact on Meckler. He was brought in many times during a two-year period to lead workshops with Shared Experience actors and other London theatre practitioners. This residency with the company came to a climax with his direction of a new work, The Closing Number in 1991. Next, in 1989, Meckler decided to direct Maria Irene Fornes’ play, Abingdon Square. This script, more than any other she had directed for the company up to this point, demanded an acute visual and physical approach to performance. First, I’ll discuss the production of Fornes’ Abingdon Square, then explore Materic’s artistic background, his influence on the developing Shared Experience ‘style’, and his guest-directed production for the company.

It is with Abingdon Square that keynotes of the company’s future work start to sound and become more prominent. Always eager to pursue artistic risks, Nancy Meckler decided in 1989 to stage this particular play by Maria Irene Fornes. The Cuban-

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born American playwright was relatively unknown to London audiences and critics, but familiar to Meckler who had been a fan since she directed a different Fornes play with her Freehold Theatre company in the late 1960s. It was almost inevitable that Meckler would meet up Fornes’ work again at some point, as the physical and visual aspects of her writing are so prominent. *Abingdon Square* provided for a fortunate marriage between the visually attuned language of the playwright’s script and Shared Experience’s developing anti-realist aesthetic. Just one year earlier, *Plays & Players* suggested that, “Fornes has developed her own language of dramatic realism, turning realism on its head by emphasizing the interior lives of its characters rather than their exterior selves.”

On the surface, the story of *Abingdon Square* is deceptively simple: Set in the years prior to World War I, it explores the emotional conflicts and sexual passion of Marion, a young woman suspended in a marriage to a much older man. Furthermore, as with much of Fornes’ writing, the text of *Abingdon Square* relies on the barest of plot structures. The play is composed of thirty-two short scenes, presented more as individual episodes, and often dislocated by gaps in information that disrupt the flow of action and development. The episodes function more as a collage of moods, images, and textures. The action is deliberately skeletal, since the events themselves are of secondary importance to the inner lives of the characters. As Michael Billington described the

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14 Quote from the October 1988 issue of *Plays & Players*, appearing in the Royal National Theatre program note for *Abingdon Square*.

15 *Abingdon Square* publicity material.
performance, the controlled, calm exterior behavior of the characters was regularly ruptured by the, “destructive passion bursting through a formal, elegant surface.”\textsuperscript{16}

Some critics were markedly disappointed in the sparseness of the plot, and the lack of naturalism in the approach. Charles Spencer went so far as to describe the performance as “a worrying indication of the impoverished state of new writing for the stage.” He further considered that Fornes, “as if embarrassed by her story,…goes for a non-naturalistic, self-consciously…tricksy approach.”\textsuperscript{17} Paul Taylor similarly commented that since “we are given so unfleshed-out a picture of [Marion], this tragic, self-voiced irony remains largely diagrammatic and fails to move.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet, other commentary, more attuned to the emphasis on characters’ psyches, pointed out aspects of the text and performance that attempted to communicate through an expressive visual language.

With \textit{Abingdon Square}, Meckler truly began to demonstrate her ability to communicate with visual as well as textual confidence. This is not to suggest a bold or exaggerated use of spectacle, but, rather, intensely charged emotional moments which are birthed through the subtelst of gestures, emphases, and responses. The intricately nuanced performances were choreographed as precisely as if preparing poses for photographs, and the subsequent visual tableaux, according to Billington, “imply more


\textsuperscript{17} Charles Spencer, “Emotionally Lean New York Cuisine,” \textit{The Daily Telegraph} 3 April 1990.

\textsuperscript{18} Paul Taylor, “Square Roots,” \textit{The Independent} 3 April 1990.
than they state.” Alex Renton observed that the eloquent use of the body, the subtle movements, and delicate gestures communicated a depth of sexual longing: “In a silent scene, Marion, half-dressed, binds herself to a pillar and stretches her body in a dim attic light; her frustrations exercised in a physical catharsis of great erotic power.” An additional non-verbal aspect of the production that would soon become a hallmark of future Shared Experience projects was the interweaving of music into the production. One critic crafted her entire review of the production as if she were responding to the emotional score of a musical composition: She used phrases such as “tone-poem of a play,” “delicacy of an adag,” and “emotional shifts of tempo.” The company’s work was noted not only by arts critics, but by the administration of mainstream theatres as well: The Royal National Theatre made a request for the theatre to remount *Abingdon Square* in their Cottesloe theatre space. Though Mike Alfreds and Nancy Meckler had both been commissioned as free-lance directors to work on the stages of the National Theatre, this was the first time a Shared Experience production had been given a space in the season; it was a major move on the part of the subsidized theatre sector to recognize the work of the fringe.

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22 *Abingdon Square* played at the Soho Poly from 2 June until 1 July 1989. It appeared at the National’s Cottesloe Theatre in April of 1990.
Eastern European Influences:

Exploring New Working Methods with Mladen Materic

“Those of us working in the innovative sector must constantly search for new influences if we are to develop and explore the boundaries of performance.”

-Nancy Meckler

The second key event from the late 1980s that would shape the artistic path of Shared Experience and push the company’s artists to explore new theatrical territory was Nancy Meckler’s meeting with Mladen Materic, followed by his subsequent association with the company. Since 1987, the long-standing association with Mladen Materic has been the single most important ‘outside’ influence on the creative path of Shared Experience Theatre. In this section, I will examine Mladen Materic’s artistic background and philosophy, the ways in which he impacted the artistic direction of the Shared Experience, and also the manner in which his work has helped to expand the company’s performance vocabulary.

Background on Mladen Materic

Mladen Materic, a theatre director from the former Yugoslavia, was a Professor of Theatre Arts at Sarajevo University from 1984-1992. In 1984, with other artists from the Academy of Performing Arts at Sarajevo, Materic founded and served as Artistic

23 Nancy Meckler, Shared Experience company publicity statement for Mladen Materic’s residency.
Director for a new theatre called The Open Stage ‘Obala’. It was intended as a center for the exploration of theatre, film, and music. 1984 appears to have been a very busy year for Materic; also in 1984, Materic created a group called Tattoo Theatre. Earlier in his career, Materic had worked on texts from playwrights such as Beckett and Lorca, yet with Tattoo Theatre, Materic was more focused on trying to find a way to work without words; to find a visual, physical theatre. He believed that the lack of dialogue would inspire him to intensify the physical action on a theatre piece instead.

The first production, Dance in the 80s (1984), was performed to popular and critical praise across Yugoslavia. In 1986, he created the performance of Tattoo Theatre. It was at a performance of this show, winner of the Fringe First award at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1987, where Nancy Meckler first observed Materic’s work.24 Nancy Meckler was fascinated by what she saw in Tattoo Theatre: an entirely wordless exploration of human behavior and relationships. At the time of Materic’s Edinburgh performance, Meckler noted that the power of his work “lies in his capacity to evoke passion, pathos, humor, and high drama through physical rather than the verbal skills of his actors.”25 As well, Meckler was interested in Materic’s rare way of plumbing many

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24 The performance of Tattoo Theatre at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was produced by Ricard DeMarco, OBE. Demarco has been presenting experimental theatre and visual arts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe since its inception fifty-five years ago. He has devoted his efforts to furthering the presence of avant-garde art in Scotland. In 1995, “Demarco was awarded the Polish International Theatre Institute Award in Warsaw for thirty years of commitment to presenting Eastern European theatre to the English speaking world.” (Xela Batchelder, Rocket Venues program, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, 2002.)

25 Shared Experience publicity for The Closing Number.
different avenues of human communication, which she considered, “a specific and unique theatre language.”

Mladen Materic’s Artistic Philosophy

Materic envisions a ‘theatre of action’. Yet, he does not perceive ‘action’ in the same manner in which the term has been defined in conventional North American or British theatre practice. His use of the term “action” is directly related to contemporary Eastern European scenography theory, and the related vogue for “Action Design.” The postwar era theatres of Prague nourished this new approach to scenic design; the movement, beginning in the late 1960s, was led by designers such as Jaroslav Malina, Jan Důsek, Albert Pražak, Jozef Ciller, and Miroslav Melena. The term ‘Action Design’ designates, “an approach to scenography that is physically and psychologically functional, and intimately interactive with the actor.” This design theory, a reaction against pictorial realism, is focused instead on the complex layers and metaphorical possibilities of dramatic space, and the actor’s interactive role within this space. It is the pursuit of a fluid and psychologically open design that is, “at once suggestive of many locales, evocative of the play’s inner life.”

Delbert Unruh, in a series of articles exploring the influence of Action Design, describes the importance of ‘actuality’ onstage; according to Unruh, actuality “is the quality that things have when they are

26 Shared Experience report to the Gulbenkian Foundation.


28 Christilles and Unruh, 134.
existing now, present, current, immediate and involved in acts of action.”29 He further explains that, “for a theatre that believes that action is the primary means of communication, multiple information streams and multiple channels of communication, visual as well as verbal, need to be invented and exploited.”30

In this section I will be considering the ways in which Materic has expanded the possibilities of the term ‘action’ and increased Shared Experience’s vocabulary for performance. During his early development as a director, Materic often worked with texts from playwrights such as Lorca and Beckett, or with improvised textual scenarios. All the while, Materic was observing how often the actors relied upon their hands, faces, or speech to aid them in their acting tasks; he noticed an overwhelming emphasis on the use of text and dialogue to communicate meaning on stage. He wondered how to include other parts of the body in the acting process. Eventually, he arrived at certain key questions that guided the next phase of his work: In what ways do we communicate as human beings? What other channels of communication exist? With actors from his own theatre company at Obala, he was engaged in pursuing answers to these questions:

> From the start the actors and collaborators of the company are engaged in research and in the elaboration of a new theatrical language, conscious that what is essential in human relationships is found beyond the universe of words and their meanings, the company imposes action as the fundamental element of its theatrical language.31


Materic, then, sought a more accurate description of the complex relationships between things in life and, therefore, on the stage as well.

Materic’s main point of inspiration and focus came from his affinity with German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys’ belief in the energy of material. Beuys developed a center for contemporary art in Düsseldorf during the 1960s, working to break down boundaries between literature, music, visual art, and performance. Beuys’ own performances, which he referred to as “actions”, involved highly symbolic and metaphorical sculptures, objects, drawings, and installations; he often incorporated unconventional items such as fat, earth, felt, and honey in these actions, focusing on what he believed to be the different energy or heat inherent to each item. Materic is interested in Beuys’ ideas regarding the existence of different qualities in the energy of materials. He explains: “For example, because this table is made of wood, I have a very specific reaction to it, to its warmth and texture. Our theatre was based on a great respect for materials, in all their forms, shapes, materials and colours.”

As a result of Materic’s respect for the different qualities of energy in physical objects, he further concluded that this could have a major impact on the work of the actor, by exploring “…the three dimensions of space and the dimension of time.” Materic insisted that each dramatic situation has its own energy, and ascribed equal value to all contributing factors such as colors, position of the actor’s body, sounds of words, and other elements of production.

32 CD-ROM notes from a Materic’s talk at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, Scotland in 1994, in Organic Sequences for the Theatre, Arts Archives.

Materic’s interest in action, then, is relational. It has to do with the ways in which the actor is always relating, and therefore always shifting, to these elements and influences around him or her. In fact, Materic introduces several terms that are useful for understanding both his training methods and his approach to ‘action’ and ‘receptivity’ in the theatre. As an acting teacher, Materic begins by introducing his students to the idea of the ‘impulse’. Materic defines this term as the “minimum of energy which is capable of provoking a reaction [or response].”34 This impulse requires a shift or an adaptation on the part of the actor. At the most basic level, Materic’s actors practice an exercise called ‘Activity/Passivity’, in which one person actively tries to move another through direct force, breath, energy, or sound.35 This activity involves the use of all parts of the body. Building upon this concept, Materic teaches actors how to create ‘organic sequences’ in relation to time, to space, and to direct force or power. This activity, however, does not mean that actors simply respond to internal shifts within themselves, to their own impulses. But, rather, suggests that we also must react to stimuli that are outside of us. To achieve an ‘organic response’ we must be capable of adjusting ourselves in accordance with the “harmony of things.” Again, Materic is referring to the actor’s ability to shift or relate, to be aware and to adapt to different aspects of the space or environment.

34 Materic, Organic Sequences for the Theatre.

35 Materic became unsatisfied with the term ‘passivity’, and started to explain the idea more specifically as ‘receptivity’—the main idea here is that one person is actively attempting to influence or change another person. The ‘receptive’ person is not necessarily passive, but must respond to the active partner’s requests.
Materic insists that there is always something making us adapt or react. Actors must constantly adapt their positions and performances. Materic’s training thus becomes a ‘theatre of receptivity’ as well, focusing on impulses that are given and then answered with a response. These explorations include experimentation with all aspects of the actor’s physical world: time, space, sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and other elements of the space or production. Materic observes a direct relation/link between these activities and a more vibrant life on stage: “In exploring these possibilities, the extent of variation allows for a closer link to the complexities of life; the movements become ‘more alive’….This is important on the stage to allow for more variables to take place—shifting between different levels of tension.”36

In Workshop with Mladen Materic at the Soho Laundry

Shared Experience has always sought to ‘absorb’ new artistic influences, with the intent of exploring new areas of performance. Nancy Meckler, in particular, believes that the best way to disseminate information is to assimilate new practices. The company has developed a reputation for “pioneering new working methods which eventually filter through to the mainstream.”37 In the late 1980s, the company invited Mladen Materic to the Soho Laundry where British actors and directors might work with him for an extended period of time.38 Meckler worked to raise enough funds to ensure that Materic

36 Materic, *Organic Sequences for the Theatre*.

37 Shared Experience Report to the Gulbenkian Foundation.

38 By extension, Mladen Materic’s methods may now be in use by other theatre artists in Britain.
would have adequate time to teach and work with British actors, including a subsequent rehearsal period that ultimately led to the creation and direction of an original theatre piece called, *The Closing Number*.\(^{39}\) She applied to the Gulbenkian Foundation for funding to help make it possible for British actors to participate in workshops with Materic, and she suggested to the Board of Shared Experience Theatre that, “workshops with Materic would prove to be a very important move.”\(^{40}\)

This turned out to be a prophetic statement. Well-known actors and directors from throughout fringe and mainstream British theatre participated in the workshops, including Annabelle Apsion, Saskia Reeves, Harriet Walter, Joely Richardson, Mike Alfreds, Nancy Diuguid, and Sue Lefton.\(^{41}\) During his time at the Soho Laundry, Mladen Materic’s unique artistic vision also influenced his host theatre company in a variety of ways. It was Materic’s series of workshops and guest-directed production of an original work, *The Closing Number*, which provided the strongest impetus for the company to begin exploring the possibility of original, devised productions, and, in particular, the return to theatrical adaptations of literature.

\(^{39}\) International Initiatives and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation both financially supported Materic’s production of *The Closing Number*.

\(^{40}\) Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes, 14 Feb. 1988.

\(^{41}\) Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes highlight various workshops with Mladen Materic in January 1988, January 1989, and April 1989.
Creating *The Closing Number*

Nancy Meckler wanted British actors to have the benefit of an extended rehearsal period to explore the possibilities of Materic’s ‘organic’ theatre language. As a result, Materic was invited to create an original production at Shared Experience Theatre’s Soho Laundry. This production, *The Closing Number*, was co-produced with the Hampstead Theatre in 1991.42 By engaging Mladen Materic to direct a full production, Meckler was keen to widen the access to Materic’s theatre techniques: “The production will reach, stimulate, and ‘educate’ a broader catchment in the profession than workshops alone.”43 It is extremely rare for Shared Experience Theatre to invite a guest to direct a production under the Shared Experience banner. Since Nancy Meckler’s leadership began, there have been only two guest. The production of *The Closing Number*, not covered by the company’s general grant from the Arts Council, was financially supported by both the Arts Council’s International Initiatives Fund, and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

*The Closing Number* was a completely wordless piece, as are all of Mladen Materic’s projects, with a story focused instead on the visual and physical aspects of the

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42 Rebecca Gatward was invited to direct *The Magic Toyshop* in 2001. She is the second guest director to work with Shared Experience since 1987.

43 Nancy Meckler’s report to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Please note the tone of this statement. Although Nancy Meckler is eager to spread new theatrical influences, this report also reflects, to a certain degree, the context in which the work was produced, especially the pressure to obtain private or corporate funding outside of basic Arts Council of England resources. Increasingly, theatre artistic directors and managers have been required to provide evidence of the ‘educational’ value of their activities and the of the company’s capability to be accessed by wide-ranging and diverse audiences. Shared Experience became very skillful at marketing their productions for all of these audiences.
destructive relationship between a husband and wife in a knife-throwing act. The emphasis lay in the characters’ body language, as extensions of the emotional brutality and violence that results when people in a relationship are pushed to the edge. The main characters were played by Phil Daniels and Denise Wong. Before performing in *The Closing Number*, Daniels had been playing Alex in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s (RSC) production of *Clockwork Orange* for two years. With the RSC’s text-dominated approach to acting, Daniels felt that he had been neglecting movement work and decided rehearsals with Materic would be the best solution. Fortunately, Daniels brought a vital skill with him: He had learned knife-throwing five years earlier in preparation for a film. According to Daniels, who was challenged by Materic’s unconventional approach to creating theatre: “You’ve got to really work hard to find devices of conveying messages without speaking. You’re very exposed. Often you can cover your acting by speaking, if it’s not going so well, but here you can feel pretty naked.”

The inspiration for the production came from one particularly vivid image: “that essential picture of a man throwing knives at a woman against a board.” Materic felt that “in that one variety act there are many layers of a relationship.” This decision was

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44 I have used the past tense to describe the production because there is neither script, nor any videotape footage extant to document the continuing existence of the piece, even if only in archive form. The production has only ever existed in the performers’ minds. It is more evidence of the difficulty of documenting and writing about the nature of alternative theatre work. The evidence for the production lies not in an existing script, as with most conventional productions, but with scattered pieces of reviews, interviews, and memories of the production.


46 Hemming, “Sharpening Up the Act”
closely related to his belief that “in daily life we communicate on many, many levels.” For *The Closing Number*, Materic let the performers influence the way the story was told. He gave his performers this skeletal story line and let them improvise and develop the details and ‘truth’ for themselves during eight weeks of workshops, leading to a rehearsal period during which time Wong and Daniels honed specific images and sequences. The performers repeatedly improvised scenes until the ‘truth’ emerged “as a gut response to the emotional dynamics of the act.” This required a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness from the performers in every part of their bodies.

Materic’s journey towards what he considers to be ‘truth’ needs to be clarified. He is not referring to a verbal or philosophical conception of truth, but rather a genuine engagement in the process of action and reaction. Materic’s rehearsal methods can also be understood more clearly though his guiding concepts of impulse and receptivity. In essence, the performers developed simple, specific, and detailed movements to communicate the story; the movements were created by the performers responding to each impulse given by the other performers, or generated by the space, the sounds, the emotional atmosphere, and other immediate influences. A detailed example of this process in action was observed and recorded by theatre critic Helen Rose for the publication, *Time Out*:

Silence. Phil Daniels and Denise Wong prowl around the rehearsal room, their disintegrating relationship angrily expresses through improvised action and gestures. The scene they are performing is developed instinctively—he is sullen and introverted, she aggressive and resentful.

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47 Hemming, “Sharpening Up the Act”

The scene is run through twice more, each time with subtle shifts to its internal dynamics, each time with dramatically different interpretations. In the silence the emotional charge is almost palpable, the tension electric.49

Materic’s emphasis on his performers’ actions and reactions during the rehearsal process is further evidence that it is not only the conventional elements of character and dialogue that enliven a performance, but “the fact that something is happening” on emotional, physical, and subconscious levels as well.50 Jenny Topper, Artistic Director of the Hampstead Theatre where The Closing Number was presented, notes Materic’s tendency to comment on the actors’ ability to relate to everything around them; their moment-to-moment process of action and response: “Mladen gives notes like no other director I know. He doesn’t talk about the action itself, but always about what gives rise to it.”51

Press Response to The Closing Number

Many of these aspects of creating an original performance were the outcome of Materic’s interest in exploring levels of human communication that exist beyond spoken language. Yet, it was precisely this lack of dialogue that sparked the strongest negative

49 Helen Rose, “Impro Vision.” I would suggest that Helen Rose’s use of the word “instinctively” to describe the development of performers’ process is not completely accurate here, and would benefit from further qualification. The use of impulse does rely on a certain amount of freedom of response and sensitivity to elements below the conscious level. However, the development of the scene also reflects the extent to which the performers must consciously discipline their responses, intentionally and purposefully adjusting and tweaking each action and response in the creation of a series of gestural and movement patterns—movements that must communicate meaning for the audience watching the performance.

50 Nancy Meckler, Report to Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Shared Experience Archives.
reactions from the press. “This is a play without words and it is the poorer for the lack of them,” suggests Gwyn Morgan in *Plays & Players*. Charles Spencer concurs: “Mr. Materic’s wizard wheeze is to dispense with the tiresome, time-consuming business of writing dialogue.” He continues, “We learn nothing of the character’s thoughts and emotions, nothing of what they have to say to each other.” Spencer then pushes the idea further to propose the absurdity of the production and the calculating nature of Materic’s theatrical interests. Spencer suggests, “[Materic] is secretly laughing all the way to the bank.”

Claire Armistead’s review focuses more on the potential destructive impact of the show’s violent content. She observes, “a sadistic recklessness that becomes as unbearable to the people watching it as to those experiencing it.” Yet, she continues to form a rather different conclusion: “But who cares, when the result pushes a group of English actors so far beyond the normal bag of tricks.” Lauraine Leigh comments that the production, “pushes the limits of theatre;” Jon Garrett suggests that, “true to the ambition of Shared Experience theatre company, Mladen Materic presented a piece that

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53 *Plays & Players* May 1991:30. Gwyn Morgan offered the same comment roughly four times during his review. He also suggested the following: “It’s like watching a dumb show, or a piece in an unknown foreign language,” “It’s a conventional play without speaking, a creature with a limb missing,” and “Body language without talking is a very limited kind of fun.”


goes beyond the bounds of usual experience.”56 And Michael Billington offers praise for this “quietly beguiling” production “which appeared “at a time when our theatre is plagued by a formal sterility.” He further suggests that “Hamptead Theatre and Shared Experience deserve credit rather than abuse for trying something new.”57 In a theatre culture shaped by the word, the reviews in general appear to be torn between those critics who would not excuse the lack of dialogue, and those who praised Mladen Materic for providing both theatrical nourishment and a challenge to mainstream British theatre with an outrageous and unconventional experience. It is intriguing to consider why the arts critics were so divided in response to The Closing Number. It could be related, as Michael Billington so sharply pointed out, to the stifling dominance of the intellect on the stages of Britain’s theatres in the early 1990s. Or, it could also be related to Nancy Meckler’s observation of “a wariness in the face of the unfamiliar.”58

Another ‘Sea-Change’: Shared Experience Theatre Re-Discovers Literature

1991-1994

Whatever the cause of the resistance to the piece, the production certainly provoked and unsettled audience expectations regarding the possibilities of performance. The year 1990/1991 was a key turning point in both the company’s work, and vision for


the future. Immediately following the Materic’s production of *The Closing Number*, Shared Experience began exploring the possibility of creating original work and adaptations of fiction. It would be the company’s first attempt, under Meckler’s guidance, to use literature as a springboard for theatrical storytelling. Interestingly, with this next production, an original and devised piece, Meckler did not choose to follow Materic’s fascination with wordless performances. Shared Experience remained a physical theatre committed to the combination of image and text. She did, however, take to heart Materic’s interest in a balance between what is seen and heard on stage. The subsequent production was an original adaptation, devised by Nancy Meckler and Paul Godfrey, based on Shakespeare’s sonnets; an exploration into the world of the Poet, the Dark Lady, and the Young Man. This production, *Sweet Sessions*, touring in April and November of 1991, incorporated roughly forty of Shakespeare’s sonnets, together with songs and music from composer Peter Salem.

Meckler was originally inspired by the idea that the sonnets, often considered works to be read in private, are actually meant to be spoken aloud; She wanted to “open the sonnets up by making them visual, without acting them out or turning them into a poetry reading.”59 As Meckler’s first experience with adapting, reworking, and reinterpreting a piece of literature, she found the sonnets to be remarkably varying in tone: passionate, furious, enraged, sensual, and jealous. By involving an additional character in the story—a young female academic who is researching the sonnets—the artistic team was able to explore the emotional content of the poems and to highlight the

different relationships suggested within them, rather than being tied to looking only at the actual relationships at the center of the poems. Here begins Shared Experience’s re-appropriation of literature for theatrical purposes, with the irreverent twist that has distinguished their work from the more somber or realistic adaptations presented by other companies.

**Embracing New Languages of Performance**

There is ample evidence in both *Sweet Sessions* and a score of subsequent productions that Mladen Materic had a profound impact on Shared Experience Theatre’s working methods. Following Materic’s extended residency, the company began to integrate production elements such as lighting, sound score, set, and costume in a new, more balanced manner; increasingly, all production elements served to emphasize and support the actor’s relationship with the theatrical story. A new phase had begun, and Meckler embraced new languages of performance introduced by Materic to combine her passion for text-based shows, with non-text based rehearsal methods. Furthermore, *Sweet Sessions* marks the first instance, for this administration, of women finding a voice and gaining understanding through an interaction with literature. This production led to a substantial and celebrated body of original works, the creation of theatre pieces inspired by fiction. Nancy Meckler’s first success at adapting the novel began with *Anna Karenina* in 1992. This innovative adaptation was followed over the next decade by *Trilby and Svengali, Mill on the Floss, War & Peace, Jane Eyre, The Magic Toyshop,* and *A Passage to India.* These novel adaptations were the vehicles that raised the
company’s profile within Britain and catapulted Shared Experience into the realms of international acclaim.

It would perhaps be both simplistic and misleading to suggest that the influence of Mladen Materic propelled Shared Experience’s re-discovery of novel adaptations. On the contrary, a complex set of circumstances intersected at this point to lead the company in this particular direction of work. A combination of artistic interests, market forces, and practical touring considerations during the 1990s influenced Shared Experience’s decision to look towards the novel for theatrical inspiration. During 1991/1992, the company again weathered some unfortunate economic setbacks as a result of inefficient financial record-keeping. The situation was quickly resolved, and hopefully prevented from happening again through the institution of a finance sub-committee. Yet, with this situation, in combination with lean times for the Arts Council who funded the company, and limited resources available to a small touring company, there were several options already unavailable to the company. For instance, a company the size of Shared Experience, with only a small permanent staff, could not afford to produce large-cast classical plays, nor could they pay salaries high enough to attract ‘star’ performers.

Nancy Meckler realized the company would have to identify other ways to satisfy venue managers and potential audiences alike: “We’re such a small company with eight actors who tour, so we need familiar plays. Lots of English plays have too many characters so we had to look elsewhere for material.”60 The novel appeared to provide a solution to a number of their needs. For example, the novel has been and remains an

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incredibly popular genre in Britain. This aspect alone could help market the work. A familiar and popular novel title could function effectively as the “star” performer—attracting both venues and financial support. Meckler later reflected that, “the adaptations had helped us to sell out work, as before that it was difficult to find material that the venues wanted.”61 This move would also make them popular with arts councils and educational markets as well. As the novel, particularly the nineteenth-century novel, appears so often on the reading lists for secondary and university level education, Shared Experience would be providing the necessary educational value and audience access required by the Arts Council in order to obtain and retain public funding.

This decision to pursue the novel was a way of appealing to a broad market whilst still employing innovative and experimental techniques. The decision was not motivated primarily by the need for financial support or healthier box office figures. Rather, the narrative structure of the novel provided an appropriate creative outlet for a company quickly developing their commitment to expressive physicality. With the company’s previous history with the novel, the challenge would be to create adaptations as expressions of their own creative vision.

When Nancy Meckler first arrived at Shared Experience ten years earlier, she had no inclination towards directing adaptations of the novel for the stage. In fact, she admits that she “was suspicious that [adaptations] encouraged an audience to focus mentally on the original novel rather than engage them here and now in a totally theatrical

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61 Shared Experience Theatre Board Meeting Minutes, 22 June 1998.
experience." By the early 1990s, Meckler found herself frustrated with so little material which lent itself to the kinds of experimentation she was interested in pursuing. The company needed enough scope to create theatre that “goes beyond naturalism. I was looking for stories that would allow us to express those areas of human experience that are inside our heads, the world of imagination and memory and hidden thoughts.” Meckler suggests that the novel “allows us to explore a world that is usually hidden from view. You might see that world in music, painting, or dance, but in theatre, because of the predominance of naturalism, it is only the outer symptoms that are visible.”

Developing a Creative Approach: “An Amazingly Good Marriage”

As if it were almost inevitable, Shared Experience once again turned hungrily towards the novel. However, Meckler was insistent that the company must define their own approach to adaptation. She wanted to create theatre inspired by the book, but not “overly reverential towards it.” They were aiming to produce pieces of theatre significant in themselves. The first piece Meckler wished to create would be based on Leo Tolstoy’s epic nineteenth-century Russian novel, Anna Karenina. Yet, who would write the initial script? Polly Teale, still in touch with Meckler, recommended a friend of

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63 Anna Karenina III, 5.


65 Helen Edmundson, interview with the author, July 2001.

hers, the playwright Helen Edmundson, whom she knew from her years at university in Manchester. Edmundson had previously written several cabarets, musical pieces, and one full-length play, *Flying*, which was directed by Teale and produced at the Royal National Theatre Studio. Meckler read the script for *Flying*, a non-naturalistic piece imbued with images of people’s secret fantasies realized on the stage. Meckler felt an immediate connection with Edmundson’s interest in her characters’ inner lives and arranged a meeting with the playwright to discuss the adaptation for *Anna Karenina*.

Interestingly, Edmundson revealed reservations regarding novel adaptations that were similar to the ones expressed by Meckler. She had not seen any work by Mike Alfreds, but was wary of the narrative form often used in adaptation work:

> I had seen a couple of adaptations; very dull adaptations where there was a Narrator on the other side of the stage saying, “And this happened.” Then you see a bit of a scene…And I remember saying to [Nancy], If I do [the adaptation], then I’m going to make it very, very immediate. I don’t want there to be a narrator. I don’t want there to be any distance. I want the audience to be right there from the word ‘go’. I want them to be let in…I want that illusion of theatre to remain.67

In discussion of their vision for approaching the novel as theatrical source material, both Meckler and Edmundson agreed that the journey should begin with the physical images evoked by the novel, rather than a need to solve the issue of “How do I work with the words?” Meckler asked Edmundson to “go away and read the book and try to think about it almost as a ballet or an opera. If it were an opera of *Anna Karenina*, what would you want to be hit with? What would you expect to see? Or, if it were a ballet…how

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would you do it without words? It was a marriage of intentions and artistic vision that would give birth to *Anna Karenina*. Edmundson’s involvement was integral to the success of this and subsequent adaptations. Together, Meckler and Edmundson sparked the development of the Shared Experience commitment to storytelling on the British stage.  

Re-Defining Storytelling in the Post-Alfreds Years

In preparation for the upcoming adaptation and production of *Anna Karenina*, Meckler and Edmundson arranged a research trip to Russia. It was a trip that helped to unlock doors to both the desired artistic approach and the key interpretive issues surrounding the story. One enlightening experience took place when the two women went to see an adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. It was performed in a small room by only four actors. Meckler reflects, “We realized how free Helen could be if she approached the project thinking she was creating a theatre piece, not a stage version of a book.”

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68 Helen Edmundson, interview with the author, July 2001.

69 I would like to stress that it is impossible to give credit for the adaptations to any one individual; they are the products of collaborative ventures, and would not be the same productions without the input of all the contributors. Helen Edmundson has maintained a beneficial working relationship with Shared Experience and is currently working on an adaptation of a twentieth-century American novel, *Gone to Earth*, by Mary Webb.

70 *Anna Karenina* III Education Pack: 5. It is ironic that Meckler and Edmundson gained a sense of artistic freedom from attending a production that must have been similar in technique to early Mike Alfreds adaptations of novels. Yet, they heartily rejected the narrative format that Alfreds so eagerly embraced. Still, they were re-discovering the evocative power of storytelling techniques and the creative imagination that Alfreds explored earlier.
With their 1995 attendance at the St Petersburg production of *Crime and Punishment* in such an intimate space, Meckler and Edmundson both experienced first-hand the evocative power of the storytelling techniques similar to those that Mike Alfreds had pioneered so much earlier: the quick transformations between a multiplicity of characters and spaces, and using only body, voice, and gesture to convey a story. Though Alfreds had specialized in techniques of experimenting with narrative devices and the shifting relationships and perspectives between actor, character, narrator, and audience, Meckler and Edmundson would develop their own aesthetic of storytelling in a different direction; they would use expressionism to physicalize and release the characters’ ‘inner’ stories. With *Anna Karenina*, these women would re-invent Shared Experience Theatre’s approach to storytelling once again. There are several devices Meckler and her creative teams employed to re-shape their own journeys through the world of novel adaptations. The three most important of these dramatic devices that I will specify here involve the manipulation of the novel’s structure, simultaneous staging, and the use of metaphor and symbol to represent character thoughts and emotions.

**Theatrical Metaphor**

The first device that I would like to mention is the use of theatrical metaphor. The Penguin edition of *Anna Karenina* weighs in with a massive 853 pages. By necessity, Shared Experience felt they had to find ways to condense the action of the novel, while still expressing the thoughts, feelings, and major actions of the characters. For example, in a novel, characters and relationships may be carefully modified, revealed, and developed over the course of many chapters. The novelist has a wide variety of tools, including narration, authorial description, and shifting points of view
with which to present information about characters, their relationships and their conflicts. The adapter’s challenge is this: How do you succinctly and intensely convey this same information within the physical space and time available for their lives to unfold over the course of an evening on stage? According to Meckler, “The live actor, the spoken word, the event of actor and audience sharing a moment in real time…these things define us as a theatrical animal first and foremost.”71

In production, eight actors portrayed a range of characters and situations in nineteenth-century Russian society, from peasants to aristocrats, and from ballrooms to racetracks. In a flexible, open space, and with the aid of lighting and sound, the production was constructed to use a minimum of props and design elements to express key themes as social attitudes, class issues, and political views. As an example, suitcases would fall open, the contents of which would spill out onto the stage to help indicate the setting of any particular scene: dry ice for a train station, rocks for a field, and white powder for a snowy walk. Furthermore, symbolic stylization of movement helped to convey complex relationships within seconds. Unconventional love scenes were presented as swift rituals: the loveless and unerotic pat and touch between Anna and Karenin was accompanied by the regular ticking of a clock; contrasting the erotic and sensual legato of gesture suggesting the heat between Vronsky and Anna.72


72 Extensive explorations of Shared Experience Theatre’s process of rehearsing novel adaptations will be dealt with in a later chapter. This will be accompanied by a full discussion and analysis of one particular adaptation: Mill on the Floss.
Events from the novel are compressed and subsequently function as theatrical metaphors for the urgency of characters’ emotional needs and desires. A fitting example of how Edmundson has pared down the lengthy description of events in *Anna Karenina* in order to create compelling stage action occurs in the scene at the racecourse, in which Count Vronsky’s horse, Frou Frou, goes down and is subsequently destroyed. This single, brief scene compresses the action of the race with the emotional danger of Anna and Vronsky’s developing and illicit relationship.

**ANNA.** I am at the race track. He is riding in the last race. I am sitting with Princess Betsy and my husband is nearby.

**PRINCESS BETSY, KARENIN, STIVA and female companions enter and stand some distance away.**

If I use my binoculars, I can just see Alexei in the enclosure. All the other have stallions—big, powerful horses which stamp the ground, but Alexei has a mare called Frou Frou. She is delicate, with fine soft skin and a gentle head, but she is spirited too and her neck is strong and she has good blood in her veins.

**VRONSKY calms ANNA as if she is the horse.**

She is nervous. He is calming her, whispering to her and now he is straightening a lock of her mane. They have had the order to mount…

**STIVA.** They are lined up The starter is ready. They’re off.

**VRONSKY has seduced ANNA down onto the ground and now he is riding her like the horse.**

Betsy, Stiva, and other spectators comment on the progress of the race. Finally, when Anna announces her pregnancy to Vronksy, the scene freezes; it continues as a private exchange between Vronsky and Anna regarding the possibility that Anna might leave her husband. When Anna refuses, the scene continues once again towards the destruction of Vronsky’s mare:
SPECTATORS. They’re up in the air,

What’s Vronsky doing?

He’s dropped into the saddle,

She’s going down,

She’s going down,

She’s fallen on her side…

*He kicks the horse*

She can’t get up…

*He kicks her again*

She can’t get up.

VRONSKY *let’s out a wail.*

Her back is broken. He’s broken her back.

ANNA *has collapsed onto the floor and will not move.*

VRONSKY *walks away—he can’t bear to look.*

*There is the sound of a gun-shot. ANNA screams. Everyone looks at her.*

The movement work and specific choreography was developed by Liz Ranken in collaboration with the ensemble of actors, according to the text and images set forth by Edmundson in her adaptation. The main image involves Count Vronsky riding Anna as if she were the horse, Frou Frou; it is seductive, highly sexual, and dangerous. Anna’s flagrant and illicit sexual behavior places her outside the bounds of the approval of nineteenth century aristocratic society. In metaphorical terms, as Frou Frou falls and is

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destroyed, Anna’s status in society, her very happiness is wrecked forever. The rest of
the actors play spectators in this scene, reacting not only to the disastrous events of the
literal race, but also releasing their disapproval and disgust upon Anna as she is seduced
and then destroyed by her lover. The implicit and often subtle hidden danger of societal
disapproval is made explicit in the visual gestures and movement created by members of
the crowd as they respond publicly to Anna and Vronsky’s private relationship. Liz
Ranken guided the ‘crowd’ actors to find ways of physically and visually releasing their
disgust upon Anna, thereby highlighting Anna’s inner tensions and anxieties about
potential public shame. The physical action of the scene, then, reflects both what is
happening at the racetrack, as well as the complex social subtext of the action.

Dual Narrative

The second device I will consider is Shared Experience Theatre’s manipulation of
the novel’s form or structure. The research trip to Russia in preparation for the first
adaptation resulted in a vital decision regarding the thematic interpretation of the novel:
Meckler and Edmundson chose to compress the dual plot lines. Film versions of the
novel tend to focus on the love story—Anna’s doomed relationship with the handsome
Count Vronsky. Yet, there is another key thematic strand to the story involving the
idealistic landowner, Levin, who yearns for the love of the youthful Kitty. Anna and
Levin meet very late in the novel, causing their stories to appear somewhat unrelated to
each other. Meckler and Edmundson had both been interested in Levin’s character and
wondered why Tolstoy had put these two stories together. Upon reflection, the answer
became clear for them—together these characters’ journeys counterpoint the novel’s
larger interests in life and death, and in hope and despair. Many people they met in
Russia confirmed this observation. According to one man they encountered, “Levin must be part of Anna, and Anna must be part of Levin.”

Edmundson offers their stories in parallel to each other, presenting both Anna’s journey towards death and freedom and Levin’s journey towards hope and life.

Putting Anna’s and Levin’s stories together in a dual narrative succeeded in providing a complex and philosophical thematic interpretation, and also lent a dramatic framework to the novel. Not only did Edmundson consciously interweave Anna and Levin’s stories, she accomplished this by manipulating time and space to place these characters in the same stage space together and allowing them to talk to each other. As explained by Meckler, the director for the production: “We hit upon the device of having the characters of Anna and Levin in dialogue almost as if they are squabbling over the same space…What this does is show how their lives counterpoint each other.”

“Where are you now?” they frequently ask each other, sharing thoughts and feelings with the other character who functions more like a confidante or a moral sounding board. For example, as Anna’s longing for Vronsky grows stronger, Levin warns Anna to temper her desires:

**ANNA.** I went to a party last night and he wasn’t there and I felt desperate, desperate. I dress for him, I do my face, my hair for him. What am I going to do? I thought I wanted him to stop but I don’t, oh please don’t let him stop…

**LEVIN.** And what happens if you don’t stop? What? You have an affair, play Stiva’s game, would that feel like living?

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ANNA. No, I am not like Stiva…

LEVIN. And then who will be next? And where will it end? In self-disgust, that’s where, and misery and dirt. I know those dark passions, the devil inside—I used to be worse than Stiva—that shocks you doesn’t it? But it’s true. And I can’t think about that time now without…It’s not the right path, Anna.⁷⁶

Levin’s presence is a reminder that allows Anna to reflect on her own actions. In this way, Edmundson provides a dramatic tool to retain not only key expository information for the audience, but also “inner thoughts and feelings of the characters which might otherwise be lost in the translation from novel to play.”⁷⁷ One critic suggests the unique nature of their adaptation. Unlike many other theatre companies’ attempts to transfer literature to the stage, this is “…not a plodding attempt to recreate a wordy masterpiece in a different genre, but a way of cutting back the words, getting rid of the background settings, and paring down Tolstoy’s truth about human nature to its raw nerves.”⁷⁸

**Seeing Double**

A final device Nancy Meckler and Helen Edmundson first employed in this adaptation, and then continued in their subsequent adaptations, was the use of simultaneous staging.⁷⁹ The stage, unlike the novel, can give audiences a double

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⁷⁹ I am not suggesting that Shared Experience Theatre is the only group of theatre practitioners to employ simultaneous staging—far from it. I am only suggesting that this is one of the distinguishing features of their novel adaptations.
experience by presenting different scenes or situations simultaneously on stage. For instance, as Anna dies in one area of the stage, Levin’s wife, Kitty, gives birth in another.

One reviewer remarks on another example of this device:

In one of the finest moments, we simultaneously watch Levin’s ecstatic happiness as Kitty accepts his proposal, while on the other side of the stage, Anna is first bitterly rebuked by her husband and lies in feverish agony after childbirth. It is a scene that thrillingly captures the full emotional range of the book with its intersecting arcs of despair and hope.80

This technique was initially suggested to Edmundson by Meckler who was initially worried about the length of the script. She was interested in implementing ways of condensing the story, while retaining the intensity of events. This allowed Meckler to quickly and economically cut in or fade out of scenes with cinematic ease. With the aid of one main set piece—a large sliding door—Meckler could also take advantage of simultaneous staging to provide multiple perspectives of a single situation. For example, if a more naturalistic scene is being presented, the door might slide open to reveal another character not directly involved in the scene, an imagined presence or a tableau; both of which have the power to illuminate characters’ inner tensions, anxieties, dreams, or fantasies.

Building an Audience

The previous examination of specific adaptation techniques involved in the creation and production of Anna Karenina should by no means be considered an exhaustive list; nor are they the only features that distinguish Shared Experience

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adaptations at that point of the company’s artistic development. The artistic process of adaptation will be considered fully in later chapters. They appear for discussion here because they are characteristics that were most often highlighted by the major British arts critics in discussion of the show. These are the features through which Shared Experience gained audiences for their adaptations, and through which the company began to distinguish themselves in the growing field of physical-based touring theatre.

In have devoted a significant amount of space to this production in particular because it marks both Nancy Meckler’s first efforts in this area, and Shared Experience’s re-entry into the field of novel adaptations. Reflected in a variety of journalistic commentary from the show, are general reservations about the nature of physical theatre techniques, but also a firm recognition of the company’s attempts to inject life into the alternative theatre scene by their constant efforts to widen their own performance vocabulary. Some reviews reflect the extent to which the interdisciplinary nature of the performance was still unfamiliar territory to during the early 1990s. While one critic objected to the use of “so much orchestrated physicality,” others described the “thrilling use of movement, half-way between mime and ballet,” or observed that “the company thrives on breaking boundaries, taking risks and creating distinctive, highly-charged performances.” Yet, the bulk of the reviews make direct reference regarding the company’s relation to the field of novel adaptation, and suggest a certain amount of journalistic approval of Shared Experience Theatre’s long history in this area of theatre. Charles Spencer writes, “This is a living piece of theatre, not an illustrated reading,” and

Michael Arditti suggests, “This is vintage Shared Experience, to be set alongside their legendary versions of *Bleak House*, and *A Handful of Dust*.”

*Anna Karenina* certainly attracted immediate attention to the company’s work, and the production received a number of significant and prestigious awards including the Time Out Award for Outstanding Theatrical Event (London), and the TMA/Martini Award for Best Touring Show. The production also garnered Liz Ranken the London Dance Umbrella Award for choreography. For a production that began on such a small-scale that it had to travel with two sets—one for the very smallest spaces—it’s popularity extended the life of the show from small-scale tour to international theatre festivals events around the world. The production was remounted in 1993 and 1998. By 1993, *Anna Karenina II* was being played in larger British venues such as Brighton Theatre Royal, and was being invited by the British Council to tour Europe and South East Asia in cities such as Prague, Helsinki, Paermo, Kuala Lampur, Penang Ipho, and Singapore. The final remount in 1998 brought *Anna Karenina* to Australia, Argentina, and North America, resulting in £137,500 in income for the foreign tour.

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83 1992 Shared Experience History notes, located in the company’s administrative archives.
CHAPTER 7

WOMEN AT THE HELM:
NANCY MECKLER AND POLLY TEALE AS JOINT ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

Following the success of *Anna Karenina* and its various re-mounts, a new era of
life had begun for Shared Experience Theatre. *Anna Karenina* (1992) was followed by a
(2002). Increasingly, this area of work garnered Shared Experience all the benefits of a
rapidly rising profile in Britain and abroad, including higher box office figures, loyal
audience, more secure relationships with presenting venues, and a more recognizable
identity as both a physical and text-based theatre company. These business, profile, and
marketing conditions are crucial because they affect the resources with which the
company produces and presents shows; therefore, these conditions have a direct impact
on the artistic productivity of the company.

The early 1990’s brought substantial changes to Shared Experience in the way of
major staff additions, solidifying a viable artistic identity, and the further development of
the company’s own approach to marketing its artistic image. One of the most important
factors in the growth and popularity of the company’s adaptation work during the 1990’s
was the presence of a second artistic director, Polly Teale. Though Teale did not become formally involved with the company as an associate director until 1995, she has had a familiarity and a fascination with Shared Experience since childhood. Teale first came into contact with Shared Experience years ago in Manchester when Mike Alfreds’ actors presented their first production, *Arabian Nights*, in her school’s dining room. She was struck by this performance in which “everything was conjured up out of thin air.”¹ Later, Teale became interested in Nancy Meckler’s directing work, independent of that first impression of Shared Experience. Teale attended productions of *My Sister in this House* (1987) and *Low Level Panic* (1988), directed by Meckler.² Teale was so moved by the performances that she wrote a letter of admiration to Meckler and requested a meeting—which Meckler granted. Subsequent to the meeting, Meckler invited Teale to assist her in the direction of *The Bacchae* (1988). Between 1988 and 1994, Teale pursued a variety of freelance directing and scriptwriting work, including such plays as *Vows* (1991) with Scarlet Theatre, *Ladies in the Lift* at the Soho Poly (1988), *Waiting at the Water’s Edge* (1993) at the Bush, *On Air* (1993) at the Battersea Arts Centre, and *Somewhere* (1993) and *Uganda* (1995) at the National Theatre.³

¹ Polly Teale, interview with the author, July 2001.

² *My Sister in this House* (1987) was presented by the feminist theatre collective Monstrous Regiment at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre; *Low Level Panic* (1988) was presented at The Royal Court.

³ Polly Teale’s freelance directing career also includes shows such as *Ladies in the Lift* at the Soho Poly Theatre, *The Glass Menagerie* (Lyceum, Edinburgh), *Miss Julie* (Young Vic), *Babies* (Royal Court), *A Taste of Honey* (English Touring Company), *What is Seized* (Drill Hall), and *Flying, Other Voices*, and *Manpower* (Royal National Theatre Studio), and *Angels and Saints* (Soho Theatre, 2000). Teale has also produced significant work as a writer. In addition to *Jane Eyre* for Shared Experience in 1997, Teale wrote
In both directing and writing, much of Teale’s work explores female voice and experiences, often highlighting distinctions between the conditions of women’s public and private worlds. For instance, Teale’s direction of Cindy Oswin’s *On Air*, produced before her formal association with Shared Experience, explored the different realities of both working and homebound women. A significant theme in this production involves the secret anxieties and fears of all the women. It is a prominent theme in Teale’s work, both before and subsequent to her association with Shared Experience. Teale, in her director’s notes for Shared Experience’s *A Doll’s House* (2000), explains her own family background, in which her stay-at-home mother developed an extraordinary fear of venturing outside of the safety of her home. She was afraid to use a public telephone, or to speak aloud during her night class. Teale’s willingness to share this personal story within the widespread circulation of a production’s education pack is a key example of the strength of Teale’s long fascination with the image of people trapped within themselves. She suggests that it is a phenomenon perhaps more particular to women than men, that women are “struggling to find a way to express themselves and to live in the world, to be visible to the world.” These interests would find further outlets in her subsequent work with Shared Experience, strengthening the company’s explorations of women’s lives and voices, and exposing the hidden emotions within such characters as Maggie Tulliver, Jane Eyre, and Nora Helmer.

*Afters* for BBC Screen Two, and *Fallen* for the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and the Drill Hall.

*A Doll’s House* Education Pack (2000). Teale further explained this background during an interview (July 2001).
Between 1988 and 1994, Nancy Meckler remained in contact with Teale, and often attended the productions Teale directed in her growing freelance career. In 1994, Polly was invited back to Shared Experience as a co-director for Mill on the Floss. Teale was needed to cover periods of unavailability during Nancy’s competing film schedule for Sister my Sister.\(^5\) Polly Teale was later offered the position of Associate Director in 1995. This was an enormous step forward in the development of a partnership that would help shape a unique identity for Shared Experience from that point forward, especially with Teale’s appointment as Joint Artistic Director in the Autumn of 2000.

Teale co-directed productions such as Mill on the Floss (1994) and War & Peace (1996), and was sole director for Jane Eyre (1997), The House of Bernarda Alba (1999), Desire Under the Elms (1995), A Doll’s House (2000), and The Clearing (2002). Within this mixture of novel adaptations and predominantly classic plays, there can be found a pattern of expressionist directorial interpretation. Some of these productions have received mixed reviews from the critics for her strong re-workings of classic dramas. Yet, she has developed a reputation for the solid ensemble work of her actors. Further, since she often rehearses in a manner that seeks to uncover and make visible to the audience the hidden desires and passions locked deep within the repressed natures of a drama’s characters, she has become particularly well-known for her ability to evoke electrifying, highly sexually-charged performances. Roy Shaw comments on Teale’s production of The House of Bernarda Alba, “I cannot remember a play in which,

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\(^6\) Sister my Sister is the film version of any earlier stage production, My Sister in This House, which was also directed by Nancy Meckler.
although no erotic activity is seen, sex is so powerful a force, all the more so for being repressed.” 7 Her earlier production of O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* evoked even more lengthy comments from critics on the electric nature of the sexual attraction between characters on stage. According to Charles Spencer, “It is a piece that explodes with passion, and Shared Experience’s production is breathtaking. The director, Polly Teale, and her cast also triumphantly prove that actors don’t have to take their clothes off to create a dramatic furnace of desire.” Spencer further highlights the combination of visual metaphor and physicality at work in Teale’s production:

There is a brilliant defining moment in the production’s depiction of illicit desire. Eben is downstairs in the kitchen. Abbie is upstairs in the bedroom. Simultaneously Eben hauls himself up on a beam to kiss the ceiling while Abbie prostrates herself and kisses the floor. The two cannot see each other yet are drawn to each other like magnets. It is a visual image that seems to distill the essence of the play. 8

**Youth and Education Work: Teaching the Shared Experience “Approach”**

One of Teale’s chief responsibilities as an Artistic Director is to oversee the Youth and Education work for the company. This area of the company’s efforts exemplifies another of Teale’s most recognizable contributions to the company’s focus on expressionist performance. Along with uncovering the hidden experiences of the characters, Teale is intensely interested in the freedom of expression that we experience during childhood. This freedom, she believes, is lost or buried as we grow towards adulthood. Much of Teale’s interest in using theatre to explore this area of repressed expression was sparked during her first experience with Nancy Meckler as her assistant

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director for *The Bacchae* in 1988. Teale observed Meckler working on an exercise in which the actors were asked to step outside of the boundaries of the script and to play the “inner lives” of their characters. It was an improvised scene that involved a pair of lovers. During their discussions the actors discovered that one of the lovers was feeling very jealous, so Meckler asked the actor to give full physical expression to the raw jealousy and rage that the character was feeling at that precise moment in the scene. The exercise deeply affected Teale: “That set me off on a whole train of thought which was to do with that journey that we make from being small children where everything is very expressed and visible, towards adulthood where we’re much more contained and controlled, and we conceal a lot of what we feel.”

Between 1988 and 1994, when Teale co-directed *Mill on the Floss* with Meckler, she had ample opportunity to hone these ideas as a free-lance director in London. By the time of Teale’s Associate Directorship in 1995, she had developed her interests in childhood freedom/adult restraint to the point that many of her activities, including workshops for students and for professional theatre artists, and her own rehearsal methods all reflected the individual’s need for liberation or reconnection with youthful emotions, desires, and expression.

This focus was notably present in Teale’s adaptation and direction of *Jane Eyre* (1997), in which the young Jane is punished for losing control of her emotions. Thereafter, the humiliated girl represses all childhood feelings and desires in order to achieve the approval of adults around her. Teale’s approach emphasizes the idea that

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such youthful emotions do not disappear once the individual matures into adulthood, but remain a constant presence, one that the adult Jane must continually struggle to control.

This ‘Hidden Worlds’ approach became a keynote of the education workshops following Teale’s involvement with the artistic leadership of the company. Prior to the novel adaptation work and Teale’s association with Shared Experience, the company’s youth and education work was by and large unconnected to the work of the core touring company. This is partly due to the fact that during previous years there were not enough people to nurture the educational activities. Yet, Teale’s artistic appointment, along with her inherited responsibility for overseeing the major operations of the company’s educational activities finally provided the workshops the needed vision, connection, and guidance they needed. Further, the re-discovery of novel adaptations became firmly wedded to the company’s style, and this approach to rehearsal and performance took on an identifiable life of its own.

After Anna Karenina, the company began exploring their adaptation process within general workshops; the first was titled, “From the Novel to the Stage.” These workshops introduced text-based actors to non-text based rehearsal and performance methods. The actors were encouraged to engage with a range of tools including, words, images, space, and sounds. These were efforts to challenge artists to extend the range and depth of their skills. Throughout the mid and late 1990s, these initial workshops were extended specifically to the youth and education area of the company, through which the ideas of ‘the divided self,’ and ‘the hidden inside’ became prominent themes and phrases in the company’s attempts to identify their artistic approach. In these workshops, students throughout England were provided instruction in physical and
movement-based approaches to exploring the disjunction between characters’ inner desires and their outward, controlled exteriors.

Teale’s production of *Jane Eyre* again provides useful examples. In 1997, the Education wing of Shared Experience presented a series of school and youth theatre workshops, with titles such as “In the Red Room,” “Behind Closed Doors,” and “The First Mrs. Rochester.” This last session was specifically aimed at experimenting with methods for staging the character of Bertha. In 1998, during the second re-mount of *Anna Karenina*, the company offered workshops titled “Inside Out,” “Past Experience,” “Introduction to Shared Experience,” “Inside Struggle,” “Inside Me,” and “A Haunted Woman.” These sessions were generally aimed at exploring the social and emotional undercurrents present within *Anna Karenina*. Liz Ranken led movement sessions at few of these workshops, with the goal of showing student actors how theatrical metaphors can be used to explore and uncover characters’ emotions. All of these workshops offered young people, between the ages of 13 to 24, the opportunity to develop a variety of skills and experiences. Not only did they develop a deeper understanding of the novel that was being adapted for the stage, but they also learned techniques specific to physical and text-based theatre. Further, they gained knowledge and skills specific to Shared Experience’s approach.

The incorporation of workshops devoted to the values and activities of the core company was a strategic move in many respects. This connection benefited Shared

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10 Aiding in the presentations of these various workshops were youth theatre workers such as Becky Chapman, Kate Saxon, and Sue Nash. Liz Ranken, a movement coach for many of the company’s productions has often stepped in to help conduct workshops.
Experience by strengthening its relationships with arts councils, schools, other interested theatre practitioners, presenting venues, and with the growing number of potential audience members. One of the most important institutions by which these outreach workshops received solid approval was the Arts Council of England (ACE). The Arts Council has been and continues to be the largest public supporter contributing to Shared Experience’s financial survival. It is essential for the company to maintain a positive relationship to this council. Fortunately, the company established such a relationship during the early days of Mike Alfred’s leadership and has maintained their support ever since that time.

Though some of Shared Experience’s main aims are to take creative risks and to develop innovative material, their choice of subject matter and accessible touring schedule to the productions have helped the company to remain in agreement with the Arts Council’s key values.\(^{11}\) Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Arts Council of England has officially stated its interest in increasing audience access to theatre productions, especially through education and outreach work. Further, a local arts council, the Westminster City Council (WCC), funds much of Shared Experience’s youth theatre and community work.\(^{12}\) This local council has funded activities such as drama

\(^{11}\) The Arts Council of England is eager for as many as people as possible to have access to the arts. Touring companies who present shows in a wide variety of regions within England help to fulfill this goal.

\(^{12}\) Although the national arts councils support theatre companies’ main production seasons, local arts councils often financially support activities that will offer direct benefit to that specific community. For instance, the Westminster Community Council provides funds that allow Shared Experience to rehearse and present community plays, youth productions and weekend workshops. These are activities that are not limited to professional Equity actors, but are open to members of the community or youths that seek
workshops for young people at the Soho Laundry, and community theatre projects involving the participation of dozens of local citizens from the Westminster community.

However, it is the series of in-school workshops connected to the main touring productions that is the vehicle through which Shared Experience has reaped the most marketing and financial benefits, primarily in the way of developing and educating potential audience members. There are several key factors that shape the relationship between the school workshops and the administrative life of the company. It is important to consider these factors because Shared Experience does not sustain its own artistic survival in a vacuum, but must depend upon a variety of resources and conditions within its surrounding community.

First, the prominence of the novel in British culture is indisputable. For instance, the Man Booker Prize is an annual award for the best contemporary fiction in Britain and Ireland; normally, it also offers the winners the opportunity to have their works filmed for a world-wide audience. Both the Whitbread Book Awards and the Orange Prize for Fiction provide further evidence of the prestigious place of fiction and the novel in British culture. More specific to work of Shared Experience, novels, and often nineteenth-century ones, are the subjects of major national examinations on high school additional training or exposure to the arts. Local council support allows more people in those particular neighborhoods to participate in and derive benefit from arts activities. The WCC has generally offered Shared Experience in the range of £25,000 to £30,000 a year to support these community activities, except during years of strict budgetary cutbacks within the overall governance of the local council.

13 The Orange Prize for Fiction specifically awards women’s writing.
and university curricula for both English and Drama. Therefore, through novel adaptations and accompanying education workshops, Shared Experience and schools throughout Britain have the potential for mutually beneficial relationships. The students gain a unique understanding of the source novel through the theatrical explorations provided by the company, since students are encouraged to consider the novel, its structure, characters, language, and themes from a variety of dramatic perspectives. Further, they learn more about theatre in general and the creative process of Shared Experience in particular. Students are exposed to the artistic process, the vocabulary, rehearsal exercises, and performance values in frequent use by the company. As such, these workshops have, in their way, contributed to students’ familiarity and comfort with the overall field of physical theatre and the variety of methods possible within this area of contemporary theatre practice.

Not all the novels that Shared Experience has adapted have been texts appearing on examination lists for British students during the year in which a production toured. Yet, the scripts for some adaptations produced by the company have subsequently become permanent features of the curricula that shape the educational process in Britain.

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14 Surprisingly, the English novels which have been adapted by the company are sometimes more well-known by foreign audiences than by students in Britain.

15 From the mid-1980s onwards, the field of physical theatre became more widespread in popularity, alongside the increasing availability of physical theatre performances. For instance, groups such as Theatre de Complicite, Cheek By Jowl, Trestle Theatre, Forced Entertainment, and international festivals such as London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) or Barbican International Theatre Event (BITE) have helped to introduce performance methods focused on the body. Productions from these artists or during these events have helped to weaken the dominance of the ‘word’ in mainstream British theatre. For example, it is interesting to compare examples of reviews from *Mill on the Floss* during the first tour of 1994, to those from the latest tour in 2001. The physical theatre techniques are far more entwined in an accepted theatre practice by this final tour.
According to Sue Nash in the Board of Director’s report from the 18th of July, 2000, “the company is now on the A Level Drama syllabus as practitioners and the text of our production of *Mill on the Floss* also appears.”\(^{16}\) As it might be expected, following the inclusion of Shared Experience’s work on the syllabi for national examinations, the company received an increased demand for their workshops in the schools.\(^{17}\) In this manner, Shared Experience has not only a fostered relationship with educational institutions, but it has also expanded vital audience bases. The company has cultivated a higher possibility for box office success by promoting the younger audience’s familiarity with the theatre’s name and artistic process. This approach increases the likelihood of students, and teachers, returning to see more shows, or to get further involved in the youth theatre projects housed at the Soho Laundry. In addition, Shared Experience acknowledges the pragmatic importance of the young people to the company’s future financial survival. The students who begin to understand and appreciate the work of the company, as experienced through educational workshops, are the same students who will

\(^{16}\) Sue Nash was responsible for the Youth and Education area of Shared Experience in 2000, during the time of this report.

\(^{17}\) The effect of the company’s work was far more widespread than just the schools at this point in time. Not only did the company have an effect on the A Level syllabi, but it had an enormous impact on one of the most important sites for the study of theatre in England—the British Theatre Museum in Covent Garden, London. Also in 2001, the Theatre Museum ran a series of adaptation workshops featuring the Shared Experience *Mill on the Floss*. This information appears in the Youth Theatre and Education Board Meeting minutes for Shared Experience during January of 2001. Previously, in the year 2000, Shared Experience’s production of *Mother Courage* was presented by the Theatre Museum as an example of a Brecht production. Obviously, mainstream theatre in Britain was affected not only by the novel adaptations produced by Shared Experience, but by the overall artistic process of the company, as reflected in their productions of existing dramas as well.
become the future philanthropists and leaders of industry in tomorrow’s workforce. As theatre companies are forced to seek more and more funding from private charities and corporations, Shared Experience generates pathways both to artistic understanding and to future financial security.

**Raising Shared Experience Theatre’s Profile: Success at Home and Abroad**

The extensive youth and education activities are not the only efforts undertaken by members of Shared Experience Theatre to secure the company’s artistic and financial future. Significant changes were initiated during the 1990s in the areas of marketing and development. In addition to informing audiences through workshops and education packs, the company hired additional staff members to market and promote their work. In 1992, the year in which the company first produced *Anna Karenina*, there had been only a handful of full-time administrative staff: Artistic Director, General Manager, Assistant Administrator, and a part-time bookkeeper. The Assistant Administrator, in addition to running the office, also managed the Youth work. By 1995, the situation had altered. The company gained an Associate Director, a Marketing/Development Director, a Marketing/Administrative Assistant, and a part-time Youth Theatre worker. Not until 1997 would the company be able to hire a full-time Marketing Director separate from Development.

Board Meeting Minutes, and Marketing and Development Reports throughout the 1990s and up to the present reflect a continual concern regarding the desire to market
interest in the “Shared Experience Theatre” name. Marketing Directors have wanted to attract venue managers and potential audience members to the work of the company as a whole, rather than individual projects which might be of variable interest depending on the particular show title. Further, it is important to note that the company increasingly presented a unified and specific image through print and other publicity materials. Programs, education packs, and, finally, a web site all evidence the concentrated efforts to fashion evocative statements of artistic identity and mission.

In the early 1990s, the company formulated an official statement of artistic intent that was then included within all subsequent programs and press releases. The contents of the statement have remained unchanged, for the most part, with the exception of the addition of the company’s interest in, “giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination.” This phrase, inserted in 1995 after Polly Teale’s was appointed Associate Director, reflects her particular impact upon the company’s aesthetic mission. The artistic statement as it appears in the program for E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (2002) reads as follows:

> Shared Experience is committed to creating theatre which goes beyond our everyday lives, giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination.

> We see the rehearsal process as a genuinely open forum for asking questions and taking risks that redefine the possibilities of performance.

> At the heart of our work is the power and excitement of the performer’s

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18 Since the company’s production of Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1990), the Youth and Education Department has produced an education pack for teachers to go along with workshops conducted in the schools.
physical presence and the unique collaboration between actor and audience—a shared experience.\textsuperscript{19}

The artistic statement within the programs is part of a larger effort to shape a specific identity for Shared Experience. The goal is to make the name “Shared Experience” synonymous with a specific and unique brand of physical and text based theatre. To a great extent, attracting an audience through marketing this style of theatre has been successful. The rest of this section will be devoted to considerations of the conditions and activities that have generated substantial administrative success for the company, and lastly to those areas of work in which the company continues to struggle to achieve similar recognition.

Achieving National and International Acclaim

Throughout the 1990s and now at the start of the twenty-first century, Shared Experience Theatre has experienced a steady rise in national and international acclaim. Again, the achievement is based largely on the success of the company’s innovative novel adaptations. The early successes of national tours of \textit{Anna Karenina}, \textit{Trilby} and \textit{Svengali}, and \textit{Mill on the Floss} caught the eyes of the British Council and prompted their invitation to tour \textit{Mill on the Floss} to countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. These productions also caught the attention of the Artistic Director for the Royal National

\footnote{\textsuperscript{19} The only significant change to the artistic statement since 1995 is the order of the sentences. This could suggest either a minor matter of editorial finessing, or it may signal a more significant adjustment in aesthetic priorities.}
Theatre, when Richard Eyre requested Shared Experience to present both *Mill on the Floss* and *Anna Karenina* in repertoire at the National Theatre.\(^{20}\)

Meckler declined Eyre’s offer for practical reasons.\(^{21}\) Yet, the invitation is an indication of the rising profile of the company. It signals the desire of the National Theatre to take advantage of Shared Experience’s style, approach, and current box office appeal. It was not the first, or the last, time the National would suggest collaboration between the two companies. In 1991, after a successful London appearance, *Abingdon Square* appeared in a re-mount on the stage of the Cottesloe Theatre of the National. In addition, co-productions and collaborations with the larger presenting venues indicate a willingness and a desire of other theatres to be associated with Shared Experience. Some of the venues with which Shared Experience has established productive relationships include the Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich, the Young Vic, the Royal Court, the Soho Theatre, and Nuffield Theatre in Southampton. Although these partnerships increased audience access and exposure to the company, heightened company visibility, and brought Shared Experience a wealth of administrative and production resources through the established ties of the co-producing venues, these associations have not provided a

\(^{20}\) Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes, 26 September 1994.

\(^{21}\) In Board Meeting minutes, Nancy Meckler does not specify her reasons for turning down Eyre’s offer. However, it is likely that with the size of the administrative staff, there would not have been staff available to tend to such an ambitious undertaking. Also, this would have necessitated a great deal of extra effort to try to cast and re-mount these productions. It may have been nearly impossible to recruit many of the actors who were in the original productions. Further, Meckler has commented on the difficulty of collaborative ventures of this nature. Companies such as the National Theatre have vastly different resources in production, marketing, rehearsal schedules and methods, as well as production interests and overall mission. She has suggested that this kind of co-production is often not worth the effort that is requires.
lasting solution for presenting Shared Experience work. The different time schedules, production methods, and artistic or financial values that define the different venues have often proved to be a drain on Shared Experience’s resources and the energy of its staff.

One co-production that brought a significant change in Shared Experience’s fortunes and national reputation began when Richard Eyre invited the company to present a show at the National’s Cottesloe Theatre in 1996. This production, Leo Tolstoy’s *War & Peace*, started out as a kind of joke, an impromptu suggestion tacked on by Helen Edmundson to the bottom of a list of possible projects the company might produce for Eyre at the South Bank. The list also included novel titles from authors such as Emile Zola and Charles Dickens. The Company took this list to a meeting with Richard Eyre at the National, who responded, according to Helen Edmundson, “*War & Peace*, what a fantastic idea!” Although the company members and Edmundson came out of the meeting “feeling a bit sick,” the partnership brought Shared Experience a wealth of creative resources and freedoms, and resulted in a successful production with packed houses for the majority of its run.22 According to the conditions of the agreement between Shared Experience and the National Theatre, Shared Experience retained creative control over the production by choosing its own creative team. The company was also provided funds for a research trip to Russia, rehearsal time at the Soho Poly Theatre, and two sets of previews prior to the opening of the show. Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale both directed this production, which included a impressive number of ‘firsts’ for the company: the first large cast (fifteen actors); the first live use of music; and the

22 Helen Edmundson, interview with the author, 19 July 2001.
first attempt to create a large scale theatre event. When the director, Trevor Nunn, saw the show, he sent the company a note that read, “More, more!”

A Growing National Reputation and Box Office Rewards

Box office figures during the 1990s and at the start of the new millenium are a meaningful indication of the rise of Shared Experience’s national profile. These figures, though not an entirely accurate reflection of a show’s popularity, do suggest the theatre-going public’s level of interest in both the content and style of Shared Experience productions, whether adaptations, new works, or existing dramas. It is interesting to note that as the company gained more widespread national recognition, they moved permanently away from small-scale venues, towards the mid-scale venues seating anywhere from 400-900 patrons. This move in scale reflects the number of people who are able to see a show, and, thus, helps to explain the expanding box office figures. The successful move of the company to the larger scale also suggests that the marketing efforts achieved a growth in audiences at home and farther afield.

The steep jump in box office income from the first production of Anna Karenina in 1992 to the remount in 1993 marks a progressive pattern for the company’s popularity and exposure. The first production of Anna Karenina achieved £13,240 in box office

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23 Shared Experience Theatre Board Meeting Minutes, 5 September 1996. The use of live music would not be repeated until the 2002 production of A Passage to India.

24 Box office figures are often not an accurate representation of how many people went to see a particular production. The numbers are affected by a variety of factors, including the configuration of the house for the show, the number of complimentary tickets offered to patrons or restricted view seats, and other such contingencies.
income during a small-scale tour in England. By 1993, the second production, including an international tour, earned £140,775 at the box office, netting a profit of £21,644 for the company.\textsuperscript{25} The adaptation of \textit{Jane Eyre}, written and directed by Polly Teale, was toured in 1997 and 1999. An audience survey conducted by the company in 1998 after the completion of the first \textit{Jane Eyre} tour provided some useful indications of the composition of their audience at that point, and the key motivations for seeing the shows. As it might be expected, 60\% of those surveyed indicated that an interest in the novel or subject matter had attracted them to the show.\textsuperscript{26} The great popularity of certain nineteenth-century novels has always been one of the major contributors to Shared Experience’s policy of promoting this kind of material as a kind of “star” performer. \textit{Jane Eyre}, in particular, holds a firm place on secondary and tertiary level exam and course curricula in many areas throughout the world. More promising were the percentages of those surveyed who were returning after having seen a previous Shared Experience production: 66\% had seen any production by the company; 74\% attended \textit{Mill on the Floss}; 53\% attended \textit{War & Peace}; 33\% attended \textit{Anna Karenina}; and 25\% attended \textit{Desire under the Elms}.\textsuperscript{27} The percentages increased with each subsequent

\textsuperscript{25} General Administration notes, 1994—In November of 1992, after the first tour of \textit{Anna Karenina}, the British Council confirmed funding for a five week foreign tour.

\textsuperscript{26} This statistic is aided by the fact that the novel \textit{Jane Eyre} is a core text on the curriculum for English literature in many secondary and tertiary level courses around the world.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Desire under the Elms}, seen by only 25\% of the audience surveyed, suggests a potential area of concern for the company. The smallest percentage belongs to an existing drama, not a novel adaptation. Like Mike Alfreds, Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale would encounter more difficulty selling their productions of classics and other existing scripts,
production. Over half, 58%, came to the show based on the company’s overall reputation as a whole. Although the company has always struggled to develop a following based upon the company’s identity rather than the pull of individual shows; it was a promising statistic for the time.

In addition to the British tour, the 1997 production of *Jane Eyre* was the first Shared Experience show to be presented in the West End. It appeared at the New Ambassador’s Theatre, and was seen by approximately 10,000 patrons at this venue.\(^{28}\)

By the time the company re-mounted the show in 1999, international interest in the show had skyrocketed. The re-mount was toured to such places as Australia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and New York’s Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). Board Meeting Minutes during the promotion of this tour reflect the overwhelming desire to see this show: “The whole world wants to take the show!”\(^{29}\)

**International Acclaim**

The box office figures for the international tours are equally as impressive. Similar to the British Council sponsored international tours in the early 1990s, the

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\(^{28}\)Box office income for this production during its various tours amounted to £42,000 for the national tour, £100,000 for London, and £231,000 for the international tour. These figures can be found in a report by Rachel Tackley, the producer, from 8\(^{th}\) February, 1999.

\(^{29}\)Shared Experience Board Meeting Minutes, 30 Nov. 1998—These sentiments are also reflected in minutes from 22 June 1998: “Who to turn down…Everyone seems to want it.”
majority of international touring undertaken by the company so far involves remounts of successful novel adaptations.\textsuperscript{30} For example, successful international tours of novel adaptations include the above mentioned \textit{Anna Karenina} along with \textit{Mill on the Floss} in 1993, 1995, and 2001. The third production of \textit{Anna Karenina}, which toured to Argentina and Australia, brought in £137,500 in box office income. \textit{Jane Eyre} was toured in 1997 and 1999. The 1999 tour brought in £42,000 from the national tour, £100,000 from the London residency, and £231,000 from the international tour. The total box office income for the year from this production was £373,000.\textsuperscript{31} The most impressive box office numbers are the result of the \textit{Mill on the Floss} tour in 2001. As part of the tour, the production was invited to Washington, D.C., as part of the Kennedy Center UK arts residency in 2001, then later continued on to a tour in China. For the Washington, D.C. tour, the production received the 2002 Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Non-Resident Production. During that year, \textit{Mill on the Floss} earned an average of 70\% box office capacity during the national tour (or £327,190), and 72\% abroad, amounting to $1,832,515 in box office income for the international tour.

As successful as the international tours have been, the above figures mask important financial and artistic obstacles facing the company during the late 1990s. In many ways, the international touring structure reflects key struggles in the vision and

\textsuperscript{30} One notable exception was the 1997 tour of Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest} through Japan, Korea, and Israel. However, the popularity of this production cannot be claimed by the presentation of Shared Experience’s ‘style’ alone. The popularity of Shakespeare’s plays, especially in Japan, must be taken into account when considering the success of this particular tour, especially in comparison with the tours of original pieces developed by Shared Experience.

\textsuperscript{31} Rachel Tackley, General Manager Report, 8 Feb. 1999.
direction of the company, especially relating to the precarious balance between business and artistic imperatives. Certainly there have been a plethora of benefits that Shared Experience continues to reap from international tours. The company has earned international acclaim, and the scripts are now being produced outside of Britain. For example, in the United States alone, *Mill on the Floss* is becoming a popular programming choice for regional theatres and university campuses. Further, according to General Manager Rachel Tackley, “being ‘world renowned’ as an ‘international touring company’ undoubtedly has a considerable affect on our profile in this country.”

The higher profile has increased the company’s ability to cast a higher caliber of actors, and to sell shows to more prestigious venues at home and abroad. The international tours also allow the company to offer attractive benefits to actors, including international experience and working with a high profile theatre company. In addition, throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the company’s physical process of rehearsing and performing has slowly become more absorbed into the mainstream, and, therefore, less frightening to potential company actors. Rachel Tackley explains, “It is very gratifying that actors who in the past might have hesitated to tour will now do so because of the reputation of the company.”

Yet, the international tours represent something far more powerful than just prestige for the company. Within the Shared Experience theatre, there exists a growing

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32 Baylor University in Waco, TX produced *Mill on the Floss*, and the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin produced the script in April/May of 2003.


need to establish a balance between artistic and business concerns. I will focus first on the impact that the international tours have made on the artistic activities of the company. As I have mentioned several times in this chapter, much of the company’s success during national and international tours has been largely due to the popularity of the novels and novel adaptations presented. However, this trend has become a matter of concern for Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale. The company’s artistic mission expresses a commitment to a diversity of programming, with a desire to balance the popular adaptation work with more “risky” new work. The members of Shared Experience do not wish to become known solely as an ‘adaptation company’. Furthermore, since the beginning of Nancy Meckler’s artistic leadership in 1987, the company has produced a range of works, including classic and contemporary plays, new and devised works, and adaptations of novels. New and existing play scripts that Shared Experience has produced since beginning adaptations with Anna Karenina include such titles as: O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms (1995), Judith Thompson’s I am Yours (1998), Lorca’s The House of Bernarda Alba (1999), Brecht’s Mother Courage (2000), Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (2000), and Helen Edmundson’s The Clearing (2002). The coherence binding all these productions together has been the company’s commitment to a highly physical

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35 I am including the term used by the company to express their concerns for how their new works and lesser known titles may be perceived by the venue managers and potential audiences. It is ‘risky’ simply in the sense that little known scripts or titles are more difficult to sell to venue managers, who, in turn need to be able to fill their auditoriums with patrons. It is more difficult to generate a sufficient audience for a less popular production title. The ‘risk’, then, is more financial than anything else, and plays a significant role in building relationships with venue managers, or maintaining audience loyalties. At the base of the issue, the problem is this, if a company offers too many risky productions, they will not have sufficient box office receipts to stay financially viable.
approach to rehearsal and performance. It is one of the few, if not only, companies maintaining an equally strong balance between text and movement. Yet, the company acknowledges a certain amount of difficulty in marketing the scripted plays and more unfamiliar new works to some venues:

We are confident that there is more than significant demand for our adaptations and more renowned pieces, whilst venues are still sometimes unwilling to take a risk on our more experimental work. We therefore propose to tour our most ‘popular’ work more widely and for longer than the slightly more ‘risky’ ones.  

This has amounted to a kind of ‘split’ in the areas of work produced by Shared Experience. On the one hand, the company presents well-known novel adaptations, productions intended for subsequent and extensive foreign touring. While on the other hand, the company continues to experiment with riskier, less marketable titles. As stated in a Shared Experience self-assessment in 1998/99:

This [practice] will allow the company to maximize its earning potential, increase its foreign profile, and venture into those venues in England reluctant to take untested work, whilst keeping alive the desire to experiment and develop.

36 Company Statement included in the 1995 Appraisal Report by the Shared Experience Board of Directors. It is not the first sentiment of this kind expressed by members of Shared Experience or the Board. Other similar notes of caution have appeared sporadically in the Board Meeting Minutes. For instance, earlier in 1992, the following statement appeared: “Shared Experience Theatre recognize that that the experimental nature of our work often makes raising sponsorship for individual shows difficult.”

Aside from general revenue grants from the Arts Council of England, many alternative companies such as Shared Experience increasingly rely on private and corporate sponsorship to provide additional support not covered in their main grants. More experimental and unknown works are less likely to get support from prestigious corporations and institutions unless the show ‘fits’ safely with the sponsors already established national profile and reputation. These situations provides another argument in support of the need for Shared Experience to consistently market the general ‘style’, name, and quality of the company, rather than pursue sponsorship for individual shows.
So, in essence, the international tours have offered the company enormous benefits in terms of artistic profile, prestige, and financial rewards. Yet, by the late 1990s, the financial benefits of international touring, together with standstill arts council grants and financial needs elsewhere in the company, had put the company at risk of becoming entirely dependent upon remounts and tours of their popular novel adaptations. Shared Experience needed the income from the international tours above everything else. To discontinue efforts in this direction would bring certain financial disaster. There would be no financial or artistic future without a substantial change in the monetary resources of the company.

By the late mid 1990s, the company’s costs had rapidly exceeded their grants, yet no increase in subsidy was forthcoming. The remounts and international tours brought in income, without which Shared Experience would not have been able to survive. According to Rachel Tackley in 1999: “The reason we need to make money on at least one of our productions is that our grants do not cover even our running costs, let alone the costs of producing two shows a year.” Tackley, in a report to the Board of Directors, outlined the company’s running costs and situation with the Arts Council of England (ACE). The running costs for the company in 1999 (administration, overheads, fees, and non-production artistic costs) totaled £268,961. The total amount of grants for that year was only £211,000. Despite the uplift in the ACE grant from £153,000 to £183,000, the company would not be able to maintain financial survival without the benefits from the
foreign tours. Tackley, in her notes to the Board of Directors in February of 1999, compared fees for the company that were received from British presenting venues with possible fees that might be received from foreign venues. In Britain, the average fee offered per week of performances was £13-15,000. Touring abroad could earn significantly more each week, with an average of £22,000. Furthermore, the comparison of costs for such tours is equally as interesting. Each week of performances within Britain costs Shared Experience £13,000. Yet, performances in international venues cost the company substantially less, at £7,966 per week.

Shared Experience 2000 and Beyond: Heading into the New Millennium

By 1999, Shared Experience had completed a long series of remounts of their most popular novel adaptations. Members of the company, through Board meeting reports, expressed serious concerns that they felt “compelled” to continue this pattern of production. Two particular issues, or warning signs, emerged in these discussions. First, the venues were attracted to the adaptations such as Jane Eyre, Anna Karenina, and Mill on the Floss. As such, Shared Experience needed to give venue managers what they

37 ACE grants for Shared Experience since 1991 are as follows: £124,000 (1991/92); £130,000 (1992/93); £143,200 (1993/94); £153,200 (1994/95); and £153,200 (1995/96) until 1999. In 1999/2000, the grant increased twenty percent from £153,000 to £183,000, though a thirteen- percent reduction from the Westminster City Council. The grant reduced from £33,000 to £28,000. It was also a period of general low activity for business and private sponsorship.

38 To help explain the decreased costs of international tours, it is helpful to note that Tackley’s negotiations with foreign venues required the hosts to cover many costs that the company would normally have to cover themselves during domestic tours.

were looking for, in order to retain the loyalty of certain venues and to sell future shows in these locations. Shared Experience, however, felt that this kind of production choice would limit the company’s artistic freedom to produce shows of varying scale and content. Second, the re-mounts were the main contributors to essential production reserve funds. Without the exploitation of these successes, the reserves would be in danger of complete depletion. Further, they were running out of shows to re-stage and tour. Adding to the already mounting production pressure, the three year fixed-term funding was due to expire at the end of March 2000. Rachel Tackley, as General Manager, had submitted a new application in July of 1999 for three year funding to cover the period from 2000/01 to 2002/3 arguing that, “the current levels of funding are inadequate and that further erosion of reserves undermines the continuing artistic development of the company.”

The company had been receiving annual funding from the Arts Council since 1990/91, but began three year contracts with them from 1st April, 1991. Fortunately, or perhaps miraculously, due to an overall Theatre Review conducted by the Arts Council, on the 6th of March, 2001, Shared Experience was

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41 Annual funding through the Arts Council of England is allotted until the end of a financial year, but is not guaranteed beyond that time period. Three year funding is guaranteed for three years time, and is reviewed in the final year of funding for potential renewal. To put Shared Experience’s acquisition of three year funding in context of the work of other theatre companies, note that the following companies were also taken on by the ACE for fixed term three year contracts at the same time: Actors Touring Company (ATC), Cambridge Theatre Company, Cheek BY Jowl, IOU, Monstrous Regiment, Tara Arts, Trestle Theatre Company, Theatre de Complicite, and Forkbeard Fantasy. This information is listed in a letter dated 4th January, 1990, from the Arts Council’s Drama Director, Ian Brown.
awarded a new three year funding contract, promising a substantial increase in subsidy over this period. The financial support for 2000/2001 would include and increase of core funding from £183,000 to £229,800. Yet, over the next three years there would be a major enhancement: £236,694 (2001/2002), £250,000 (2002/2003), and £330,000 (2003/2004). This major development provided a source of relief for members if the company who, according to Tackley, “…now no longer feel that we have to re-mount existing productions in order to survive.”

The next question facing the company, now that they finally felt that they were being adequately subsidized, would be to determine what artistic projects this additional money would allow the company to pursue. Interestingly, aside from a production of Helen Edmundson’s *The Clearing* (2002), the company once again began working on new novel adaptations, and other projects inspired by literary sources. Recent shows include Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* (2001), and E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (2002). Productions currently under consideration take in adaptations of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Mary Webb’s *Gone to Earth*, and a new work by Polly Teale called *After Mrs. Rochester*. It is based on the writings of Jean Rhys, author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This title, in particular, demonstrates Teale’s continuing fascination with the character of Bertha Mason, or Jane’s passionate alter ego in her own adaptation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Yet, the most important, though risky, experiment the company has recently undertaken is an

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administrative one. Shared Experience produced its first commercial co-production, which was presented in the Riverside Studios, London. The company joined forces with David Aukin, General Manager of Associated Capitol Theatres (ACT), to produce a commercial co-production of Forster’s *A Passage to India*. Shared Experience and ACT co-commissioned Martin Sherman to write the adaptation and shared the rights to the script. Risks and rewards are both higher for this type of venture, taking the company into new territory, including larger venues, such as Milton Keynes Theatre, which seats over 1100 patrons. All the venues for this tour seat at least 900 people. Inevitably, presenting shows in larger venues requires substantially greater marketing efforts, more planning, and more time. The size of the cast is also bigger than normal for a Shared Experience production: twelve actors and two musicians. The size of this show, from a variety of these perspectives, required more funding than other company productions. Shared Experience is a not-for-profit organization. They, therefore, created a second company—‘SET TO’—as a commercial arm to exploit Shared Experience’s successes. Barclays Stage Partnership also gave £88,000 in additional funds for this production. It is a new direction for the company, and the future of Shared Experience in the commercial sector remains to be seen.

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44 David Aukin is married to Nancy Meckler.

45 Shared Experience Board meeting minutes, 25 March 2002.

46 The timing for this grant was serendipitous. Barclays Stage Partnership was keen to provide funding for the innovative theatre sector just before the launch of their new campaign to fund non-theatre related activities.
CHAPTER 8
THE SHARED EXPERIENCE ‘PROCESS’

“We are committed to creating a theatre that goes beyond our everyday lives, giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination.”

What makes a Shared Experience production different from adaptations by other companies, or from the BBC serials? Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale emphasize a unique approach to text and rehearsal. These directors consciously avoid, or reject, the use of naturalism in their rehearsal processes. By their use of the term “naturalism,” these directors refer to the ‘kitchen sink’ level of realism that predominates in much British theatre as a way of representing everyday life. In contrast, Meckler and Teale are

1 Nancy Meckler, *The Clearing* (2002) Education Pack. I would like to include a general note about the effectiveness and impact of Shared Experience’s education packs, which they have been producing in conjunction with touring productions since 1990. Along with contextual articles on authors or playwrights, historical, social, and political background, these education packs also provide specific examples of the company’s ‘process’ in action during rehearsal and production. The packs offer actual activities used by directors and choreographers to develop and deepen characterization and scene work. These packs are provided to teachers and students during education workshops, allowing a more intimate view into the complex creative process of this alternative theatre company, as well as compelling new insights into the source novels that are being adapted. In this way, students and educators alike not only gain confidence and familiarity with alternative theatre vocabulary and approaches to the creation of new theatre pieces, but the students’ experience with these novels is forever entwined with the particular adaptation presented by Shared Experience.
visionaries who desire theatre to be a hugely expressive medium, not one that simply imitates life, or our daily experiences. For them, theatre must go beyond the experience of the ‘everyday’. According to Teale, “Central to Shared Experience’s approach is the desire to go beyond naturalism and see into the characters’ private worlds.” She believes that, “in our everyday lives we hide much of what we think or feel, for fear we would be considered foolish or even mad. I believe we have a longing to see expressed in theatre that which we conceal in life; to share our ‘madness’ and understand that we are not alone.”

This emphasis on inner, subjective experience is often, though hesitantly, referred to by the company as an ‘expressionist’ approach to theatre. At times, they have refrained from using this term in publicity because the word ‘expressionism’ can mean different things to different people and end up confusing potential audiences. For Shared Experience, expressionism is not what we might think of when we see a Munch painting or any other kind of horror or gothic art object. Rather, Meckler sees expressionism as a ‘larger than life’ style of acting. It allows performers to physically express emotions and desires that are not normally seen by others—hidden things “going on in the mind and in the imagination.” Meckler has expressed a frustration with the limits of social behavior which operate in naturalistic theatre, and urgently suggests the need for Shared Experience’s approach. She considers that most of us go through life pretending not to

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feel much of what we are actually feeling, or disguising and covering up our true
emotions and responses. As a result, she suggests, we derive a great benefit from
watching performers experience those things we as socialized and constrained adults
cannot express in our daily lives.

Shared Experience and ‘The Body’: Building a Shared Vocabulary

It is a comparably easy task to discuss the theoretical implications of an
expressionistic approach to creating theatre. On the other hand, it is much more difficult
to articulate the process of how this takes physical shape in workshops or in rehearsal. It
is harder still to communicate to an actor who is new to Shared Experience rehearsals, the
process of giving an external physical form to a private emotional experience. For
example, in a workshop with actors, Meckler explained, “We know what nervousness
looks like in everyday life, but the ‘inner’ nervousness that you feel—which is a very,
very strong sensation—we don’t know what that looks like, and we don’t know how we
would express it.”5 Meckler suggests the necessity of creating a shared vocabulary so
that the director, actors, and other artistic staff can express together the ‘hidden’ lives of
the characters.

There are certain key values that inform all of Shared Experience’s work with
their actors, whether in workshop, rehearsal, or performance. First, Shared Experience’s
work depends upon the central idea that, “everything should come from the actor. It’s all

5 Nancy Meckler, dir., Ways of physicalizing thoughts, feelings and text, video archive,
Exeter, Arts Documentation Unit, 1994.
about using processes that allow the actor to discover their own language for whatever it is that they’re expressing.” As such, though Shared Experience is well known for adaptations of novels, sources often with 800-1000 pages of text, the company wants to explore texts first through the actors’ bodies: physical, intuitive, non-intellectual impulses. The artistic directors believe that:

As we get older, we lose touch with the intuitive capacity to express, So a shared ‘vocabulary’ is needed in order to reconnect with the capacity to express, and to develop the physicality of actors without negating the use of words, sounds, and speech.

The challenge is to train actors to be more physically expressive with their bodies, to train actors to stretch their expressive capacities beyond the ‘everyday’. One key goal of the company in the development of a shared language is to re-awaken the physicality of the actor—letting the body ‘wake up’. The aim is to ‘free’ the body, to trust the body, without relying on the rational powers of the brain to guide, and often censor, creative explorations. As actors are exploring the inner life of their characters, the idea is to express their discoveries in the body, not just with words. Meckler notes how difficult it is, sometimes, for actors to trust that their own bodies “know what they want to do in given situations.” Meckler and Teale often refer to movement explorations as opportunities to discover “pleasure” of the body, and encourage actors to try movements that “feel good” for their individual bodies to do.

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7 Shared Experience Artistic Statement, 1989.

8 Nancy Meckler, dir., Ways of physicalizing thoughts, feelings and text, video archive, Exeter, Arts Documentation Unit, 1994.
In order to help actors put life in the body and not just the head, Meckler and Teale insist that we must change our idea of the ‘starting point’ in rehearsals. Instead of rationalizing key ideas and concepts, we must start with work on the body—first. Meckler and Teale have devised various activities that help to re-train the focus of their actors in terms of ‘pure’ movement. The goal is to allow movement to be led by the body rather than by the story of the play or the intellect of the actor. In other words, it is movement that exists solely as an exploration of what the body wants to do, or how the body wants to move, rather than for the purpose of telling a particular story. This allows the actors to explore movement that benefits their own selves, rather than simply carry out movement patterns imposed by a director or choreographer. This is an emphasis in opposition to most mainstream British theatre practices. Yet, according to Meckler,

> We tend to use feeling and imagination and story to make our bodies move. The idea of this is, what if the body was in charge rather than the imagination? What if my body was responding to your body as opposed to my storytelling brain responding to your storytelling brain? 

Further, as one of the most basic and essential things that theatre artists try to create on stage is communication, Meckler and Teale regularly incorporate into their rehearsals several exercises that are designed to introduce actors to the idea of how the ‘languages’ of the body can be used to stimulate communication between two people. In workshops, Nancy and Polly often have actors work in pairs to explore an exercise they learned from Mladen Materic: “Activity/Passivity”. This activity, involving an active

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9 The idea of putting life into the body and not just the head is something that is heard often from Meckler and Teale in workshops and rehearsals.

leader and a ‘passive’ responder, explores the languages of touch, breath, sound, and energy. For example, the ‘active’ partner ‘asks’ for a movement from his/her partner by using only hands, or perhaps only breath to communicate the desire. A variation could be for the active partner to try to communicate her wishes without actually touching her partner, but using only the ‘energy’ emanating off of her hands. The goal of the responder is to give her partner exactly what she is asking for. The activity can be further developed by having one actor offer a simple movement, then the partner ‘answers’ with a movement that “goes well” with the movement already offered.

What Meckler and Teale find interesting about the use of these seemingly simple exercises is how they keep the space “alive” with communication and response. There is a palpable exchange of energy between the two people who are trying so intensely to communicate. The actors learn to respond honestly to each other with movement only, instead of trying consciously to “make a story.” The aim is to help actors establish a vocabulary of always feeling connected. Meckler suggests that the actors should always ask themselves in workshops and rehearsals: “Am I really seeing my partner? Am I really trying to take something from her, or am I doing something on my own terms?”

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“Making the Invisible, Visible”: Physicalizing the Feelings

A second, related goal is to develop a different kind of consciousness and awareness in the Shared Experience performers. Instead of relying on rational, literal, and conscious activities of the brain, the actors must encourage the abstract, intuitive, and unconscious impulses of the body’s desires. Meckler observes that most mainstream theatre tends to be very literal. Yet, we must also wake-up the ability to give physical shape to what is “inside”. This is a term Meckler and Teale frequently use to refer to the emotions, inner states, or hidden, often unconscious, desires. These are aspects of human experience that are not normally publicly shown to others in our daily lives. Yet, these directors want to take these emotions and inner states, things we are familiar with, and let these grow until they become “larger than life.” These women want to help actors increase their vocabularies to express things on stage that all humans know and experience. For example, consider the adjective ‘sad’. Meckler suggests that if the naturalistic form of such a state is ‘soft and gentle’, that doesn’t mean that’s how to express that [on stage]. It doesn’t have to be the way we see it. If you were trying to express what it feels like to be sad, what would that look like? This is the crux of her interest in “making the invisible, visible.”

One particular exercise that Meckler uses to guide actors towards the ability to physically express the abstract rather than the literal, involves having the actors line up

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12 This is a phrase Nancy Meckler has used in ‘Process’ workshops to explain the Shared Experience approach to rehearsal.

and move across the room as an “essence” of something. Going back to the idea of the inner or “insideness,” Meckler might ask actors to consider what it feels like to be contained, or to have boundaries? How would you express this with your body, and not with words? As an additional example, she might ask them to physically express the essence of ‘weakness’. She asks the actors to try to give a physical form to what is going on inside of them; what they are feeling, as opposed to what they are thinking. A key aim of this exercise is to discover where in the actor’s body these feelings ‘live’, and will likely be expressed differently by each individual actor.

Here, too, naturalistic ideas of what ‘weakness’ is or what ‘weakness’ looks like may be challenging and ultimately limiting to actors more familiar with mainstream theatre techniques. Meckler stresses that she is not asking actors to express what a weak person looks like, but the “essence” of what it feels like to be weak. Since weakness can be a hugely complicated sensation or experience, she suggests the actors consider how it might be expressed in a drawing, a painting, or in music. For instance, she notes that a person who was affected with a debilitating physical disease or impairment might create a painting to express that physical condition. Though the disease may weaken or destroy the body, the painting might be full of strong lines and bold colors, reflecting the feeling brought about by the condition, rather than the limits of the person’s reality.14

There are other ways that Meckler and Teale, in collaboration with Liz Ranken as movement director, have found to stop the “thinking side of the brain” and let the body impulses take over. Ranken’s background, though not specifically in theatre, provided

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fertile ground for the exploration of abstract communication. Ranken, using her early training as a speech therapist, has worked with profoundly learning-disabled adults who could not speak to communicate. She developed methods to allow these individuals the means to communicate with a physical rather than a spoken language. Working now as a movement director, she aims to help actors identify the truth inside characters, and guides them in conveying inner thoughts and conflicts as visual sequences—the poetry of human movement. The visual sequences are the means by which the private, inner lives of characters are made tangible and placed center stage. These are the “haunting gestural repetitions” that resonated so deeply with Pavithra Krishnan.

There are several ways that Ranken works to unlock physical impulses in the actors. One of these is the metaphysical use of pure color and the elements: air, fire, earth, and water. First, the use of color is a key element in aiding actors to explore characters’ inner lives. For instance, Ranken asks actors to explore pure color through movement, guiding them to discover answers to questions such as the following: “How do you express with your body the color ‘orange’ or ‘pink’?” or “Where do these [colors] live in the body?” In order to explain this concept Nancy Meckler suggests the ensuing example; for a production of Hamlet, the actress playing Ophelia might bypass or supplement questions about Ophelia’s mental state, and instead try exploring color as the

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15 Liz Ranken’s movement background includes extensive training in the techniques of Rudolph Laban (1879-1958), internationally renowned choreography, dance, and movement theorist. The system developed after his death, Laban Movement Analysis, concerns notation and description of the forms of human movement. Although not specifically drawn from Laban’s system, Ranken’s exploration of color, ‘energies’ and the elements is related to the dynamics of Laban’s system.
root of character.\textsuperscript{16} She could try, for instance, to move around the room as if the color ‘pink’.

Second, in addition to explorations of color, Ranken also guides actors to respond physically to elemental and sensory stimuli. Harriette Ashcroft, who played Bertha in \textit{Jane Eyre} (1999) offers: “The main ideas for me were passion, anger, water and rain. We explored fire with Liz through lying down and feeling the color red, letting it pass through our fingers and arms. We then brought ‘red’ onto our feet and moved with each other.”\textsuperscript{17} These examinations of color and emotion informed early explorations of ways to organically ‘ignite’ the scene in which a fire consumes Thornfield Manor. Penny Layden, who played the title role in \textit{Jane Eyre}, comments on her experience during rehearsals:

\begin{quote}
We did explore the element of fire in rehearsals, using items of Furniture, books, material, and of course our bodies! Liz did quite a lot of colour work with us; a very simple example would be, ‘How does the colour red move?’ Much of the movement discovered in these rehearsals was incorporated into the show at the big fire at the end.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

These explorations of color and the senses may, at first glance, appear to be trivial or nonsensical approaches. Yet, this is a fertile area used by the directors as a basis for exploring character, in addition to the traditional psychological explorations used in most rehearsal rooms. The most useful character discoveries do not always emerge while

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\textsuperscript{16} Nancy Meckler, \textit{Ways of physicalizing thoughts, feelings and text}, 1994.
\textsuperscript{17} Harriette Ashcroft, letter to author, 13 November 2001.
\textsuperscript{18} Penny Layden, letter to author, 13 November 2001.
\end{flushright}
rehearsing in a traditional manner. Often, this approach is too cerebral and blocks the actor’s intuitive impulses. Or, the actor quickly makes judgments about the character and jumps to conclusions that obscure other potential meanings. On the other hand, the more abstract explorations, such as those involving color, the elements, or particular ‘energies’, provide a pathway to unconscious aspects of a character’s behavior and dialogue. As the actor delves into his or her internal landscapes, the imagination is released, facilitating the discovery of new emotional energies, specific qualities of movement, or unearthing additional meanings in the script.

Shared Experience in Rehearsal: Physicalizing the Text

“Shared Experience understand the true nature of theatre—it’s a poetic medium in which a room can become a whole physical world, and a group of characters can become a whole society.”

-Richard Eyre

Shared Experience is a theatre company in possession of a passionate desire to develop a shared vocabulary amongst cast and crew for the creation of images and gestures that extend beyond everyday, external reality. These jointly devised physical images will become the means for expressing the heart of a theatrical story for the audience. A variety of sensory activities including the awakening of body impulses, exploring emotional essence, exchange of energy, and partner answering and

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19 For more extensive discussion of the Shared Experience process in performance, see the case study of Mill on the Floss, Appendix A.

communication are just a selection of the key exercises used to build cooperative ensembles capable of communicating through word, movement, or exchange of energy. All of these activities discussed thus far involve the ability of actors to be alive to their own bodies or to communicate with each other; to perfectly respond to or answer a movement or gesture offered by a fellow actor. These are all necessary elements of a fully engaged ensemble. However, these exercises alone will not support the production of a given dramatic script. As yet, this investigation of the Shared Experience process has not dealt with that most essential element of dramatic rehearsal and performance: conflict.

In rehearsal, Shared Experience combines physical explorations of character emotion with analysis of text to uncover the complexity of conflicts contained both within individual characters and between various characters involved in any given scene or situation. More precisely, Shared Experience seeks to foreground the physical expression of conflicts normally hidden beneath the surface of a more naturalistic dramatic story or situation. In rehearsal, the actors and directors look for ways to expand the possibilities of physically expressing on stage multiple layers of human experience. According to Teale, “There is a whole level of reality that is going on in our lives, but we can’t express it.” She considers the theatre a vital space in which to stage aspects of our experience that we, as adults, contain or suppress, “It’s all there, but we don’t get a chance to express it.”21

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'Wants': Stanislavski Meets Expressionism

The work and writings of the Russian director, Constantin Stanislavski, have most often been associated with naturalistic rehearsal techniques; they are not as often connected with innovative and experimental physical theatre approaches. Yet, three basic terms found in Stanislavski’s writings play a key role in the shared vocabulary in Shared Experience rehearsal studios: objectives, tactics, and obstacles. These are essential terms known even to students at the beginning of their acting training. Investigation of a character’s objectives, referred to by the company as “wants”, is a starting point for all rehearsals that are aimed at physicalizing the text. To clarify their use of the term ‘wants’, Shared Experience borrows the following definition:

The actor ought to consider the major and predominant concern of each character, what it is that consumes his life and constitutes the perpetual object of his thoughts, his idée fixée.22

The artistic directors’ consider characters’ ‘wants’ to be of central importance to their expressionistic approach; for, unless you know what a character wants, it will be impossible to physically explore the subtext of a story. Considering that all of the characters’ actions, decisions, and choices are governed by these powerful desires, the ‘wants’ are “the key which unlocks the door to the unique physicality of Shared Experience’s approach.”23 As far as Shared Experience rehearsals are concerned, Nancy

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Meckler believes that “the want is the key to everything.”24 The most useful wants are discussed, explored, and established early on in rehearsals. Characters will experiment with an endless variety of means to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals, but the wants remain “as a baseline for the character.”25

There are a couple of core reasons that the wants must be established early. First, they are used to uncover the “driving force” for each character in a scene. Secondly, and of crucial importance to this particular company, a character’s physicality and body language will be strongly affected by his or her major want or desire. For example, in order to uncover more information about what fuels a character’s actions, one of the directors might ask actors to play an improvisational scene without the use of scripted words, but to instead focus on making the inner wants as strong as possible. First, the actors will be asked to feel the want as a strong inner impulse. The actors will then spend some time exploring how the feeling disrupts their bodies, depending upon if they are sitting, standing, or moving around the room. The directors will ask them to let the feeling in the body grow slowly, always observing how breath affects the physical state as well. This desire is increased and heightened until the inner impulse begins to affect the actor’s physical state. The actors will continue to physicalize the feeling in the body until even walking becomes distorted. The actors will next be instructed to try to hide the feeling, not letting anyone else know about it. They, then, might try to express the feeling with only one part of the body: the hands, feet, neck, or other part. This kind of


scene exploration generally releases specific “expansive movement” in the actors’
characterization, which is later incorporated into the actual staging of the scene.

A few examples from the rehearsal process for War & Peace will illustrate the
point. The adaptation of Tolstoy’s War and Peace was presented at the Cottelsoe Theatre
in 1996 as a co-production with the Royal National Theatre. Tolstoy’s epic nineteenth-
century chronicle captures fifteen years of Russian family life during and after the
Napoleonic Wars. Playwright Helen Edmundson centers her adaptation on Tolstoy’s
examination of ideas about human freedom and free will. She also identifies several key
ideological questions implicit in Tolstoy’s novel that guide the paths of the adaptation
and subsequent production: Namely, “Should we make peace with life and our mortality,
or should we fight it to the bitter end?,” “How can we reconcile ourselves to what’s going
on around us if we feel injustice is being done?,” and “Is it ever right for one person to
impose his or her will on others.”²⁶ To best explore this debate about free will,
Edmundson chose to structure the adaptation by following the stories surrounding the
characters of Pierre, Natasha, and Maria. The character of Natasha is full of will and
believes she will get everything that she wants. Pierre searches for adventures to
challenge his will, and Maria relinquishes her own will and seeks instead for perfection in
the eyes of God.²⁷

All of the *War & Peace* cast members, along with both of the directors, discussed and decided upon the ‘wants’ for their characters.\(^\text{28}\) Once the wants were established, the directors set up improvisations and looked at specific moments in the script that might be suitable to help the actors to *physically* understand how the want will affect their bodies and their character’s movement. For example, in *War & Peace*, the character Lisa wants “to be adored.” The director asked Cathryn Bradshaw, the actress playing Lisa, to imagine she was a famous actress on the first day of rehearsals for a play. It was her goal to comfort and excite the rest of the cast. The directors continued the improvisation until Cathryn achieved a physical understanding of the charm and vivacity unique to the character of Lisa.\(^\text{29}\)

A slightly different example will help to illustrate situations in which a character’s dialogue expresses something in complete opposition to what the character is actually feeling. For instance, we are all used to talking about the subtext in Pinter’s plays. However, we normally see these characters being elusive and hiding information from each other. We *wonder* what the characters are really thinking and feeling. A Shared Experience production would explicitly and physically play out what would otherwise be

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\(^{\text{28}}\) This production was co-directed by Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale. The ‘wants’ for each character as listed in the Education Pack for the production include the following: Pierre wants to be a leader of men; Karataev wants to give peace; Napoleon wants to rule the world; Kutuzov wants to be the guardian of the Russian people; Natasha wants to challenge life; Nikolai wants to be a hero; Sonya wants to repay her debt to the Rostov family; Count Rostov wants to be a provider; Countess Rostov wants a safe haven for her family; Maria wants to achieve perfection in the eyes of God; Andrei wants his life to have significance; Prince Bolkonsky wants order; Lisa wants to be adored; Helene wants power; Anatole wants to enjoy life to the fullest without ever paying a price.

mysterious and ambiguous. In this case, the goal of the activity was to physically express emotions that normally remain hidden underneath the surface of the scene. In War & Peace rehearsals, Meckler and Teale often worked with actors to explore ways to first uncover emotions that the character is concealing, and then found ways to express the concealed emotion. There is a scene in War & Peace between the friends Andreí and Pierre that follows immediately after a scene in which Pierre is painfully rejected by Natasha, the woman he loves:

PIERRE. You look well. Was the treatment a success?

ANDREI. Oh yes, I’m very well now. I have received my dismissal from Countess Rostova. Here are her letters and her portrait. Kindly return them to her—if you happen to be passing.  

The actors were first asked to work on the scene by exploring the affects of the inner ‘wants’ on the characters’ bodies, similar to examples mentioned previously. The subtextual desires were identified and intensified, revealing the immense amount of pain that Andreí is suffering, and his desperation not to be touched or helped by his friend, Pierre. After the actors had improvised the physical “underneath” of the scene, they were told to contain the physicality completely, only allowing it to show in one small part of the body. This physical exploration allowed the actor playing Andreí to discover one small physical detail, a constantly twitching hand, which would successfully suggest his

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30 Edmundson, War & Peace, 74. The passage in the source novel reads as follows: “‘Well, how are you? Still getting stouter?’ he said in an unmarked tone, but the newly formed furrow in his brow deepened. ‘Yes, I am very well,’ he replied to Pierre’s enquiry, and smiled. It was clear to Pierre that his smile meant ‘Yes I am well, but my health is of no use to anyone now.’” War & Peace Education Pack (1996).
inner pain. It was a gesture that was not imposed upon him by a director, or randomly
selected, but discovered through the actor’s own individual physical response to
heightening and expanding the experience of emotional pain.

**Physicalizing the Underneath: Uncovering Conscious and Unconscious Desires**

“It is this conflict between the outer and inner self which fascinates us
and is crucial to the physical life of the work.” ³¹

Often, Shared Experience approaches the early stages of rehearsal by working
without language to explore the competing ‘wants’ and tensions within a particular
cracter. Furthermore, some productions highlight divisions within a character’s inner
nature—an explicit difference between a character’s unconscious and conscious
motivations. For these particular stories, a character’s inner needs or sensations are at
odds with the surface nature that that character allows other people to see. These are
often characters that struggle to be true to themselves, or to fit into a constrictive society.

Meckler and Teale seek for physical ways to reveal the tensions between warring
aspects of a character’s inner nature. The company first presented *Mill on the Floss*,
adapted by Helen Edmundson from the novel by George Eliot, in 1994. ³² In this
adaptation, three actresses representing different aspects of the character as she develops
from child to adult play Maggie Tulliver, an unconventional girl who does not fit into the
provincial world of her St. Oggs community. The three-way split may best be described


with Freud’s terms of ‘id’, ‘ego’, and ‘superego’. As these different Maggies appear frequently on stage together, the directors set up improvisational situations to explore the ‘pull’ between Maggie’s various desires as child, young woman, and adult. In this way, it is also helpful to see which aspect of the character’s desires is more powerful in a given moment, or perhaps a particular scene. For example, late in the story, Maggie falls in love with her cousin’s fiancé, Stephen. After a letter from Stephen begging Maggie to call him back to her, a struggle between all three Maggies emerges and highlights Maggie’s inner struggle to release Stephen.

To physically explore a scene like this, the directors and cast might first decide upon ‘wants’ for each character. For instance, the objectives might resemble the following: First Maggie wants to experience everything in life; Second Maggie wants to be a good daughter; and Third Maggie wants to experience romantic love. Polly Teale suggests that a helpful way to initially explore the inner workings of the scene might be to place the actresses in the empty rehearsal space and let them pursue the ‘wants’ as strongly as possible, with sound and gesture only. The resulting scene in performance demonstrated the violence of Third Maggie’s desire, as she struggled to release herself from Second Maggie. Third Maggie physically and forcefully slammed Second Maggie away from her and towards the ground as she shouted, “I want him.” The improvisations helped to animate and highlight Third Maggie’s rejection of her more youthful and repressive behavior at this moment.33

33 The production of Mill on the Floss is explored extensively in Appendix A.
Jane Eyre (1997), Polly Teale’s adaptation of the Charlotte Brontë novel, offered another opportunity for the company to physically experiment with a character whose inner sensations are totally at odds with what she allows other people to see. Shared Experience’s production of Jane Eyre departs from more traditional adaptations by concentrating on the inner struggles of Jane, to reveal the hidden passions raging beneath the calm exterior of the dutiful governess. Bertha Mason plays a dual role in this adaptation. Similar to the theory proposed by literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Bertha appears not only as Edward Rochester’s mad wife, the “mad woman in the attic,” but also as Jane’s alter ego, her more passionate and expressive self locked away by the repressive restraints of Victorian social acceptability:

Central to the adaptation is the idea that hidden inside the sensible, frozen Jane exists another self who is passionate and sensual. Bertha (trapped in the attic) embodies the fire and longing which Jane must lock away in order to survive in Victorian England. 34

The first scene of the play exemplifies Jane’s divided nature. In the source novel, Jane reads alone from a book in the library at Gateshead before being confined in the red room for hitting her abusive cousin. Yet, in Teale’s adaptation, this experience of the book is shared between Jane and her alter ego, Bertha. The external restraint controlling Jane is emphasized through costume design. Jane appears in a modest and rather prim gray dress, with her hair pulled tightly back from her face. Bertha, on the other hand, appears in a low cut and sexually provocative red dress. She is barefoot and her hair hangs loosely around her shoulders. Yet, the physical entanglement of the actors’ arms

and legs suggests their interconnected nature, “as if they are one person.”35 They read of
the frozen sweep of the Arctic zone before Bertha turns to a page describing the hot and
steamy climate of the tropics. The movements of the actors suggest the existence of
Jane’s passionate potential even within childhood. The stage directions read:

They squeal with excitement…BERTHA stands, her palms turned
to the sky and head thrown back. She laughs and begins to dance.
JANE watches her with delight and sways slightly in time.
BERTHA sings as she dances. The dance becomes wilder and
wilder.36

In the source novel, the reading is a solitary escape for Jane. It is not until later in
the story that readers meet Bertha. The play compresses these experiences and recreates
parts of Bertha’s nature and experience in Jane from our first vision of her. Bertha’s
movements are wild and sensual, incorporating an aggressive physical closeness with
Jane, sexually suggestive dancing, rolling around on her back along the floor, and other
fluid and provocative gestures and sounds. The passionate feelings are inextricably
connected to Jane and cannot be separated from her. Rehearsal activities developed this
aspect of Jane’s childhood nature. Teale notes:

Bertha was asked to excite Jane to such a degree that she could not
resist reading on. By bringing to life the images from the book she
tempts Jane to abandon her reserve and join her in the game. It is
as if we are seeing Jane enter the world of her imagination leaving
behind the loneliness of her real life.37

The scene exemplifies one of the key fascinations for Polly Teale, the “journey that we

make from small children where everything is very expressed and visible, towards
adulthood where we’re much more contained and we conceal a lot of what we feel.”

The split between Jane’s conscious and unconscious desires plays a major role in
creating tension in her later scenes with Mr. Rochester, the Master of Thornfield Manor,
and Jane’s employer. The adult Jane has a ferocious pride and a need to hold on to her
dignity and to be in control of her emotions. Yet, at the same time, she also has an
enormous appetite for life and sexuality, and a hunger to be loved. Teale suggests that
the conflicts between Jane’s dreams and nightmares provide an excellent opportunity to
find and develop the appropriate energy for scenes between Jane and Rochester. In these
scenes, the secret wants and desires of characters can be played without words to find the
energy of the characters and to discover the nature of the battle that is going on ‘within’
them and ‘between’ them. Within scene eighteen, as follows, Mr. Rochester hosts a party
at Thornfield:

ROCHESTER. Return to the drawing room. You are
deserting too early.
JANE. I am tired Sir.
ROCHESTER. And depressed. What about? Tell me.
JANE. Nothing…Nothing Sir. I am not depressed.
ROCHESTER. But you are. So much so that a few more
words would bring tears to your eyes. Indeed they
are there now.

(JANE turns to hide her face.)


Teale worked with actors to explore the following wants: Rochester wants to “unmask” Jane, or to “pierce Jane’s reserve”; Jane feels she is being toyed with and wants to “hold on to her dignity.” Teale put the two actors into the rehearsal space and let them play these wants without text, but with movement and sound. Teale maintains that this approach is a useful way of establishing the kind of tension and conflict between the two characters before approaching the actual script.

Making the Text Larger Than Life

“In more realistic scenes the social façade is a thin layer beneath which bubbles a river of barely suppressed emotion.”

Not only is Shared Experience interested in uncovering the inner desires that fuel characters’ emotional lives; the company is aware that there is more than one level or layer of reality operating in a given scene. Their goal is to see inside the characters’ heads, while also witnessing the reality of their situation. The physical expression of the characters’ inner feelings will be explored extensively in rehearsal, even though a scene may ultimately be played naturalistically. First, the actors must explore what it is like to fully reveal characters’ hidden impulses. One general exercise that Meckler and Teale use to wake-up the actors’ ability to reveal and intensify their emotional lives involves having actors fully experience a particular sensation, such as ‘cold’ or ‘loss’. They are asked to line up on one side of the space and move slowly across the room, each actor individually embodying the essence, perhaps of ‘loss’, and letting the sensation grow and

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overwhelm their bodies. Or, the directors might ask actors to perform a simple task with a prop—such as putting on or removing a pair of shoes—investing this simple action with the emotion being explored. A workshop question might be, “How does ‘loss’ affect the body as the actor removes the shoe?”

Next, a more complex exercise—one that I will refer to as ‘Releasing and Concealing’—allows actors to explore scenes with strong emotional subtext. First, the actors must work to reveal characters’ hidden impulses; they must then experience the strain of constraining them. In preparation for the activity, the actors initially improvise a situation or scripted scene to establish the wants of each character. They are encouraged to allow the emotional energy to explode and take over: At different points in the scene, the director signals with a clap of the hands for the actors to break out of the scripted scene, to reveal through sound and movement whatever a character is feeling at that precise moment. Another clap signals the return to the scene and to the containment of feelings. The clap is repeated at several points in the scene to allow the energy of explosion and containment to build. Often a specific gesture can be identified, heightened, and then built on in the actual staging of the scene.

During rehearsals for War & Peace, this activity was observed by a journalist, who noted how it affected the exploration of a scene in which Princess Maria is about to be courted by Anatole:

Helen Schlesinger, the actress playing Princess Maria, is writhing in an ecstasy of nervous excitement; Cathryn Bradshaw as Lisa is bouncing up and down like a five-year-old desperate for a pee, and Rakie Ayola’s Mademoiselle Bourienne is silently fluttering like a
bird. Suddenly, watched by co-director Meckler, Teale claps her hands. Instantly the exaggeration disappears from the actresses’ performances. Teale claps her hands and once again the performers start behaving like small children in a kindergarten being asked to express a primal emotion.41

This process allows adults to re-visit the privilege of childhood imagination and emotional expression. It also depends on the ability of the actors to be completely free physically and to be emotionally in tune with their characters’ desires in the scene. Furthermore, this type of activity and the effort expended by actors to release and contain such strongly experienced feelings means that each scene becomes highly charged with the emotional subtext: “It is like taking the lid off a pressure cooker for an instant to be let the steam out, and then putting it back on to suppress it again.”42

Conclusion

The members of Shared Experience have earned international acclaim for their commitment to physically innovative approaches to novel adaptation. These creative artists consciously reject the use of naturalism in favor of distinctly physical and ‘expressionist’ techniques; the rehearsals function as investigations of what a story ‘feels like’ rather than what it looks like in reality. The sensory activities designed to develop a shared vocabulary of human movement are also the core exercises used to build cooperative ensembles capable of communicating through words, but also effectively through movement and image. Shared Experience represents a commitment to actor-


centered theatre, ensemble playing, and a physically innovative approach to novel
adaptation which has re-invented storytelling techniques for the British stage.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

“The haunting gestural repetitions…
I wanted to fold up your play like a blanket,
and take it home with me. Make it mine.
Because in a way it was…so close to veins and arteries.”

These are the words of Pavithra Krishnan, writing from Chennai, India in response to Shared Experience’s touring production of Jane Eyre (1999). How is it possible for a woman in India to respond so viscerally to this British adaptation of a nineteenth-century novel set in a provincial town in England? In order to locate an answer, I offer the quote above as a kind of touchstone though which to conclude my examination of Shared Experience Theatre; for, I believe Krishnan’s response to Jane Eyre highlights several key areas of the company’s artistic impact and significance.

First, throughout the company’s existence, Shared Experience’s work has been focused on the process and possibilities of storytelling, most often through the adaptation of novels. It was Shared Experience’s work in the 1970s and 1980s that sparked the contemporary British interest in stage adaptations of literature, with their landmark productions of Arabian Nights and Dicken’s Bleak House. The latter show was presented during the height of the British fringe at the end of the 1970s, giving audiences over a hundred characters and 935 pages of text, using only the physical and imaginative
resources of five actors in an almost completely bare space.¹ This *Bleak House* served as an important inspiration for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s own production of Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1981. Under the artistic leadership of Mike Alfreds from 1975 until 1987, Shared Experience explored the ‘shared experience’ between actors and audiences in the communication of a story. The actors and directors experimented with the simple yet transforming presence of the live actor at the center of performances. They employed the narrative of the novel as a wellspring of theatrical possibility, physically transforming themselves through the slightest of gesture, conjuring up a wealth of images from the sand dunes of the Sahara to the damp streets and “fog everywhere” of Dickens’ London. Further, they explored the flexible and spontaneous communion between actors and audiences, sharing a moment in time—a fleeting and magical moment in which anything can happen.

From the late 1980s, under the direction of Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale, Shared Experience has continued the exploration of novel adaptations under a different, but equally compelling ethos. Meckler’s and Teale’s style is distinctly and powerfully physical and ‘expressionistic’; their rehearsals are an exploration of what the story ‘feels like’ rather than what it looks like in reality. During the past ten years, Shared Experience’s work has been most successful with the adaptation of classic and often nineteenth-century novels such as *Anna Karenina, War & Peace, Jane Eyre*, and *Mill on

¹ The Penguin edition of *Bleak House* weighs in at 935 pages.
the Floss. Together, these women have created “a new method of storytelling in which the inner lives of those in stage is made palpably physical.”²

It is not surprising that Shared Experience has achieved its greatest successes through exploring the novel form, given the special, if not revered, place the novel holds in British cultural history. British entertainment industries have demonstrated an obsession with the novel, adapting countless narratives for the stage, film, television, and radio. Furthermore, the nineteenth-century novelists such as Tolstoy, Dickens, Eliot, and the Brontës offer a multifaceted psychological dimension to their narratives, delving into worlds of imagination, dream, and desire. Potential for dramatic conflicts converge in a complex web of authorial voices and character perspectives, layered amongst a variety of narrative points of view. Even with the most contemporary Shared Experience adaptations, a foray into the ‘magic realism’ of Angela Carter’s The Magic Toyshop (2001), the novel offers material on various levels of myth, metaphor, and symbol—all fertile areas in which to explore the hidden and the unseen.

Shared Experience’s fearless and innovative approach to novel adaptation has opened the doors for many other British theatre companies, fringe and mainstream alike, to pursue similar projects involving the staging of literature. Trevor Nunn’s early 1980s experience with Nicholas Nickleby led him to extraordinary West End commercial success with the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables. Giles Havergal’s stint as guest director for Shared Experience in the mid-1980s, working on projects such as adaptations of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela and Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day, led him to experiment with other adaptations for his own company, the Citizens’

Theatre, Glasgow. These include a 1987 production of Anna Karenina, as well as an all-male version of Graham Greene’s Travels with my Aunt. Also in Scotland, Liz Lochhead’s Dracula appeared in 1985. Later London fringe companies appearing in the 1980s, after Shared Experience had begun its pioneering work combining physicality and text, have also turned to literature for inspiration. Théâtre de Complicité’s The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol (1994), Cheek By Jowl’s adaptation of Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1983), and Northern Stage Ensemble’s adaptations of Orwell’s Animal Farm and 1984 (2003) are just a few selections of innovative productions that have emerged since Shared Experience began the trend for experiments with Novel adaptation in the 1970s.

Second, Krishnan’s visceral response to Jane Eyre highlights the importance of physical innovation in Shared Experience’s work. The use of gesture and image, as well as sensory and abstract explorations have cracked open the hearts of the novels and expanded the realms of the theatrically possible. Building on the work of visionaries such as Peter Brook, Joan Littlewood, and Jerzy Grotowski, Mike Alfreds’ meditations on the nature of theatre challenged conventional ideas of theatrical production and expanded the physical languages of performance during the early years of Shared Experience. By clearing away the unnecessary stricrures of lavish sets, costumes, and other technical encumbrances, he made room for experiments with theatrical conventions, as well as new possibilities for staging novels and approaches to the use of the narrator and narrative in performance. Using variable gesture, image, tone, and direction, Alfreds’ actors created performances anew each night. By refusing to ‘fix’ performances, Alfreds gave audiences stories that were ‘free’ to transform according to the will and
imagination of the performers—truly a unique category of performance on the London Fringe.

Under Meckler and Teale, the approach to novel adaptation continued to be physical and innovative, yet took a significantly different path in aesthetic experimentation. With Meckler’s background in the New York avant-garde, Grotowski’s training exercises, as well as her early work with Warehouse LaMama and Freehold on the London Fringe, Meckler brought a passion for image, physical gesture, ritual, and “larger than life” performance. Together with Polly Teale in the 1990s, they delved further into the world of hidden desires and passions locked deep within the repressed natures of the characters. Teale’s fascination with the general notion of a greater freedom of expression during childhood years led her to use rehearsals as a way to explore the individual’s need for liberation, and the need for reconnection with youthful emotions, desires, and expressions. Often, they worked on characters who are ‘trapped’ within themselves, and who struggle to release their hidden emotions. This focus on revealing the inner, subjective nature of the characters, together with the “larger than life” physical approach, merged to form the ‘expressionist’ style that has become nationally and internationally associated with the work of Shared Experience. The performances of novel adaptations such as *Anna Karenina*, *War & Peace*, *Mill on the Floss*, *The Magic Toyshop*, and *A Passage to India* have been noted for their raw, emotional ferocity, as well as the abstract and physical expression of the characters. The use of ritualized gestures, images, split characters, and the physicalization of characters’ fantasies and dreams have all become hallmarks of the Shared Experience ‘approach’. With these
tools, Meckler and Teale have cracked open the secrets ‘hidden inside’ the heart of the novel for the British stage.

The physical approach to staging novels is a key link in the merging of the fringe and the mainstream theatre in Britain. Not only did the Royal Shakespeare Company borrow fringe techniques in the staging of their Nicholas Nickleby, but there has been a continual and progressive merging of the fringe and mainstream techniques and venues throughout the eighties and nineties. For example, Mike Alfreds was invited to present Cymbeline (2001) at Shakespeare’s new Globe in Southwark. This production, using techniques almost identical to those of his original production in the earlier days of the Fringe in the 1970s, was finally recognized for the success of its unconventional and experimental physical approach. Further, the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Court have both hosted Shared Experience productions. Indeed, many alternative theatres since the 1990s are now regularly invited to present work on the stages of the National. It appears to be a mutually beneficial relationship, since the fringe companies enjoy the publicity, resources, and prestige, while the National benefits from the infusion of new ideas and creative energies from the alternative theatre practitioners. This link between the fringe and the mainstream has been under-documented, yet this study of Shared Experience is intended to bring contemporary theatre scholarship one step closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these two areas of British theatre practice.

Third, another significant aspect of Shared Experience’s work that has had a broad impact on the shape of British theatre in general, is the focus on women’s lives and experiences. Although this was not a particular focus of the work under Mike Alfreds’
leadership, the emphasis on women’s lives continues to strongly distinguish the productions directed by Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale. For instance, Pavithra Krishnan, in her letter to Shared Experience, responds to an adaptation of a novel that was authored by a woman writer, adapted and directed by a woman, designed and choreographed primarily by women, and concerns the experience of a female protagonist—Jane Eyre—in her search for greater vocational, emotional, and sexual fulfillment.

In a nation where theatre leadership is still largely dominated by men, Shared Experience, unusually, has had two women sharing the helm for nearly fifteen years. In addition, the female presence is even more strongly apparent in the number of women who have functioned as designers, choreographers, education directors, administrators, and general managers. This is not to suggest that Shared Experience is now a feminist theatre company. In fact, Meckler and Teale reject a specifically ‘feminist’ label, as this not an agenda pursued by the company, unofficial or otherwise. Additionally, if one considers the shows on an individual basis, they are not all focused on the experience of the female characters. The eclectic nature of the programming is obvious; the productions are drawn from a broad range of time periods, national cultures, ethnicity, genres, and artistic interpretations. Yet, a comprehensive view of the content and aesthetic approach reveals particular patterns of attention, responding to, or perhaps reflecting, certain cultural anxieties. Many of the Shared Experience productions, especially the adaptations, re-shape our experience of the past and our response to the novels, as well as informing our outlooks for the future of women’s self-expression. In the adaptations, as well as the scripts from dramatists such as Lorca, O’Neill, Ibsen,
Shakespeare, Maria Irene Fornes, and Judith Thompson, we see silent, intelligent, passionate, ambitious, and imaginative women bound together with one common characteristic: a constructed silence and constraint. Consciously or not, the directors work to rip through the veil of Victorian propriety, giving women the opportunity to publicly voice, and to physically embody, their unheard dreams and desires.

Though it falls outside the scope of my present project on the history of Shared Experience, a more thorough examination of the literary and analytical aspects of the scripts that have been produced from 1987 until the present has the potential to yield a wealth of information on the cultural significance of women in Shared Experience’s productions. For example, following Polly Teale’s 1997 adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, she continued her fascination with the outcast and silent ‘madwoman’, Bertha Mason. Through *After Mrs. Rochester* (2003), a new production she both wrote and directed, she explores the life of Jean Rhys, author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This production has very recently been on tour, and it will be important to take note of the subjects and direction of Teale’s future writing and directing projects for Shared Experience.

Fourth and finally, Krishnan’s comments on her experience of *Jane Eyre* highlight the international impact of the company’s work. From small-scale national tours to middle- and larger-scale international tours within countries such as India, China, Japan, Australia, Argentina, and the USA, the company has ‘shared’ an experience of the novel and a aesthetic approach that is not limited simply to British culture or interests. With international tours of *Jane Eyre* and *Mill on the Floss*, and national tours of *A Passage to India*, and the very recent *After Mrs. Rochester*, the international perspective of the company is continually broadening. Shared Experience provides opportunities for
audiences to re-think their cultural pasts. Using the languages of physical innovation, image, and gesture, Shared Experience allows the silent, the dispossessed, and the ‘other’ to speak, regardless of geographical orientation.

Shared Experience has never before been the subject of a full-length study. My purpose with this dissertation is to function as a kind of detective, gathering together pieces of evidence implicit within the eclectic and never-ending variety of documents accompanying the creative and administrative lives of this theatre company. I have explored the aesthetic innovations produced over more than a quarter of a century, as well as the company’s pioneering contributions to novel adaptation and physical theatre within Britain. Yet, in considering the administrative decisions—such as qualities of performance venues, marketing strategies, mission statements, board meeting minutes, season programming choices, or box office figures—I have also examined the context in which the artistic creations are produced. It is hoped that this study will help to provide a more accurate and comprehensive view of fringe and mainstream theatre in Britain. However, it is ‘a’ history of Shared Experience, not ‘the’ history of Shared Experience. I have tried to make this information available to subsequent scholars, to provide a platform for further investigations of novel adaptations, the language of gesture in performance, physical theatre, fringe theatre, and above all, further meditations on the company “intent on exploring the boundaries of theatre.”

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APPENDIX A

A CASE STUDY OF GEORGE ELIOT’S MILL ON THE FLOSS

Adapted for the stage by Helen Edmundson

Introduction

What follows is a documentation of a performance of Shared Experience’s Mill on the Floss, first produced and toured in 1994. It has been revived for two additional tours in 1995 and, most recently, in 2001. The production has been seen around the world, in countries such as England, Germany, India, China, Malaysia, and the U.S.A. Its residency at the Kennedy Center in 2001 earned the production the Best Non-Resident Theatre Award. I have chosen this particular production to examine more closely because I believe it, more than any other Shared Experience production, exemplifies the physical passion and prowess of the performers, the theatricality of novel adaptation, the exploration of women’s lives, and the expressionist performance style for which the company has become world renowned. I was not involved in the rehearsal process for the production, and have only the experience of an audience member upon which to rely. Yet, the contents of this case study are influenced by numerous interviews with company directors, the adapter, actors and designers. I have also included materials provided by
the company itself through education packs; this included rehearsal diaries, as well as interviews with the music composer, the designer, and the adapter.

I offer one note regarding the ephemeral nature of theatre productions; this documentation can never come close to the power, ferocity, and energy of the original performance—nor is it meant to do so. Any theatrical experience—especially a performance by a company primarily utilizing movement, gesture, and the body—lives only in the particular moment in which it is performed. It is shared between the actors and the audience for that moment only, then disappears forever. My aim is not to replace the original production, but merely to recognize its achievements and its unique creation within the context of contemporary British theatre. The inspiration for this chapter derives from Geraldine Cousin’s *Recording Women: A Documentation of Six Theatre Productions*. She records the performances of three feminist theatre companies in Britain: Scarlet Theatre, Foursight Theatre, and The Sphinx Theatre Company. Like Cousin, I desire to record events that “are trebly subject to the process of erasure.”¹ The theatrical performances recorded by Cousin, and here by myself, are not only ephemeral by nature, they are also smaller-scale touring productions, and performances created largely by women, with the central focus being on the lives and experiences of women. I join with Cousin to “provide traces” of these productions and to “bear witness to what has been.”²


² Cousin, 3.
I am borrowing elements from the structures that Cousin employs in the six case studies that appear in *Recording Women*. However, her documentation varies slightly according to the nature of each performance. For instance, though all three companies from which the case studies derive are run by women and feature productions specifically focused on women’s lives, not all six productions were created in the same fashion or with the same purpose in mind. The productions from Scarlet theatre include an adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* that features only the female characters from his play, and an original devised piece that uses images, music, and text to explore the theme of domestic violence. The two Foursight Theatre productions include a movement-oriented devised piece based on a narrative poem and the Celtic myth of Boadicea, and a second piece, a one-woman show. The final two productions by the Sphinx Theatre include, like Foursight, a one-woman show, and as a piece based on a novel by Jean Rhys. For each production, Cousin includes the following information: cast lists, credits, tour dates, comments by the practitioners involved, an account of the piece in performance, performance venues, and a selection of quotes from reviews.

The following case study on Shared Experience’s *Mill on the Floss* most closely resembles Cousin’s studies of Scarlet Theatre’s *Sisters*, and Sphinx Theatre’s *Voyage in the Dark*, which, like *Mill on the Floss*, were also both adaptations of existing drama or novels. Like those two case studies, I include cast lists, credits, commentary from

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3 Although, the theme that unites all six of Cousin’s productions together, compares interestingly with the theme of *Mill on the Floss*. For example, Cousin notes in all the productions that she explores, “characters who attempt—with varying degrees of success—to extricate themselves from stagnant and imprisoning environments” (3). This is remarkably similar to the situation of Maggie Tulliver, who desperately attempts to
practitioners, production concept, press comments, and a breakdown of the production in performance. Unlike the above adaptations by Foursight and Sphinx, I offer a brief summary of the source novel and story.

For the account of *Mill on the Floss* in performance, I follow Cousin’s structure for the two adaptations discussed above. For instance, I break the performance down into main parts; I specifically employ three parts for the three major changes or developments of Maggie Tulliver’s character over the course of the performance. I further sub-divide these parts into sections, or groups of scenes. These are headed either by short titles that I have created or by actual quotations from the script, and are all based on main events connected to Maggie’s changing relationships to her brother, her family, or her community. For the quotations that I have selected as heading titles, I have tried to choose text that most closely indicates the interior struggles Maggie endures or phrases that run through her head as she pursues approval and validation from those closest to her.

*Mill on the Floss*

**Credits and Cast List: Original Team 1994 Tour**

**Credits:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-Directors</td>
<td>Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Bunny Christie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Peter Salem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting</td>
<td>Chris Davey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement</td>
<td>Liz Ranken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>Rachel Tackley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production Manager</td>
<td>Alison Ritchie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Coach</td>
<td>Jeanette Nelson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

find peace and happiness in the stultifying environment of her parochial St. Oggs community.
Cast:
Simeon Andrews     Mr. Tulliver, Dr. Kenn
Shirley Henderson   First Maggie
Michael Matus        Bob Jakin, Phillip Wakem, Uncle Pullet
Buddug Morgan       Second Maggie, Aunt Glegg
Ian Puleston-Davies Tom Tulliver, Wakem
Simon Robson         Stephen Guest, Mr. Stelling, Uncle Glegg
Clara Salaman       Mrs. Tulliver, Lucy Deane
Helen Schlesinger   Third Maggie, Aunt Pullet

First Performance of this production: Thursday 17 March 1994 at the Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich.

1995 Revival:
Simeon Andrews
Anne-Marie Duff
Michael Matus
Catherine Cusack
Simon Cox
Jonathan Cake
Clara Salaman
Helen Schelsinger

First Performance of 1995 production: Thursday 26 January at the Queen’s Theatre, Barnstaple.

2001 Revival
Pip Donaghy
Pauline Turner
Michael Matus
Jessica Lloyd
Hywel Morgan
Joseph Millson
Hilary Maclean
Caroline Faber

**The Mill on the Floss: Summary of the Novel**

George Eliot’s novel appeared in 1860. At the heart of the story are the clever and ambitious young girl, Maggie Tulliver, and her struggle to find approval in the provincial community of St. Oggs. Maggie longs to have education and adventure, but as a female, she is denied both of these pursuits. As a child, her imagination and passions get her into trouble as she plays along the River Floss, and her headstrong ways convince her mother, brother, and host of uncles and aunts that she will indeed “come to no good.” Maggie desperately craves the approval of her brother Tom, but her unconventional ways and her friendship with Philip Wakem, son of her father’s enemy, create an irreparable rift between the brother and sister. In an effort to achieve peace with members of her family and her community, adolescent Maggie adopts the religious teachings of Thomas à Kempis and attempts to stifle all of her own personal longings and bear her troubles happily for the good of her family. Eventually, Maggie’s passions give way and she renounces the authority of her brother. As a mature woman, she struggles to balance the desires of her sensual nature and the will of those around her. Ultimately, Maggie succumbs to the thrills of a romantic suitor and falls for Stephen, her cousin Lucy’s fiancé. She is irrevocably cast out from society after an ill-judged trip on the river with her new love takes her far beyond the bounds of acceptable and moral behavior. Though she finds the strength to relinquish her own desires and give Stephen up for the good of her cousin, Maggie’s punishment comes swiftly. Maggie and her brother, Tom, are both caught up together in a flood that overtakes their father’s mill. The two unhappy souls die together, as the storm releases them from the unhappiness and disagreements of the past.
The Adaptation

In *Mill on the Floss*, adapter Helen Edmundson, “decided to focus on the idea of a woman being forced to change her behavior, to stifle and modify herself, because her true nature is at odds with what society expects of a woman.” Maggie Tulliver is a clever, sensitive, and ambitious girl who does not fit into the provincial world of St. Oggs. Co-Director, Nancy Meckler, was initially intrigued by the intense amount of passion felt by Maggie, an inner nature continually at odds with her community’s expectations of womanhood. Meckler comments on her response to the novel: “[T]here’s a bit in George Eliot’s novel…where young Maggie gets so upset she bashes nails into the head of her doll. When I first read that I found myself fascinated by how this little girl could ever survive. I wondered what would happen to that wild, passionate child as Maggie grew into a woman.”

Adapter Helen Edmundson and Nancy Meckler looked for ways to theatricalize the heroine’s search for a way of living that is peaceful yet passionate enough. Edmundson noticed ways in which Maggie was forced to change her behavior and modify herself, while in many ways her personality and character remained the same: “When she reaches adulthood she still has that little girl inside her who has a hugely deep and passionate nature. But she is forced to listen to what other people say about her and look inside herself to try to find a different way of dealing with life.”

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observations motivated the dramatized division of Maggie’s character. The character is played by three actresses, representing different aspects of Maggie as she develops from child to adult: the wild child who defies convention; the religious convert who sacrifices her inner desires in order to attain peace; and the mature woman must reconcile these warring aspects of her nature. Each time Maggie realizes she must change herself in order to fit into society, the transformation is physicalized on stage.

It is important to note that all three Maggies do not occupy the stage together from the beginning of the play. Rather, each new character takes the stage as Maggie grows and changes from child to adult, adapting to suit the desires of those closest to her. For instance, young Maggie 1 is unaccompanied by any other Maggie until she realizes that who she is will no longer suffice. She must change in order to survive. At that point, Maggie 2 appears. Maggie 2 takes over the main action of the play until her religious choices no longer sustain her and she must change herself again. At this point, the adult Maggie 3 emerges. It is only at this point in the play that these different Maggies appear on stage together at various points, as a visual reminder of the tension created between childhood desire and their concealment in adult life. According to Edmundson: “Being able to have Maggie as a child on stage the same time as Maggie as an adult means you can actually physicalize that pull.”

The adaptation is unlike the source novel in the fact that, instead of devoting large passages of space to Tom’s development or to visits with the absurd aunts and uncles, it is almost exclusively devoted to Maggie’s emotional point of view. We follow her

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7 Mill on the Floss Education Pack.
experience of St. Oggs and the world. We experience relationships through Maggie’s perspective. Additionally, dramatic time and space also function to highlight her individual view of the world. Though we as audience can see Maggie as ‘plural’, and therefore sense her tensions at various points in the play, the other characters with which she interacts see only a ‘single’ Maggie. Additionally, Edmundson creates a framing device to highlight Maggie’s unbearable situation within her society. Through the insertion of a visual motif—the ‘ducking of the witch’ that opens and closes the production—this device provides an arc for the action of the play. From childhood, Maggie recognizes her situation, and through her drowning, like the woman ‘ducked’ as a witch in the opening, she is cleansed and released from the weight of the scorn of her family and community.

I would like to add a note about the inaccessibility of this script to production by other theatre companies. For instance, reading the script of Mill on the Floss is a significantly different experience from witnessing the script in performance. Edmundson created her adaptation with the ethos of Shared Experience particularly in mind, as she had done for her work on earlier adaptations of Anna Karenina and War & Peace. The resulting performance derives not simply from ‘staging’ Edmundson’s script, but is inextricable from the ‘expressionist’ rehearsal and performance methods supported by Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale. The images and gestures created in rehearsal are specific to this process alone. Though a different theatre company may, indeed, stage a new production of Edmundson’s Mill on the Floss, the subsequent performance will be an expression of the approach and style of that particular company. The documentation
of the performance that is provided below is an attempt to suggest the inseparability between the script of *Mill on the Floss* and the performance by Shared Experience. I included documentation of image, gesture, movement, and other aspects of the *mis en scene* that live in the live event of the performance alone.

**The Production Concept**

Helen Edmundson’s script for *Mill on the Floss* derives from George Eliot’s novel about provincial life in nineteenth-century England. The central theme of Edmundson’s adaptation highlights the situation of a woman who struggles fiercely to achieve freedom within a constrictive community. Yet, there are several key stylistic devices that specifically anchor and guide the efforts of the production team in the realization of this theme in performance. First, the set design and performance area itself is a highly fluid and flexible space, allowing the action to shift quickly between a variety of locations, real or imagined. The main set piece is a large platform on stilts, fashioned with ropes and pulleys.
The platform provides an upper level and can be used to shift locations in the story back and forth between the mill, the attic, the dock on the river, the father’s sick room, an overpass in the fields, the Red Deeps, or simply to provide a passage way. The main playing space below shifts between the Tulliver or Deane households, the schoolroom, a ballroom, and the Red Deeps. It further provides a pace for more abstract locations and events, such as a boating trip down the river, a flood, or a variety of Maggie’s dreams and fantasies. The main idea of this space is that it is immediately transformable by the presence of the actors and their interactions with the space.

The use of space for this production is comparable to the ideals of Eastern European-influenced ‘Action Design’, in which, according to designer Jaroslav Malina,
the “broken metaphor” allows for “contradictory meanings associated with a single image.”8 In this way, Lucy’s piano can become a boat, a book can become a butterfly or the leaves on a tree, and a rag doll can become a little girl. As with Delbert Unruh’s explanation of the aims of Action Design, “The object is neither, and both, and something else besides.”9 The meaning of the objects in Mill on the Floss changes according to how the actor interacts with the objects, the space, and the other actors. Further, through the specific focus of the lighting, this transformability allows several events to occur in different areas of the playing space at the same time, or to shift back and forth rapidly. Thus, while Maggie’s parents quarrel with her aunts and uncles over the girl’s behavior, we can watch Maggie repeatedly travel in circles around the entire playing area as she runs away to join the Gypsies. In addition, there is a continual flow of action between scenes, since there are no deliberate scene breaks. The actors themselves add or remove the objects that allow the scene to shift. For example, the schoolmaster brings on a satchel of books, and we are transported to the classroom. Maggie brings on a chair, and we shift to the Dean’s parlor.

Second, a framing device, the repeated visual motif of the ‘ducking’ of a witch, begins and guides the arc of Maggie Tulliver’s journey towards destruction. This visual image both opens and closes the main action of the play.

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9 Christilles and Unruh, 122.
It is this device that situates Maggie’s outsider status within her community. This is heightened when other characters repeat gestures from the ‘ducking’ scene at key moments when Tom’s relationship with his sister totters towards the edge of disapproval.

This framing device also establishes the dominant water imagery of the production. Maggie’s life is intensely connected with water; as a child and an adult, Maggie is drawn towards the River Floss. Water also functions as Maggie’s emotional thermometer. The imagery of the water follows Maggie throughout the play and becomes a major motif emphasizing the increasing tension and distance between Maggie and her community. Set, sound, lighting, and gesture all support this connection. Each time Maggie is chastised and told she is wrong, we, as audience, hear a water sound, the “deaf
rage” that Maggie hears inside her head. The metaphor is complete at the end of the play when Maggie drowns in the flood. The climactic image is that of Maggie suspended upside down from the platform in the same position as the woman ducked as a witch:

“We hear the sound of the deaf rage. As TOM reaches her, MAGGIE stops resisting. Their hands clasp. Brother and sister die together.”

A note is helpful here on the particular construction of the furniture for the Tulliver household. The designer, Bunny Christie, searched for a way to tie the all the aspects of the production together with the themes and motifs being used to develop the actors’ work on their characters. Since the element of water plays a major role in the development of the characters, Christie designed furniture for the Tulliver house that reflects this motif. The legs of all the furniture are uneven, appearing on stage as if the pieces are sinking into the wet sand or earth. This allows the focus on water to unite areas of performance, set design, lighting, costumes, and sound.

A third device animating the production is the three-way division of Maggie’s character. Although this split is indicated within the script, it is physicalized in performance. The division of the character allows complex layers of interaction and response between characters, highlighting Maggie’s inner tensions and desires, as well as facilitating the abstract exploration of dramatic space and time.

A final device is the use of repeated gestures and ritualized patterns of movement. Above, I have indicated the gestures associated with the ducking of the witch. These gestures, when repeated during additional scenes, further heighten the sense of Maggie’s

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disapproval within her community. Other gestures are employed during the two scenes in which Maggie transforms from ‘wild child’ to ‘religious convert’, and then to ‘mature, Maggie’. Not only do the gestures establish a pattern that identifies the repeated action, they also help to highlight the emotional force motivating her transformations. Other important gestures clarify the action during Maggie’s fantasy sequences, and the abstract scenes such as the human ‘trees’ in the Reed Deeps or the flood scene.

**Bunny Christie on the Task of Designing the Production**

Christie was “influenced by the Works of Boyd Webb—he is an artist who makes installations. He does quite a lot of work representing water and we tried to look at how to represent water in the play…. He also creates art with things floating, things submerged and layers of things. I was also particularly interested in the layers he creates when I was thinking about the river. What is on the top and what is on the bottom of the river?… I did a lot of sketches and talked to Helen, who got interested in having an upper level. She became very involved with this as an idea and began to incorporate it in her writing. I took the idea on and began to think how to use it…. I had this idea for the floor cloth and became quite interested in a kind of backdrop of a sky…. We got quite interested in cutting things right down, and also looking at them sinking into the floor. This made them smaller and easier to get rid of, jump around, or sit on… It meant you didn’t have a great big wardrobe, you could just have a half a wardrobe and also it looked quite interesting because it looked like it was sinking or floating. There is painted sky at the back and a great big floor cloth, which is wrinkled up all over the floor and thrown over pieces of furniture. Then there is the big wooden structure that runs right across it
with ladders going up to it. The upper level can become a bridge, Maggie’s attic, the mill, or the upper storey of the house…lots of different things.”

Peter Salem on Composing the Music

Peter Salem worked on a “thematic approach for Maggie. There are places where she transforms and I think musically there has to be some transformation so that any sound linked with her transforms during the play. Maggie is an interesting character because both music and sound mean a lot to her, so I have to try and find a way of getting that in. Creating that idea, that sound in her head, is very important. She has an extraordinary imagination; she sees and experiences things very vividly and sound is one of those things. There also has to be something related to the theme of water; perhaps even using buckets of water to create some kind of sound….But I also want to musicalise the water so that it becomes even more vivid. It’s as though Maggie hears things and sees things in water. Obviously it’s something that is with her through her life. It has all sorts of overtones of fatalism and destiny; and also a natural force, which is like Maggie’s own life force which goes on regardless.”

Liz Ranken on Choreographing the Movement

It is the highly stylized physical action through which we are drawn into the mental and emotional experiences of the characters. Liz Ranken’s work as movement director is a key to the company’s efforts to bond movement with text. It is the language


of gesture that allows the women to ‘speak’ their inner lives. The visual sequences are the means by which the private, inner lives of characters are made tangible and placed center stage. There are several ways that Ranken works to unlock physical impulses in the actors. One of these is the metaphysical use of pure color and the elements: air, fire, earth, and water.

To create the flood at the climax of *Mill on the Floss*, Ranken specifically guided the actors to respond physically to the stimuli of the color white as well as water imagery. The flood was created with only a wash of color from the lighting, with sound, and with actors’ movements responding to the water. Ranken worked with actors in workshop to explore ‘making waves’. She had the actors work in pairs from opposite sides of the room to send currents or waves to their partners across the room. The partners receiving the waves would respond physically to the gestures that were sent to them. They would work to the let the gesture become more exaggerated in response to the force of the current as it traveled the distance of the room. Ranken also explored the idea of water as a highly emotional medium, and asked actors to heighten the urgency of their actions by imagining that someone they love was being affected by the currents. As the actors struggled to reach each other through the currents, they would also imagine that every move they made would create currents that separated them further from the very person they were trying to reach. Or, they worked with ideas of resistance moving in the water currents; their movement would be impaired, but they would have to keep moving forward nonetheless. Later in these explorations, Ranken added objects to the activities. The actors would experiment with moving the objects as if they were in water. Again,
they would add the layer of the emotional need to retrieve a significant and desired object.

However, the central concept for the production, the ‘three Maggies’, was a key influence on Ranken’s movement work with the actresses to represent Maggie at different stages in her life. They worked together to discover and devise overall patterns of movement and response that would characterize each of the three women. For instance, since the First Maggie is youthful, Ranken characterizes the movement they developed in rehearsal for this stage of the character as “released”, and “very emotionally present with little sense of self-censorship, she is true to herself.”¹³ In performance, this rehearsal exploration is represented in ‘receiving’ actions such as stretching with wide-open arms and embracing, or exuberant movements such as skipping and circling. At all times, especially after the appearance of the Second and Third Maggies, First Maggie connects with the other two; she acts out the desires the other two are longing to express, or she invites them to participate with her in playing, living, and, most of all, feeling. Second Maggie, according to Ranken, subjugates the passion of First Maggie. She suppresses her own individuality and desires for the sake of the happiness of others, namely her brother. Her movement is “more constrained, bound, and often self-punishing.” In performance, this character often kneels for prayer, and shuts away avenues of entertainment or delight; she is often solitary, rejecting or at least not initiating physical contact with the other characters. She seeks solace in the Divine above, rather than in those closest to her. The quality of her movements is often sharp, jerking, or closed.

Third Maggie must struggle with the wants of these other two major aspects of herself. Yet, as a mature woman, she longs for entrance into the sensual world of adults. Ranken suggests, “passions release Maggie’s movements into more flowing free movement.” She continues, “there is often a water reference in her movement with a sense of embracing sensual pleasures and creativity. She is far more aware of responding to others than First Maggie.” Third Maggie is often on her toes, ready to engage with anyone or anything. Often, the key trigger of her movement is the presence of water, whether in memory or actuality. Her body responds as if entranced by the water, with arms stretching out in front of her, or over her head as she leans her whole body into the sensual delights. Her movements are languid, melting and releasing when she experiences the attentions of another person.

Figure A.3  *Mill on the Floss* –Helen Schlesinger as Third Maggie (1995) (Courtesy of Shared Experience Theatre Archives, Mark Douet Photography)
Mill on the Floss in Performance:

PART ONE

Prologue

The young Maggie Tulliver kneels alone on a dark stage, herself tightly lit by a spot light as she reads from Daniel Defoe’s The History of the Devil: “…bringing those things called witches or conjurors to justice; this is, first to know if a woman be a witch, throw her into a pond; and if she be a witch she will swim, and it is not in her own power to prevent it…”14 A gentle and rhythmic plucking sound, like the turning of the mill wheel is heard in the background. As Maggie repeats these words, the lights rise on a menacing crowd on the platform above her. They speak Maggie’s words, “witches” and “conjurors” along with her as she speaks them, and gesture towards an accused woman they are preparing to duck as a witch. As she is ducked, the woman hangs by her legs from the platform, as if submerged under water. The stage directions suggest Maggie’s immediate connection with this woman. As the woman is plunged under water, Maggie “turns to see her and, as if she too is under water, struggles to reach her.”15 The lights above on the crowd disappear and are replaced with a cold, blue light as the woman slowly struggles in the water below. The music alters; it, too, takes on the sound of something muffled and constrained under water; claustrophobic distress. This sound will become linked with Maggie throughout the performance as she experiences trauma or unhappiness.

14 Helen Edmundson, Mill on the Floss. London: Nick Hern, 1994: 1. All subsequent page citations are taken from this script and will appear henceforth within the body of the appendix.
Significantly, Maggie is also engulfed by the blue light, and reacts with her body as if responding to the movement of the woman under water. In slow motion, she twirls and stretches her arms out to the drowning woman. The woman is hauled out, then ducked a second time. Maggie fights to reach her. She recognizes and understands the inevitable and miserable predicament of this woman; Maggie screams, “No”, as the woman becomes still and drowns. The scene is a linking device, a foreshadowing tool that sets up both our introduction to Maggie and prepares us for her own demise by drowning in the flood at the end of the story. Maggie’s placement in this scene suggests her position, along with the accused woman, outside of the community, her marginal position on the fringe of a conventional, provincial, and narrow-minded society. The fact that Maggie ‘sees’ the drowning woman, and that she alone attempts to help her further highlights her recognition of outsider status, the inevitable fate of a strong-willed, intellectual, and passionate woman in a society that can find no place or occupation for such qualities.

“Too cute for a woman…”

The scene shifts as the background scrim brightens to a brilliant blue and the entire playing area is washed with light. The other characters of the Tulliver household enter and the platform area now becomes the Dorlcote mill. Mr. Tulliver and Bob Jakin use ropes and a ladder to hoist bags of flour back and forth between the upper and lower levels. It is a key staging device to allow the platform and the playing space surrounding

15 Edmundson, 1.

it to suggest multiple settings. This allows Meckler and Teale, fluidly and effortlessly, to make use of crosscurrents of time and space within the story. For example, within this one short scene, the platform becomes the Tulliver’s mill, and the addition of chairs in front of the platform gives us the parlor at the mill. Further, Maggie is seen at the back of the platform where she reads her book on the bank of the river. Mrs. Tulliver looks out front towards the audience to find Maggie at the river, and when she calls to her, Maggie winds around the back of the platform to enter into the parlour.

The following scene between Mr. Stelling, the headmaster, and the Tullivers addresses Tulliver’s desire for Tom to be educated, and highlights the effects of Maggie’s early exclusion from intellectual pursuits. Maggie eagerly demonstrates her desire for an education with her passionate account of the Defoe book that she has been reading. The rejection of her request and the subsequent chastisement by her mother, who asks, “What is to become of you if you are so naughty? No one will love you anymore” (7), propels Maggie into the first fit of rage that we witness. Maggie rushes to the side of the stage and plunges her head into a pail of water. As she does so we hear the “deaf rage” sound that becomes the motif throughout Maggie’s obstructed life.\(^{17}\) She then dashes up the ladder to the upper level of the platform, which now becomes her attic. The background scrim plunges into a dark gray in sympathy with Maggie’s altered mood. There, in the privacy of her own space, Maggie plays out her rage by beating her doll furiously against...

\(^{17}\) Adapter Helen Edmundson uses this phrase in her adaptation. Peter Salem also refers to the phrase “deaf rage” to describe his thoughts on the process of discovering images and motifs to help him compose the music for the production. Water became a major motif for the production. He explains that, “It’s as if Maggie sees and hears things in water.” *Mill on the Floss* Education Pack.
the floor until her rage, and its accompanying sound, subsides. It is the same water sound that accompanied the ducking and drowning of the woman in the prologue. It is this sound that becomes a major signifier, even, perhaps, a thermometer for the intensity of Maggie’s inner turmoil.

Figure A.4  *Mill on the Floss*—Anne Marie Duff as a water-soaked First Maggie (1995)
(Courtesy of Shared Experience Theatre Archives, Mark Douet Photography)

Additionally, this scene begins an important conflict in the adaptation; the antipathy between Tulliver and Wakem. For Mr. Tulliver, as well as Maggie, directors Meckler and Teale help us to see into the private anguish of the characters. During this scene the upper platform transforms once again. This time we see the Wakem’s dark silhouette pass slowly by above, as Tulliver reacts vehemently against the idea of his son being educated at the same school where Wakem’s son is also educated.
Tom Comes Home from School

This scene develops the importance of the relationship between Maggie and her brother, Tom, through a number of significant visual devices. Maggie craves approval from her brother, yet it is Tom who continually receives praise and celebration from his nearest members of the community. Adapter Helen Edmundson skillfully compresses several longer scenes from the source novel into one swiftly flowing theatrical scene in order to quickly establish Tom’s status in the community and his power over his sister’s affections.

The scene begins in the mill as Maggie tells Bob Jakin of Tom’s imminent arrival. It shifts suddenly, with a slow motion parade, as Tom is welcomed home. They wind from upstage to downstage, on the upper and lower levels of the platform, while other characters gesture silently, waving their arms, blowing kisses, bowing, and praising Tom. Tom, with his arms raised as if celebrating a victory, removes a laurel wreath from his head and tosses it in the air to a character on the top level of the platform. The action then quickly shifts back to real time as Maggie jumps into Tom’s arms. The two run, play and hold each other. Tom swings from the various poles supporting the upper platform, and hangs upside down from the platform itself, dropping to the floor when Maggie announces that all of Tom’s rabbits are dead. It is his overt physicality, his athletic use of the playing space that establishes Tom as a physical rather than an intellectual or spiritual force, and foreshadows the ever-widening gap between Maggie and him in mental and emotional maturity. Tom, too, chastises Maggie as a naughty girl, and retracts any earlier profession of love he may have shown for his sister. As he yells at her, the “deaf rage” returns, Maggie covers her ears, and runs back up to the attic to
pound her doll against the floor as the scrim turns grey once more. She remains there until Tom is forced to go up to the attic to apologize to Maggie. The music brightens to a gentle tune of a rushing brook as Maggie and Tom move to the side of the platform and dangle their feet off the edge; The space has transformed once again and has now become a fishing hole. The scene shifts quickly between the brother and sister at the fishing pool and a visit from Aunt and Uncle Glegg below on the main level. The characters remain on stage the entire time as the scenes shift back and forth.

The Wild Child

Scenes 4 through 12 develop the increasingly tense and unhappy relationship between Maggie and the members of her family, especially Tom. It is only her father who continues to ‘take her part’. Maggie’s interests in books and knowledge, in the misshapen boy who is Wakem’s son, in defending her compassionate but feckless father, in speaking her mind whenever the words spring into her head; all of these traits bring a rash of hearty disapproval from those nearest to her. With increasing frequency, Maggie’s “deaf rage” appears in response to the accusations of what a “naughty child” or “idiot” she is. Judged by the standards of those who do not understand her passions, nothing Maggie does is right or acceptable. She is in constant conflict with others. Significantly, during this visit from the Gleggs and Pullets, a large frilly rag doll represents Maggie’s cousin, Lucy Deane. The doll is passed from one knee to another, cuddled and cooed over, and finally placed quietly at the side of the stage. The doll is everything that Lucy is, and what Maggie can never be—blond, silent, and perfectly still. In one key scene, after being humiliated by Mother, brother, aunts, and uncles over her
clumsy haircut, Maggie runs away “to the gypsies”. She runs around the circumference of the entire playing space, from the back of the platform right on around in front of the scene that is being played in the parlor. She circles the set over and over throughout the parallel scene as the aunts and uncles quarrel over the right way to raise children; she is unseen by the other characters, but in full view of the audience. It is one device that allows Edmundson, and directors Meckler and Teale, to reveal two theatrical events concurrently, creating multiple layers of experience and character perspective.

The playing space in front of the platform remains fluid and transformable throughout these scenes. It becomes the Tulliver parlor, a road, the schoolroom, a garden, a boarding school, or a sick room through the simple addition or extraction of items such as chairs, bundles of books, a sketchpad, picnic blanket, or through focus or color of the lighting effects. For example, as Tom leaves for school he is still in the happiness of a youthful attachment to his sister. They stand center stage, holding hands in a blue light as they listen to the rushing sounds of the water through the mill. Maggie kisses him and lets go of his hand to exit. Mr. Stelling brings on several bundles of books, for Tom is now at school.

Maggie’s sudden appearance into the space again indicates a visit to Tom at his school. Here he continues to taunt her desire for books and knowledge. The “deaf rage” haunts her again, but subsides with the gentle presence and angelic singing voice of a new friend. It is at this school that Maggie meets and befriends Phillip Wakem. He is the first person in Maggie’s young life to believe in her desire for knowledge and to recognize her huge appetite for life and expression: “You have dark eyes. They’re not like other eyes. They seem as if they are trying to speak…” (27). The beginnings of this
ill-fated friendship signal more divisive conflict yet to come within Maggie’s community. As she places an innocent kiss on Phillip’s cheek and promises to always remember him, the crowd from the first scene gathers again on the platform and repeats the gestures from the ducking of the witch. The whisper, “witch,” as they stare down at Maggie. Tom stands underneath the platform in the shadows of the crowd. His proximity to their menacing accusations and the implicit suggestion of this position is a chilling reminder of the first scene’s ducking.

“That child ‘ull come to no good…”18

When Mr. Tulliver loses the family fortune and falls ill, the household goods and the mill must be sold. The outspoken Maggie finds herself on the wrong side of her brother again This time, in addition to the deaf rage, a more drastic change engulfs the young girl as she desperately seeks to change herself and to earn her brother’s approval. Above, on top of the platform, the character transforms and a Second Maggie, calm and subdued with her dark hair firmly pulled back replaces the First Maggie. There is a series of ritual gestures and arm motions that accompany the transformation, and will reappear later as the Second Maggie must change again. As Maggie enters her attic to assuage her rage, she grabs a small mirror. Desperate to be loved by her brother, Tom, “She looks at herself, trying perhaps to see herself the way others see her. She feels the weight of Toms’s words and knows she will have to change. Life is not how she thought it was. She was wrong” (34). A ‘new’ Maggie steps forward onto the upper platform. Maggie

18 Edmundson, 33.
sits in profile on the upper platform that is her attic. As she does so, Second Maggie sits
directly opposite of her. They bring their hands up in the air, mirroring each other’s
movements. Each girl takes her hands and slides them down the sides of her own face,
then they put their hands up facing outwards and press them together, as if touching the
reflection in a mirror. Second Maggie grabs First Maggie’s hands and pulls her
backwards and forwards and winds her arms around so that Second Maggie is not directly
in back of the First. They both face outwards towards the audience.

What follows is an intricate series of gestures involving arms and hand
gestures towards the women’s faces. They stretch their arms forwards and back. As
they stretch forward they cry, “Tooooooom,” then bring their hands back over to cover
their mouths. As they stretch their arms open wide and back they cry “Maaaggie.”
These repeated gestures signal desire, ambition, and hunger for love and life. Together,
the Maggies stretch their arms, cry out in a wail, and finally clasp hands over their
mouths, a gesture of silence and containment. The final gesture ends as Second Maggie
places her hand over First Maggie’s mouth and says, “Don’t look for love, Maggie.
There is no love in life, and no happiness” (34). Second Maggie takes over in the action
of the following scenes. As she climbs down from the attic on to the main space below,
the other characters twirl quickly in and around the space crying “sold…sold,” with
objects such as chairs and linens as all the Tulliver’s possessions are auctioned off and
sold.

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PART TWO

“I bear everything…”19

Second Maggie is noticeably more subdued in outward manner than the First Maggie, yet she retains the same youthful longings within her. This is apparent in physical gestures that belie Maggie’s early connection to the water, to books, and in her confusion between her affections for Tom and for Phillip. When alone, Second Maggie stretches her arms out, as if towards the water, as we hear the sounds of the water rushing through the wheels of the mill. She begins reading Tom’s old schoolbooks, yet is visibly very unhappy. First Maggie skips through and grabs one of her books; she giddily makes a ‘butterfly’ with the leaves of the book, before skipping out of the space again. As Second Maggie begins to cry, First Maggie enters again and picks up the discarded books; she wants to know if “there are any with stories in?” (39). Second Maggie doesn’t immediately respond; she is too engulfed in her “miserable, hopeless life.” First Maggie enthusiastically suggests they run away or go work on barges. This begins a conflict in Maggie between her will to behave and her longing for adventure and life. Second Maggie tries silence the First Maggie, and to physically overpower the demon inside herself. They collapse on the floor together, with First Maggie is Second Maggie’s lap; she cannot quell the spirit inside of her.

It is there on the floor together that Maggie discovers a book by Thomas à Kempis and begins reading: “Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace and tranquility. Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations and

19 Edmundson, 47.
superfluous cares fly away; then shall immoderate fear leave thee, and inordinate love shall die” (41). As Second Maggie finds hope and release for this life through the religious teaching, she becomes ecstatic with joy. First Maggie spreads her arms like wings as if she is flying.

“*You have dark eyes…*”

Scenes 17 through 20 explore Maggie’s increasing inner turmoil as she attempts to repress all feeling within her. She disobeys her brother’s wishes by meeting with Phillip in the Red Deeps. Several times during these scenes Maggie tries to break off her friendship with Phillip, but she continually fails. She attempts to rely on her religious feelings to sustain her and give her strength to stay away from Philip. They do not. In the Red Deeps, the other characters enter the space as well, lying along or standing against various section of the platform. These characters are the ‘trees’ of the Red Deeps; they hold books open before them, the leaves of the books are the ‘leaves’ of the trees. Maggie tries to explain her need to sacrifice her personal desires, yet he persists in his admiration for her hunger for life and tries to give her a book. As he does so, leaves fall from the books on the ‘trees’, for Maggie has relinquished her love of books, or at least attempted to do so. She drops to the floor, her longing expressed as she stretches her arms towards Phillip. The “trees” bends towards Maggie. It takes all of her might for Maggie to pull herself back in the opposite direction from Phillip, stretching her arms back behind her. The sky darkens and the wind whistles as Maggie’s soul shakes within her.

20 Edmundson, 42.
The presence of the First Maggie is a key device in these scenes to help physicalize the pull between Maggie’s outward and inward desires. In one key example, as Second Maggie scrubs the upper level of the platform, First Maggie attempts to sneak down to meet with Phillip. After scolding her, Second Maggie eventually gives in and they go. Phillip again rejects Maggie’s absurd sacrifice of her self and urges her to engage with life: “You were so full of life when you were a child. I thought you would be a brilliant woman—all wit and imagination. And it flashes out in your face still—there!”(47). First Maggie has rushed into the space, in between Phillip and Second Maggie. She spreads her arms wide, opening up to life and grinning wide. It is this ‘flash’ that Phillip sees within Maggie. Yet, Second Maggie, shoves First Maggie away. Phillip persists and makes a plea for her to continue to at least meet him for a ‘chance’ meeting, therefore not explicitly disobeying Tom.

The tone of the scene shifts as this request tears at Maggie’s conscience and her soul. The character, Tom, shifts quickly from his position in the trees of the Deeps, turns sharply forward, and slams his book shut. He stares at his sister. Second Maggie immediately drops to her knees and begins singing a hymn to calm her shaky soul, “I will at all times bless the Lord….” First Maggie runs in and joins Second Maggie on her knees. They both move to various areas of the stage, repeating the hymn. First Maggie follows the Second and stands behind her as she prays and sings. The intensity of the search for peace continues as First Maggie tries to pry Second Maggie’s clasped hands apart. First Maggie then throws her arms in Phillip’s direction, falling on stage towards him. Second Maggie follows the First. She then embraces First Maggie and gives her permission to go to Phillip. They are both quiet, as First Maggie gets up and walks

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slowly to Phillip, putting her arms around him. She kisses Phillip on the check and holds his hand as they slowly exit. Second Maggie remains on stage and carries on singing her hymn, now joined by the other characters, the living “trees”, who suddenly take on the role of choir.

During a subsequent scene between Phillip and Maggie in the Deeps, Phillip confesses that he loves Maggie. In turn, Maggie gives Phillip a kiss; it is not the innocent kiss that emerges from a girl’s youthful friendship, but a real kiss from a woman to a man. Immediately, the “trees” spring to life and Tom, charging in between them, blasts the couple for their deceit. The other “trees” slowly leave the stage. First Maggie remains, watching from the shadows during the exchange. Tom threatens Phillip if he continues any association with his sister. Maggie is forced to make a choice between her brother and the possibility of love with Phillip. Her need for approval from her brother is too strong and she agrees never to see Phillip again. As Tom hauls Second Maggie away with him, First Maggie wails, “Nooooo”, and runs from her position in the shadows, winding through the playing space, and up to her old attic where she flails her arms and legs as she used to do. The ‘deaf rage’ has returned.

It is apparent that a rift has formed and permanently endangers the feelings of loving kindness and respect between brother and sister. Second Maggie, discarding her reserved manner for the moment, releases her thoughts about her brother’s actions. She voices her recognition of a need for ‘feelings’ as well as for the outward conduct and propriety that Tom demands from her. Self-denial will no longer sustain Maggie. She confesses: “I know I’ve been wrong. But I also know that I have sometimes been wrong because I have feelings which you would be the better for…You thank God for nothing
but your own virtues. But there are feelings in this world which throw your shining virtues into darkness” (51-52). She can no longer submit to the will of her brother: “She has gained no lasting stand on serene heights above worldly temptations and conflict. She is down again in the thick of strife with her own and others’ passions. There is more struggle for her and she knows she must change” (52). Second Maggie enters the attic where First Maggie is crying and collapses with her in an embrace. A ‘new’ Maggie again emerges from the shadows of the top of the platform. She brings with her a mirror. This time First and Second Maggies stare into the mirror, directly opposite of the Third Maggie. The gestures from the earlier charges are repeated. The women grasp hands and pull each other back and forth, winding their arms around so that all three face the audience. First Maggie is seated on the floor of the attic. Second Maggie appears in back of the First. Third Maggie stands behind the other two as they again repeat the gestures with their hands to and away from their faces. Finally, with hands clasped over the mouth of the girl in front of them, Third Maggie speaks, “Perhaps it is for the best” (53). A “prouder, more worldly” Maggie has emerged (52-53).
PART THREE

The Testing of Maggie Tulliver

Scenes 21 through 36 develop the full conflict within Maggie’s inner nature. Third Maggie takes over in the present action, yet First and Second Maggie remain and interact with her during various scenes, highlighting the struggles and obstacles that Maggie is experiencing at any one given moment. During these scenes, several key relationships are developed; others are strained to the point of destruction. The rift between Maggie and her brother, Tom, remains unalterable, despite her efforts to appease him. Phillip persists in his longing for an intimate friendship with Maggie, yet it never develops due to her newly awakened sensuous attraction towards another man. This new
challenge presents itself in the form of Stephen Guest, her cousin Lucy’s fiancé. Maggie struggles between duty and love, between the loneliness of doing what she knows is right, and the fulfillment of her own heart’s desires. Further, the water motif that has followed Maggie throughout her life is here and parallels this phase of her ill-fated life. The water carries memories, desires, longings; her attraction towards the water grows stronger until the storm bursts and she is drowned.

Early in part three of the production, Maggie loses her most loyal supporter in life—her father. After he regains his finances and his dignity, he thrashes Mr. Wakem. The effort of this wearies Tulliver and he dies in the arms of his daughter. All three Maggies are affected by his death. As Third Maggie screams, “Noooo”, Second Maggie enters and quietly walks over to her father, she helps him to his feet as First Maggie joins them, Tulliver takes the little girl in his arms and they exit upstage slowly. Third Maggie reaches her arms out to Tom for comfort, but he disregards her and exits.

A new phase of Maggie’s life begins after a time away working for a boarding school. She arrives back home in St. Ogg’s to stay with her cousin Lucy. Left alone on stage, she looks out across the stage at the river. We hear the gentle rushing of the water and see the warm blue light as her memories come flooding back. She reaches her arms up, then out towards the water. Stephen Guest arrives at the home just in time to catch Maggie in her reverie. Maggie cannot help talking about the River Floss—it draws her. Lucy and Stephen exit the stage and we are now in Maggie’s bedroom. Maggie is left alone on stage and her heart soars; it is the excitement of the river, or perhaps the delight of a new, and very handsome, acquaintance. She takes her traveling bag and twirls it around above her head in the air. She kneels on the floor to open the case. As she does
so, Second Maggie, who has been lingering in the shadows, now enters the space: “We should go to bed” (61). She kneels next to Third Maggie and begins to pray. First Maggie twirls excitedly into the room. Second Maggie repeats her plea to go to bed, and holds up Maggie’s nightgown. Third Maggie, however, is too “charged with delight” to listen. “What are you doing here?” she says, as she shoos her away (61).

The First Maggie begins to show up on stage with the Third Maggie more and more often now, signaling that youthful and exuberant part of her heart that is active during this time. For example, when Tom gives Maggie permission to see Phillip on a friendship basis, it is First Maggie who rushes across the stage and throws her arms around Tom, kisses him, and promises not to be naughty anymore. Later, at Lucy’s, when the group is singing and playing the piano, First Maggie has brought in the chairs for Maggie to sit in as she knits and listens to the singing. Far more than just a device to set up the necessary scenery, First Maggie’s presence allows her to encourage Maggie’s adventures and experiences. All three Maggie’s interact during the following scene after the music trio has left and the light tightens on Maggie alone on stage. First Maggie sneaks mischievously around the upstage corner of the piano and begins to play on the keys. She stretches out her arm and calls Third Maggie to join her; the two revel together in the tune they are creating. Second Maggie runs in and slams the top of the piano lid, ending the song. First Maggie scampers away and Third Maggie questions why Second Maggie has appeared, as Stephen Guest arrives in the doorway with music in hand for Lucy. Second Maggie stays to observe. There follows a tense scene involving Maggie’s ball of yarn, which generates an almost palpable attraction between the two young people. Maggie drops her ball of yarn from her knitting when Stephen mentions Phillip
Wakem. He rises to retrieve the yarn and returns it to her. As Maggie deliberately drops it again, the sound of a piano and a loud metronome can be heard in the background. Stephen slowly winds the yarn up and hands it to Maggie again. He is inches from her body. As they look at each other, Maggie drops it a third time. It is more than Second Maggie can bear, and she dives for the yarn as Stephen hastily retreats out of doors. The tension dissipates, and Third Maggie rushes into the arms of Second Maggie for support and strength.

During another singing session, Maggie’s nearness to Stephen becomes unbearable. The scene abruptly shifts, in between reality and fantasy, as Maggie stamps her foot and begins to remove her outer clothing. The piano and metronome underscoring reappears as the rest of the characters leave the stage. Maggie takes off her jacket and skirt, throws them to the side, and is left in a black corset and underskirt. While she does this, First Maggie enters carrying a lacy black overskirt over her head. She places it on Third Maggie and helps her get dressed for the ‘ball’. She stretches her arms straight up in the air, enjoying the feeling of her body and her own sensuality. Another struggle ensues between the three women as Second Maggie runs in and demands that she take off the party dress. Third Maggie shouts at her, then ignores her and begins to dance to a waltz tune with First Maggie. The space transforms into the ballroom. More couples enter and begin to dance. First Maggie breaks off and giddily waltzes around the space, as Third Maggie stands self-consciously on her own. She is not unobserved. Phillip, stands above on the platform and watches silently as Stephen attempts to ask her to dance and is rebuffed. Stephen attempts again, grabs her hand, and pulls her into the space. The other couples clear as Stephen lifts Maggie off the floor and swings her around and
around in circles. It is a private, intimate moment of longing and desire. It is a desperate moment for Maggie. She feels torn between her family and her heart, and suddenly announces that she must go away.

“...My loving, large-souled Maggie”\textsuperscript{21}

Maggie’s longing to leave and seek a position elsewhere is matched by her attraction to Stephen. In another moment during which the river mesmerizes Third Maggie, Stephen approaches her to confess his love. They struggle between their attraction for each other and their responsibilities and ties to Lucy and Stephen. He places his coat around her shoulders and asks her to row with him in the boat out on the river. She moves away, twirling out from underneath the coat. In response, he twirls and again attempts to place the coat around her shoulders. She twirls away a second time. It becomes a teasing game until she finally gives in to him. They go to the river. He picks Maggie up and places her on top of the piano, which has now become the ‘boat’.

\textsuperscript{21} Edmundson, 81.
He sits on the piano bench in front of her and ‘rows’ back and forth. After a few motions of his arms back and forth, she leans in to him and clasps his hands as he rows forward. With each succeeding row, she leans in further, until she is lying across his back. He places her down, length-wise across the top of the piano as they drift on the river. With a loud crash of the piano keys, it is apparent that they have gone too far out. He wants to run away, to Scotland, to get married. They argue around the piano, until she cries, “Help me!” He kisses her. It is a sensual embrace as they both lie along the piano, which is still the rowboat. Stephen assures her everything will be all right, and they rest. Suddenly, Maggie dreams and all the characters enter and surround the piano in a dark light. In her dream, the characters speak all at once, repeating phrases she has heard them say in her youth. They are the thoughts and nightmares embedded in her mind. Maggie jumps up off the piano and the figures rush away.
Third Maggie defends her wish to not go away with Stephen. She has decided to remain strong, to part with him, and to atone to the others she believes she has betrayed. As she defends what she believes with her “whole heart and soul,” First and Second Maggies run out to her and grasp her skirts. Maggie is seized by her “memories and affections and longings after perfect goodness.” She chooses “to be true to my…to myself” (77). Stephen exits and the Maggie wonders where she will go next, if she will go home. As Tom rejects her, the crowd we have seen many times before has gathered again; they whisper to Maggie: “Witch!”

A letter from Stephen calling Maggie back to him offers yet another test of Maggie’s resolve. Here we witness the most physical and violent confrontation between the three Maggies up to this point in the performance. First and Second Maggie run out as Third Maggie struggles over the letter. Second Maggie stretches out her hands, and shouts at her not to read it. First Maggie, however, is excited and wants to hear it. Third Maggie falls to her knees as she reads the letter, with First Maggie behind her, soothing her. Second Maggie kneels next to them and prays. First Maggie gets up to get a pen and paper to answer him, while Second Maggie repeats, “I will bear it and bear it.” She goes to First Maggie and grabs her, holding her from retrieving the pen and paper. First Maggie releases herself and goes to Third Maggie. The two women take hands and twirl around as their hearts sour at the thought of reuniting with Stephen again. Second Maggie again interferes, until Third Maggie grabs her and pounds her, physically forcing her head to the ground as she screams, “I want him!” It is aggressive, violent—desperate. Her desires are absolutely clear, yet when a completely devastated Lucy appears on stage in the following scene, Maggie realizes the extent of the unhappiness that her actions
have caused. Lucy’s presence forces her to remember her responsibilities to others. She burns the letter, accepting her situation. She will bear it all, but laments, “how long must I wait before death comes?” (83).

The Flood Hits

The other characters have entered the space, and repeat their gestures from the ducking of the witch at the beginning of the performance. The flood hits, the stage is filled with blue light, and we hear the sound of rushing water. All characters slowly twirl and swirl as if caught up in water. They roll forwards and backwards on stage, or twirl around with the objects that have been caught in the flood. The three Maggies cling to each other, then swim to reach Tom, who is barricaded behind the piano. First Maggie is the one who reaches out to Tom; they cling together. A sound, like the deaf rage, hits. Tom and Maggie are submerged under water. They are alone together, then separated. Maggie is caught up and held aloft as Tom struggles to reach her. First Maggie appears again; she hangs suspended from the platform under water. She is in the same position as the woman who was ducked as a witch in the beginning of the performance. Tom clings to her and the brother and sister die together. Just as suddenly as the flood began, it subsides. The lights and gentle music return. First Maggie and Tom lie peacefully on the floor, and the other characters enter the platform and look upon them below. Edmundson describes the ending she has created: “Perhaps Maggie is a witch. Perhaps the notion of a
witch has always been society’s fail-safe mechanism for dealing with Maggies. Perhaps the ending is a happy one”

**Selected Press Responses**

The following press quotations reveal changes in the critical response to *Mill on the Floss* from its first appearance in 1994, until the third revival in 2001. They also reveal changing attitudes towards physical theatre and novel adaptations in general. The early responses suggest a lack of comfort with the highly presentational and non-naturalistic nature of the aesthetic approach. Together, the quotations indicate the progressive level of acceptance, comfort, and, finally, excitement regarding the physical and stylized staging of the novel.

**1994**

Claire Armistead, *Guardian*, 17.5.94:

“[Nancy Meckler] works with co-director Polly Teale and writer Helen Edmundson in a style that not only reinvents the book, but pushes the boat of theatricality way beyond its usual moorings…. A conceit that on paper seems naively psycho-analytical is thrillingly effective in performance. It creates a sort of 3-D effect, which merges theatrical construction with the development of identity, while acknowledging that identity is never static or finite.”

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Andrew St. George, *Financial Times*, 18.4.94:

“Eliot works on the page and on film but not on stage because she needs a fixed point of view—one narrator or one camera. The theatre has too many possibilities.”

John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 22.5.94:

“This is a penetrating analysis of the novel, but it is also profoundly anti-theatre. The threefold division is like representing Maggie’s relationship with herself—which is only a part of the book’s psychological project. It is not really separable from it. Also, in the theatre, you want to see a character growing, its parts overlapping: the actor’s challenge is to show the growth and manifold tensions in a single being. There, that is the issue.”

1995

Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 21.4.95:

“But this isn’t just a professional piece of *Reader’s Digest*-style condensation. In Nancy Meckler’s and Polly Teale’s enthralling production, *Mill on the Floss* emerges as a work of thrilling theatricality.”

Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 21.4.95:

“The company plays odd, stylised games with the original that in other hands could have become pretentious, distracting, boring, confusing, and worse; yet somehow it manages to penetrate Eliot’s heart and mind without the least spoiling her story.”
Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 26.4.95:

“…Helen Edmundson’s adaptation does not obviously appear to have its origins in a novel but rather stands up as a play in its own right. George Eliot’s strong story line and Shared Experience’s bold expressionism emerge as perfect partners.”

Alistair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 21.4.95:

“It fiercely maintains the narrative impetus of the story, but at the same time it forces latent levels of meaning to the surface—and obliges us to re-think and re-value central aspects of this dear old novel.”

2001

Oliver Jones, *What’s On In London*, 11.4.01:

“In 1994, Shared Experience rewrote the rule-book when it came to stage adaptations of weighty Victorian novels with their bodice-ripping expressionistic rendering of George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*. Seven years on, the show…finally arrives in the West End, and, though the intervening years have rather acclimatized theatre-goers to this kind of highly-charged physical style—thanks to the company’s legion of imitators—the show still packs an impressive punch.”
APPENDIX B

CATALOGUE OF SHARED EXPERIENCE PRODUCTIONS

The following is a catalogue of all the shows produced by Shared Experience between 1975 and 2002. I have included lists of cast members, as well as production and administrative staff. These lists are extensive because I would like to highlight the changes and developments in the vocabulary with which the company articulates its creative and administrative structure and function. For instance, for Liz Ranken’s first work for the company in 1991, she is listed as “choreography.” Her title changes to “movement” for the 1994 production of *Mill on the Floss*. This change reflects a significant re-thinking of both the role and creative impact of Ranken’s work within the productions. It also suggests a more general revision of movement-related vocabulary within British theatre practice on the whole.

At times the increasing specificity of the job titles also indicates expansion in the number of staff working for the company. The progressive financial success of the company, as well as enormous changes in the business-dominated atmosphere of arts marketing has necessitated continual increase in staff dedicated to finance, development, marketing, and publicity. The administrative lists document this growth and development.
I have provided the dates and locations of first performances, as well as the dates of first London performances. All shows toured within Britain, and I have indicated those productions that included international tours as well. Additionally, since there have only been two major artistic leaderships, I have not included the artistic director for each production. Mike Alfreds was artistic director from 1975 until 1987. Though Nancy Meckler became artistic director late in 1987, she did begin directing productions for the company until *The Bacchae* in 1988.

**ARABIAN NIGHTS**

**THE COMPANY**

Anthony Allen  
Diana Barrett  
Celia Booth  
John Dicks  
Veronica Roberts  
James Smith

Mike Alfreds-- Director  
B.H. Barry-- Physical Training  
Clare Davidson-- Vocal Training

*An Arabian Night*  
First performance on November 20th 1975 at the Crucible Theatre Sheffield

*The First Arabian Night*  
*The Loves of Kamar and Budur*  
First performance on February 16th 1976 at the Nuffield Theatre Southampton

*The Second Arabian Night*  
*The Rogueries of Dalilah the Wily*  
First performance on April 21st 1976 at The Roundhouse London

*The Third Arabian Night*  
*The City of Brass*
First performance on August 20th 1976 at Milton House School during the Edinburgh Festival where it won a Fringe First.

*The Fourth Arabian Night*
*The Adventures of Hasan of Basra* (for children)
First performance on June 21st 1976 at Gascoigne Primary School Barking

*Recitals of Mystery, Violence and Desire: Three Arabian Nights Entertainments*
The three adult shows were finally performed in repertory at The Kings Head Theatre London in April/May 1977

*BLEAK HOUSE*
By Charles Dickens

THE COMPANY

John Dicks
Pam Ferris
Jonathan Hackett
Eliza Hunt
Christopher Ryan
James Smith
Holly Wilson

Mike Alfreds--  Director
Trevor Roberts--  Company Manager
B.H. Barry--  Physical Training
Clare Davidson--  Vocal Training

The show was performed in four installments:
Part One The Law-Writer
First performance on September 19th 1977 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre

Part Two Sharpshooters
First performance on September 20th 1977 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre

Part Three Closing In
First performance on October 22nd 1977 at the Traverse Theatre Edinburgh

Part Four Beginning the World
First performance on February 23rd 1978 at The Crucible Theatre Sheffield

All four parts were finally performed in repertory at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs London in April/May 1978
**SCIENCE FICTIONS**

**THE COMPANY**

Sam Cox  
Pam Ferris  
Anthony Naylor  
Raad Rawi  
Ruth Seglow

Mike Alfreds-- Director  
Nicola Pallot-- Company Manager  
B.H. Barry-- Physical Training  
Patricia Arnold

First performance on September 12\textsuperscript{th} 1978 at Worcester Royal Grammar School; in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in October/November 1978 and at The Kings Head Theatre in April 1979.

**GOTHIC HORRORS**

**THE COMPANY**

Liz Brailsford  
Ken Drury  
Michael Garner  
Neale Goodrum  
Sue Rogerson

John Dicks-- Director  
Niola Pallot-- Company Manager  
Jane Gibson-- Physical Training

First performance on 16 January 1979 at the Mercury Theatre in Colchester.
CYMBELINE

THE COMPANY

John Dicks-- Cymbeline; Iachimo; A Gaoler
Pam Ferris-- Imogen; Cornelius
Raad Rawi-- Posthumus; Cloten; Belarius
Ruth Seglow-- The Queen; Philario; Arviragus
Colin Tarrant-- Pisanio; Caius Lucius; Guiderius

All the company played: Courtiers; musicians; messengers; servants; soldiers; ghosts; and Jupiter

Mike Alfred-- Director
Illona Sekacz-- Music for Songs
Dawn Lancaster-- Company Manager

First performance on September 22nd 1979 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre; subsequently at the Lyric Studio Hammersmith on April 8th 1980; The company made a British Council tour of Italy in March 1980; toured Israel and appeared at the Jerusalem Spring Festival in April/May; and played at The Project Arts Centre Dublin in May. Cymbeline played in repertoire with a revival of An Arabian Night.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
By William Shakespeare

THE COMPANY

Peter Ackerman-- Gratiano; The Prince of Morocco; A Gaoler
Jonathan Hackett-- Shylock; Old Gobbo; Stephano
Anthony Naylor-- Bassanio; Tubal; Balthasar
Philip Osment-- Antonio; Launcelot Gobbo
Mia Soteriou-- Jessica; The Duke of Venice
Catherine Terris-- Nerissa; Solanio
Stephen Warbeck-- Lorenzo; The Prince of Arragon; Leonardo
Holly Wilson-- Portia; Salerio

All the company played servants, attendants, and musicians; Peter Ackerman, flute and percussion; Jonathan Hackett, percussion; Anthony Naylor, percussion; Mia Soteriou, guitar and vocals; Philip Osment, guitar and percussion; Catherine Terris, vocals; Stephen Warbeck, violin, saxophone and bouzouki.

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Mike Alfreds-- Director
Voytek-- Designer
Ilona Sekacz-- Music
Jane Gibson-- Mask and Movement Training
Derek Laskie-- Company Stage Manager

First performance on October 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1980 at The Crucible Theatre Sheffield; subsequently at The Collegiate Theatre London on March 31\textsuperscript{st} 1981. The company made a tour of Israel in April 1981 and appeared at The Toronto theatre Festival in May 1981 where they also presented a further revival of *An Arabian Night*.

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**THE SEAGULL**

By Anton Chekhov
Translated by Mike Alfreds with Lilia Sokolov

**THE COMPANY**

Gillian Barge-- Arkadina
Alan Bone-- Yakov
Jonathan Hackett-- Trigorin
Lorna Heilbron-- Nina
David Blake Kelly-- Sorin
Philip Osment-- Kontantin
Matthew Scurfield-- Shamrayev
Sandra Voe-- Polina
Philip Voss-- Dorn
Maggie Wells-- Masha
Peter Wight-- Medviedenko

Miake Alfreds-- Director
Alan Bone-- Stage Manager
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on September 12\textsuperscript{th} 1981 at The Crucible Theatre Sheffield; subsequently at The Almeida Theatre Islington on October 15\textsuperscript{th} 1981. The production shared a British Theatre Association Drama Critics Award for the Best Production of a Revival for 1981.
**THE MAIDS**
By Jean Genet
Translated by Bernard Frechtman

**THE COMPANY**

John Dicks-- Solange
Raad Rawi-- Claire
Mark Rylance-- Madame

Clare Davidson-- Director
Ultz-- Design Concept
Mark Cruickshank-- Design Execution
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on September 28th 1981 at The Project Arts Centre as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival; subsequently at The Lyric Theatre Studio Hammersmith on October 12th 1981.

**LA RONDE (Reigen)**
By Arthur Schnitzler
Translated by Mike Alfreds

**THE COMPANY**

Pam Ferris-- The Prostitute, The Housemaid, the Young Wife, The ‘Sweet Girl’ and The Actress

Mike Alfreds-- Director
Ilona Sekacz-- Composer
Nigel Langford & Stella Watson-- Designers
Richard Johnson-- Lighting Designer
Chris Robertson-- Stage Manager
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on February 16th 1982 at The Crucible Theatre Sheffield; subsequently at The Drill Hall London on March 30th. *La Ronde* was a co-production with the Central School of Art and Design.
THE INSOMNIAC IN MORGUE DRAWER #7
By Andy Smith
A Play for One Actor

Bob Goody-- Actor

Andy Smith-- Director
Stephen Rolfe-- Lighting and Stage Manager
Michael Kennedy-- Costume
Liz Stolls-- Publicity
Tish Francis-- Assistant Administrator
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on September 13 1982 at St. Edmunds Arts Centre Salisbury; subsequently at The Almeida Theatre Islington on November 23rd 1982.

A HANDFUL OF DUST
By Evelyn Waugh
Adapted by Mike Alfreds

THE COMPANY

Sam Dale-- John Andrew, Dr. Messing
Nick Dunning-- John Beaver, Mr. James
Ann Firbank-- Mrs. Beaver, Nanny
Lorna Heilbron-- Brenda Last
John Price-- Tony Last
Angharad Rees-- Majorie, Mille
James Smith-- Jock Grant Menzies, Reggie St. Cloud
Alison Steadman-- Jenny Abdul Akbar, Winnie
Philip Voss-- Mr. Todd, Ben Hackett
Holly Wilson-- Mrs. Rattery, Polly Cockpurse

Everybody played servants, hotel guests, party guests, diners-out, church-goers, club members, taxi drivers, Amazonian Indians, etc…

Mike Alfreds-- Director
Paul Dart-- Designer: sets, costumes, and lighting
Ilona Sekacz-- Composer
Gillian Gregory-- Dance Coach
Patsy Rodenberg-- Voice Coach
Sue Parrish-- Assistant to the Director
Max Alexander-- Company Stage Manager
Colin Butler-- Assistant Stage Manager

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Sheelah Sloane-- Sound Technician
Tom Donnellan-- Lighting Technician
Tish Francis-- Assistant Administrator
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on November 2nd 1982 at The Belgrade Theatre Coventry; subsequently at The Lyric Theatre Hammersmith on November 9th 1982.

**THE COMEDY WITHOUT A TITLE**
Scenes of Peasant Life from the Plays of Ruzante
Adapted by Mike Alfreds

**THE COMPANY**

1. **Spring (The Paduan Countryside):** Sam Dale (Zilio); Nick Dunning (Nale); Jimmy Yuill (Bazzarello, Meneghello); Philip Voss (Barba Scati); Maggie Wells (Betia, Tamia); Sandra Voe (Donna Menega); James Smith (Nardo); John Price (Tazio)
2. **Summer (Venice):** James Smith (Ruzante); Sam Dale (Menato); Maggie Wells (Fiore); John Price (A Ruffian)
3. **Autumn (Venice):** John Price (Biolora); James Smith (Pitaro); Sandra Voe (Dina); Philip Voss (Andronico)
4. **Winter (The Paduan Countryside):** Philip Voss (Menego); Nick Dunning (Duozo); Sandra Voe (Gnua); Jimmy Yuill (Marchioro); John Price (Zaccarotto)

Mike Alfreds-- Director
Paul Dart-- Set, costumes, and lighting
Ilona Sekacz-- Music
Jimmy Yuill-- Musician
Sue Lefton-- Dances
Malcolm Ranson-- Fights
Colin Butler-- Company Stage Manager
Brod Mason-- Production Stage Manager
Robert Carter and Tamara Capellaro-- Poster Design
Penny Hadrill-- Dyeing
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on May 17th 1983 at The Belgrade Theatre Coventry; subsequently at The Lyric Theatre Hammersmith on May 24th 1983.
FALSE ADMISSIONS and SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES
By Marivaux
Translated by Timberlake Wertenbaker

THE COMPANY

False Admissions

Nick Dunning-- Arlequin
John Price-- Dorante, M. Remy’s nephew
Sam Dale-- Dubois, Dorante’s former valet
Philip Voss-- Monsieur Remy, a solicitor
Maggie Wells-- Marton, Araminte’s companion
Holly Wilson-- Araminte
Sandra Voe-- Madame Argante, Araminte’s mother
James Smith-- The Comte

Successful Strategies

Nick Dunning-- Dorante
John Price-- Blaise, the Comtesse’s gardener
Sam Dale-- Arlequin, Dorante’s valet
Maggie Wells-- Lisette, Blaise’s daughter
Holly Wilson-- The Comtesse
Sandra Voe-- The Marquise
James Smith-- Frontin, the Chevalier’s valet
Philip Voss-- The Chevalier

Mike Alfreds-- Director
Paul Dart-- Set, costumes, and lighting
Harriet Lansdown-- Director’s assistant
Derek Laskie-- Company Stage Manager
Brod Mason-- Production Stage Manager
Monika Biskupek, Beth Hardisty, Paul Kevill-- Production Assistants
Michael Kennedy-- Men’s tailoring
Annie Guyon-- Women’s dressmaking
Peter Gordon-- Hairstyles
Jackie Airey-- Wigs
Sue Lefton-- Movement consultant
Ilona Sekacz-- Music consultant
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

MARRIAGE
By Gogol
Adapted by Mike Alfreds
From a literal translation by Boris Isarov

THE COMPANY

James Smith-- Ivan Kuzmich Podkolyassin
Nick Dunning-- Stephen
Sandra Voe-- Fyokla Ivanova
Philip Voss-- Ilya Fomich Kochkaryov
Maggie Wells-- Agafya Ttichonovna Kuperdyagina
Holly Wilson-- Arina Panteleimonovna
Sam Dale-- Ivan Pavlovich Anuchkin
John Price-- Baltazar Baltasarovich Zhevakin

Mike Alfreds-- Director
Paul Dart-- Set, costumes, and lighting
Hamish Glen, Barbara Houseman-- Director’s assistants
Boris Isarov-- Research
Bart Cossee-- Production Administrator
Peter Glencross-- Company Stage Company
Monika Biskupek, Paul Kevill-- Production Assistants
Michael Kennedy-- Men’s Tailoring
Annie Guyon-- Women’s dressmaking
John Sheward-- Women’s undergarments
Penny Hadrill-- Dyeing and fabric printing
Sheila Nash-- Shirtmaking
Charles-- Wigs
Stuart Maclaine—Set building
Adam Banks-- Poster design
Mavis Seaman-- Administrative assistance
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

302
First performance on February 14th 1984 at The Oxford Playhouse; subsequently at The Lyric Theatre Hammersmith on March 12th 1984.

**HAPPY DAYS**  
By Samuel Beckett

THE COMPANY

Darlene Johnson-- Winnie  
Richard Wilding-- Willie

Clare Davidson-- Director  
Paul Dart-- Designer

Paul Kevill-- Production Manager  
Valerie Dew-- Stage Manager

Stuart Maclaine-- Set Builder  
Sharon Keane-- Publicist

Quentin Blake-- Poster design  
Luke Dixon-- General Manager

First performance on 18th October 1984 at Theatr Gwynedd, Bangor; in London at the Donmar Warehouse on 19th November 1984.

**PAMELA**  
Or The Reform of a Rake  
By Samuel Richardson

Adapted by Giles Havergal and Fidelis Morgan

THE COMPANY

Ian Reddington-- Barry/Mr. Belville  
Charon Bourke-- Becky/ Pamela Andrew

Sian Thomas-- Joyce/Mrs. Belville, Lady Davers  
Robin Hooper-- Neil/Sir Jacob Swynford

John Baxter-- Gavin/Mr. Williams, Jackey

Giles Havergal-- Director  
Paul Dart-- Designer

James MacDonald-- Assistant Director

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Valerie Dew-- Production Manager
Martin Coates-- Company Stage Manager
Stuart Maclaine-- Set Builder
Caroline Dyer-- Assistant Administrator
Paul Kevill-- Touring Assistant
Ray Oxley-- Design Assistant
Tony Ross-- Poster Designer

First performance on 8\textsuperscript{th} January 1985 at Brentford Watermans Arts Centre; subsequently
in London at the Bloomsbury Theatre 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 1985.

\textit{THREE SISTERS}
By Anton Chekhov
Translated by Mike Alfr sne with Nikita Stavisky

\textbf{THE COMPANY}

Holly Wilson-- Olga
Chloe Salaman-- Irina
Sandra Voe-- Anfisa
Philip Voss-- Chebutykin
John Dicks-- Baron Tusenbach
Christian Burgess-- Solyony
Rex Doyle-- Ferapont
John Price-- Lieutenant-Colonel Vershinin
Jonathan Hackett-- Andrey Prozorov
Toby Salaman-- Kulygin
Maggie Wells-- Natalya Ivanova
Trevor Allan-- Fedotik
Mark Sproston-- Rode

Mike Alfr sne—Director
Paul Dart-- Designer
Ilona Sekacz-- Sound Score
Sue Lefton-- Movement Consultant
Nick Ward-- Assistant Director
Richard Godfrey-- Production and Company Manager
Elizabeth Craven-- Stage Manager
Jonathan Lamede-- General Manager
Tish Francis-- Project Manager
Angela Samuel-- Press and Publicity

304
First performance on February 20th 1986 at Winchester Theatre Royal; in London at London’s Bloomsbury Theatre from April 1st 1986.

**TOO TRUE TO BE GOOD**  
By George Bernard Shaw

**COMPANY**

David Beames  
Selina Cadell  
Sam Dale  
Russell Enoch  
Michael Maynard  
Jonathan Newth  
Sheila Reid  
Sian Thomas

Mike Alfreeds-- Director  
Paul Dart-- Designer  
Peter Thomson-- Assistant Director

First performance in London on 5th November 1986 at the Riverside Studios.

**THE HEAT OF THE DAY**  
By Elizabeth Bowen  
Adapted by Felicity Browne and Giles Havergal

**THE COMPANY**

Kate Kitovitz-- Stella Rodney  
Charon Bourke-- Louie Lewis  
Patricia Lawrence-- Mrs. Kelway  
Mark Lewis-- Robert Kelway  
Roberta Taylor-- Connie  
Christian Burgess-- Harrison

Giles Havergal-- Director  
Stewart Laing-- Designer  
Gerry Jenkinson-- Lighting Designer
Peter Key-- Sound Designer
Jonathan Cocker-- Assistant Director
Inigo Espejel-- Production Manager
Nick Kirkpatrick-- Stage Manager
Di Speirs-- Press and Publicity
Alan Skidmore-- Set Painting
Sponsorship and Laundry Appeal-- Tish Francis
Heddy Beeby-- Assistant Administrator
Jonathan Lamede-- General Manager


NANA
By Emile Zola
Adapted by Olwen Wymark
Music and Lyrics by Anthony Ingle

THE COMPANY

John Baxter
Christian Burgess
Belinda Davison
Lorna Heilbron
John Joyce
Emma Longfellow
Peter Sproule
Julia St John
Sandra Voe
Matthew Wadsworth

Jane Gibson and Sue Lefton-- Directors
Kenny Miller-- Design
Ben Ormerod-- Lighting Design
Dennis Charles-- Production and Company Manager
Janet Cantrill and Ben Rosen-- Stage Managers
Paul Coggins of Anthill—Scenery Construction
Alistair Brotchie-- Set Painting
Jean Nicholson-- Press and Publicity
Hedda Beeby-- Assistant Administrator
Tish Francis-- Sponsorship and Laundry Appeal
Jonathan Lamede-- General Manager

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First performance on October 6\textsuperscript{th} 1987 at the Theatre Royal Winchester; subsequently in London at the Almeida in November 1987, and in February 1988 at the Mermaid.

\textbf{THE BACCHAE}

By Euripides

\textbf{THE COMPANY}

Annabelle Apsion  
Claire Benedict  
Roger Frost  
Peter Hamilton Dyer  
Wilbert Johnson  
Shona Morris  
Simon Tyrrell  
Denise Wong  
Rowan Wylie

Nancy Meckler—Director  
Polly Teale—Director’s Assistant  
David Roger—Designer  
Rick Fisher—Lighting Designer  
Molefe Pheto—Musical Director  
Lorna Marshall—Movement  
Oliver Brown—Production Manager  
Ben Rosen—Stage Manager  
Charles Hart—General Manager  
Hedda Beeby—Assistant General Manager  
Tish Francis—Sponsorship and Development  
Jean Nicholson—Press and Publicity

TRUE WEST
By Sam Shepard

THE COMPANY

Vicenzo Ricotta—Lee
Kerry Shale—Austin
Yvonne D’Alpha—Mom
Kenneth Hadley—Saul

Nancy Meckler—Director
Annie Smart—Design
Kevin Sleep—Lighting Design
Andrew Jack—Dialect
Oliver Brown—Production Manager
Ben Rosen—Stage Manager
Charles Hart—General Manager

First performance at Winchester Theatre Royal from 1 until 4 February 1989.
Subsequent London performances at Battersea Arts Centre from 1 until 5 March, and Boulevard Theatre from 14 March until 8 April 1989.

ABINGDON SQUARE
By Maria Irene Fornes
Co-Production with the Soho Poly Theatre

THE COMPANY

Annabelle Apsion—Marion
Philip Voss—Juster
Pearce Quigley—Michael
Elizabeth Bradley—Minnie
Anna Healy—Mary
Christopher Eccleston—Frank
Andrew Woodall—Glazier

Nancy Meckler—Director
Lucy Weller—Designer
Tina McHugh—Lighting Designer
Colin Brown—Sound Designer
First London performance at the Soho Poly Theatre from 2 June until 1 July 1989. The production was subsequently invited to appear at the Cottesloe Theatre of the Royal National Theatre during April 1990.

HEARTBREAK HOUSE
By George Bernard Shaw
Co-Production with Derby Playhouse

THE COMPANY

Annabelle Apsion—Ellie Dunn
John Baxter—Randall
Marty Cruickshank—Hesione Hushabye
Yvonne D’Alpra—Nurse Guinness
David Fielder—Mazzini Dunn
Ian Gelder—Hector Hushabye
John Halstead—The Burglar
Stephen Jameson—Mangan
Fred Pearson—Captain Shotover
Jennie Stoller—Lady Utterwood

Nancy Meckler—Director
Dermot Hayes—Designer
Stephen Watson—Lighting Design
Chahine Yavroyan—Sound Design
Yvonne Miles—Costume Supervisor
Patsy Rodenberg—Voice Coach
Production Manager—Peter Deans
Janet A. Cantrill—Company Manager
Peter Eccles—Stage Manager
Charles Hart—General Manager
Hedda Beeby—Assistant General Manager
Tish Francis—Development Director

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY
By Harold Pinter

THE COMPANY

John Halstead—Petey
Paul Higgins—McCann
Cecilia Noble—Lulu
Michael Parker—Stanley
Sandra Voe—Meg
Peter Whitman—Goldberg

Nancy Meckler—Director
Lucy Weller—Designer
Tina MacHugh—Lighting Design
Pauline Miller Judd—Stage Manager
Yvonne Miles—Costume Supervisor
Sally Grace—Dialect
Lorna Marshall—Movement
Chris White—Sound


THE CLOSING NUMBER
Devised by Mladen Materic

THE COMPANY

Tony Anthony
Denise Wong
Phil Daniels
Kate France

Mladen Materic—Direction/Design
Stephen Rolfe and Beth Hardisty—Production Team
Nigel Anstow—Stage Manager
Patricia Budden—Costumes

SWEET SESSIONS
Devised by Paul Godfrey and Nancy Meckler
From Shakespeare’s Sonnets
With additional material by Paul Godfrey

THE COMPANY

(March-May 1991)
Emma Dewhurst—The Writer
Jonathan Donne—The Young Man
David Fielder—The Poet
Pooky Quesnel—The Dark Lady

(November 1991)
Sara Mair-Thomas—The Writer
Jonathan Donne—The Young Man
Richard Albrecht—The Poet
Pooky Quesnel—The Dark Lady

Nancy Meckler—Director
Peter Salem—Composer/Musical Director
Tim Hatley—Designer
Ace McCarron—Lighting Designer
Pauline Miller-Judd—Stage Manager
Patsy Rodenberg—Voice
Sarah Woodside—Workshops Director
Liz Ranken—Choreography (November production)
Caroline Campbell—Administrator
Louise Coles—Assistant Administrator and Youth Theatre

Additional run at The Place, London from 20 until 30 November 1991.

TRILBY AND SVENGA LI
Adapted by David Fielder and Nancy Meckler
from the novel ‘Trilby’ by George du Maurier

Co-production with Nuffield Theatre, Southampton

THE COMPANY
Tilly Blackwood—Trilby O’Ferrall
Melissa Holding—Musician
Teddy Kempner—Svengali
Dermot Kerrigan—Little Billee
Ritchie Madden—Taffy
Mary Roscoe—Various
Jeremy Swift—Various

Nancy Meckler—Director
Anthony Lamble—Designer
Dean Brodrick—Music
Tina MacHugh—Lighting
Caroline Pope—Choreography
Catherine Charlton—Dialect
Virginia Terry—Company Stage Manager


ANNA KARENINA
Adapted by Helen Edmundson
from the novel by Leo Tolstoy

THE COMPANY

Annabelle Apsion—Anna
Katharine Barker—Princess Betsy, Agatha, Governess, Railway Widow
Tilly Blackwood—Dolly, Maria
Gregory Floy—Karenin, Priest
Max Gold—Vronsky, Nikolai
Richard Hope—Levin
Nigel Lindsay—Stiva, Bailiff, Petritsky, Priest
Pooky Quesnel—Kitty, Countess Vronsky, Seriozha
Peasants, muffled figures played by members of the company

Nancy Meckler—Director
Lucy Weller—Designer
Peter Salem—Music
Ace McCarron—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Choreography
Virginia Terry—Company Stage Manager
Caroline Campbell—Administrator
Slavka Jovanovic—Asst. Administrator and Youth Theatre
Tish Francis—Sponsorship and Development
Marie Allcock—Publicity and Marketing
Brian Lloyd—Accounts


Winner Outstanding Theatrical Event—Time Out Award 1992
Winner Best Touring Show—Martini/TMA Regional Theatre Awards 1993

1993 Revival of *ANNA KARENINA*

**THE COMPANY**

Simeon Andrews—Stiva, Bailiff, Petritsky
Karen Ascoe—Dolly, Countess Vronsky
Teresa Banham—Anna
Katharine Barker—Princess Betsy, Agatha, Governess, Railway Widow
David Fielder—Karenin, Priest
Richard Hope—Levin
Jessica Lloyd—Kitty, Seriozha
Cal MacAninch—Vronsky, Nikolai

Nancy Meckler—Director
Lucy Weller—Design
Peter Salem—Music
Stephen Watson—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Choreography


1998 Revival of *ANNA KARENINA*

**THE COMPANY**

Simeon Andrews—Stiva, Bailiff, Petritsky
Karen Ascoe—Dolly, Countess Vronsky
Teresa Banham—Anna
Katharine Barker—Princess Betsy, Agatha, Governess, Railway Widow
Ian Gelder—Karenin, Priest
Richard Hope—Levin
Derek Riddell—Vronsky, Nikolai
Pooky Quesnel—Kitty, Seriozha

Nancy Meckler—Director
Lucy Weller—Designer
Chris Davey—Lighting Designer
Peter Salem—Music
Liz Ranken—Choreographer
Richard Hope—Production Associate Director

International tour included Brooklyn, Brisbane, and Buenos Aires.

*MILL ON THE FLOSS*
Adapted by Helen Edmundson
from the novel by George Eliot

THE COMPANY

Simeon Andrews—Mr. Tulliver, Dr. Kenn
Shirley Henderson—First Maggie
Michael Matus—Bob Jakin, Phillip Wakem, Uncle Pullet
Buddug Morgan—Second Maggie, Aunt Glegg
Ian Puleston-Davies—Tom Tulliver, Wakem
Simon Robson—Stephen Guest, Mr. Stelling, Uncle Glegg
Clara Salaman—Mrs. Tulliver, Lucy Deane
Helen Schlesinger—Third Maggie, Aunt Pullet

Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Co-Directors
Bunny Christie—Designer
Peter Salem—Music
Chris Davey—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Movement
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Jeanette Nelson—Voice Coach

First Performance of this production: Thursday 17 March 1994 at the Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich.
Best Adaptation—Time Out Awards 1994

1995 Revival:
Simeon Andrews
Anne-Marie Duff
Michael Matus
Catherine Cusack
Simon Cox
Jonathan Cake
Clara Salaman
Helen Schelsinger

First Performance of 1995 production: Thursday 26 January at the Queen’s Theatre, Barnstaple

2001 Revival:
Pip Donaghy
Pauline Turner
Michael Matus
Jessica Lloyd
Hywel Morgan
Joseph Millson
Hilary Maclean
Caroline Faber

First Performance of 2001 production: Thursday 5 April at the New Ambassadors Theatre, London

THE DANUBE
By Maria Irene Fornes

THE COMPANY

Simeon Andrews—Mr Sandor
Simon Robson—Paul Green
Hannah Miles—Eve Sandor
Mark Hadfield—Mr Kovacs, Waiter, Doctor, Barber

Nancy Meckler—Director
Idit Nathan—Designer
Chris Davey—Lighting Designer
Colin Brown—Sound Designer
Company Stage Manager—Jack Tilbury
Jane Dominy—Stage Manager
Yvonne Miles—Wardrobe Supervisor
Jeanette Nelson—Dialect
Patrick Monckton—Language Tape
Karoly Zalica—Translator
Rachel Tackley—General Manager
Sharon Parr—Development and Marketing Manager
Bryan Lloyd—Finance
Slavka Jovanovic—Assistant Administrator/Youth Theatre Co-ordinator
Sooki McShane—Administrative Assistant
Luke Dixon—Youth Theatre Director
Polly Teale—Associate Director


DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS
By Eugene O’Neill

THE COMPANY

Robin Thomson—Ephraim Cabot
Gary Lilburn—Simeon Cabot
Ged McKenna—Peter Cabot
Jonathan Cullen—Eben Cabot
Gabrielle Reidy—Abbie Putnam
Shaun Glanville—Fiddler

Polly Teale—Director
Neil Warmington—Design
Chris Davey—Lighting
Sally Herbert—Music
Alison Ritchie Associates—Production Manager
Julia Hendry and Helen Thursby—Company Stage Managers
Jeanette Nelson—Voice Coach
Rachel Tackley—General Manager
Sharon Parr—Marketing and Development Manager
Sooki McShane—Administrative Assistant
Bryan Lloyd—Finance Manager
Luke Dixon—Youth Theatre Director
Polly Teale—Associate Director


WAR AND PEACE
Adapted by Helen Edmundson
from the novel by Leo Tolstoy
Co-production with Royal National Theatre

THE COMPANY

Simeon Andrews
Raike Ayola
Cathryn Bradshaw
Peter De Jersey
Anne-Marie Duff
David Fielder
Richard Hope
Sam Kelly
Guy Lankester
Barbara Marten
Jonathan Oliver
Helen Schlesinger
Anny Tobin
Ronan Vibert
John Warnaby

Musicians:
Walter Fabeck
Anna Hemery
Roland Melia
Stephen Skinner

Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Co-Directors
Bunny Christie—Designer
Chris Davey—Lighting
Peter Salem—Music
Liz Ranken—Choreography
Patsy Rodenburg—Voice
Jason Barnes—Production Manager
Stage Manager—Richard Reddrop
THE TEMPEST
By William Shakespeare

THE COMPANY

Michael Cashman—Prospero
Rebecca Jackson—Miranda
Rachel Sanders—Ariel
Richard Willis—Caliban, Boatswain
Lucas Hare—Sprite, Fransisco
David Meyer—Alonso
Adé Sapara—Ferdinand
Andrew French—Sebastian, Stephano
Peter Kelly—Gonzalo
Ged McKenna—Antonio, Trinculo

Nancy Meckler—Director
Sophie Jump—Designer
Chris Davey—Lighting
Peter Salem—Music
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Julia Bradley—Company Stage Manager

First performance 24 October 1996 at the Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich.

International tour to Japan, Korea, and Israel.

JANE EYRE
Adapted by Polly Teale
from the novel by Charlotte Brontë
in association with the Young Vic Theatre & Wolsey Theatre Ipswich

THE COMPANY
Joan Blackham—Mrs Reed, Mrs Fairfax
Antony Byrne—Brocklehurst, Pilot the Dog, Lord Ingram, St. John Rivers
James Clyde—Rochester, John Reed
Monica Dolan—Jane Eyre
Hannah Miles—Bessie, Blanche Ingram, Grace Poole, Diana Rivers
Pooky Quesnel—Bertha
Philip Rham—Richard Mason, Cellist
Octavia Walters—Abigail, Helen Burns, Adele, Mary Rivers

Polly Teale—Director
Neil Warmington—Designer
Chris Davey—Lighting Designer
Peter Salem—Composer
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Sid Charlton—Company Stage Manager
Rachel Tackley—General Manager
Darrell Williams—Marketing Manager
Jane Claire—Office Administrator
David Brown—Marketing and Administrative Assistant
Becky Chapman—Youth Theatre Director
Bryan Lloyd—Finance Manager
Polly Teale—Associate Director


1999 Revival:

THE COMPANY

Harriette Aschcroft—Bertha
Joan Blackham—Mrs Reed, Mrs Fairfax
Penny Layden—Jane Eyre
Michael Matus—Brocklehurst, Pilot the Dog, Lord Ingram, St. John Rivers
Hannah Miles—Bessie, Blanche Ingram, Grace Poole, Diana Rivers, Old Woman
Sean Murray—Rochester
Philip Rham—Richard Mason and Cellist
Octavia Walters—Abigail, Helen Burns, Adele, Mary Rivers

International tour to Ireland, Australia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, and the USA.

**THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA**

By Frederico García Lorca

In a new version by Rona Munro

**THE COMPANY**

Gabrielle Reidy—Poncia
Sandy McDade—Angustias
Sandra Duncan—Bernarda
Amanda Drew—Adela
Tanya Ronder—Martirio
Carolyn Jones—Prudencia, Maid
Janet Henfrey—Maria Josefa
Ruth Lass—Magdalena
Victoria Finney—Amelia

Polly Teale—Director
Angela Davies—Design
Peter Salem—Music
Tina MacHugh—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Sid Charlton—Company Stage Manager
General Manager—Rachel Tackley
Becky Chapman—Youth Theatre Director
Darrell Williams—Marketing Manager
Jane Claire—Administrator
Jo Salkild—Administrative Assistant
Susan Davenport—Development Associate
Kate Saxon—Education Associate
Polly Teale—Associate Artistic Director

MOTHER COURAGE
By Bertolt Brecht

THE COMPANY
Nicholas R. Bailey
Hayley Carmichael
Kathryn Hunter
David Fielder
Francis Lee
Marcello Magni
Clive Mendus
Phuong Nguyen
Rachel Sanders
Simon Walter
Maurice Yeoman

Nancy Meckler—Director
Angela Davies—Designer
Dominic Muldowney—Music
Tina MacHugh—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Susan Nash—Youth Theatre Director
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Darrell Williams—Marketing Manager
Jane Claire—Administrator
Bryan Lloyd—Finance Manager
Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Co-Artistic Directors


A DOLL’S HOUSE
By Henrik Ibsen
Translated by Michael Meyer

THE COMPANY
Jude Akuwudike—Nils Krogstad
Pip Donaghy—Dr Rank
Anne-Marie Duff—Nora Helmer
Paterson Joseph—Torvald Helmer
Eileen O’Brien—Anne-Marie
Francesca Ryan—Christine Linde
Polly Teale—Director
Yvonne McDevitt—Assistant Director
Angela Davies—Design
Gary Yershon—Music
Tina MacHugh—Lighting
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Charlotte Geeves—Company Stage Manager
Sue Nash—Youth Education Director
Darrell Williams—Marketing Manager
Jane Claire—Administrator
Bryan Lloyd—Finance Manager
Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Joint Artistic Directors

First performance on 3 October 2000 at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester. First London performance on 2 November 2000 at the New Ambassadors Theatre. The production also received an international tour to Norway.

THE MAGIC TOYSHOP
Adapted by Bryony Lavery
from the novel by Angela Carter

THE COMPANY

Harriette Ashcroft—Victoria
Jonathan Broadbent—Jonathan
Penny Layden—Margaret
Damian O’Hare—Finn
John Stahl—Uncle Philip
Simon Walter—Francie/Mrs Rundle
Hannah Watkins—Melanie

Rebecca Gatward—Director
Liz Cooke—Designer
Gary Yershon—Composer
Adam Silverman—Lighting Designer
Susan Nash—Movement Director
Katinka Rydin Berge—Assistant Director
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Graeme Braidwood—Company Stage Manager
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Ian Whitaker—Marketing Manager
Administrator—Jane Claire
Assistant Administrator—Kylie McCormack
Bryan Lloyd—Finance Manager
Education and Youth Theatre Director—Kate Saxon
Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Joint Artistic Directors

First performance on 11 September 2001 at the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich.

2002 Revival

THE COMPANY

Harriette Ashcroft—Victoria
Dominic Hecht—Jonathan
Stephen Hogan—Francie/ Mrs Rundle
Penny Layden—Margaret
Vincenzo Nicolo—Uncle Philip
Damian O’Hare—Finn
Hannah Watkins—Melanie


THE CLEARING
By Helen Edmundson

THE COMPANY

Richard Attlee—Sir Charles Sturman
Amelda Brown—Susaneh Winter
Pip Donaghy—Solomon Winter/Appeal Judge
Aislin McGuckin—Madeleine Preston
Mairead McKinley—Killaine Farrell
Joseph Millson—Robert Preston
Patrick Moy—Pierce Kinsellagh/Sailor/
The Commissioner of Transplantation

Polly Teale—Director
Angela Davies—Designer
Peter Salem—Composer
Jason Taylor—Lighting Designer
Leah Hausman—Movement Director
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Annabel Ingram—Company Stage Manager
Jane Claire—Administrator
Kylie McCormack—Assistant Administrator
Kate Saxon—Education and Youth Director
Jeremy Smee—Finance Manager
Rachel Tackley—Producer
Ian Whitaker—Marketing Manager
Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Joint Artistic Directors


A PASSAGE TO INDIA
Adapted by Martin Sherman
From the novel by E.M. Forster

THE COMPANY

Paul Bazely—Dr Aziz
Geoffrey Beevers—Turton/McBryde
Antony Bunsee—Hamidullah/Callender
Priyanga Elan—Miss Derek/Mrs Turton
Susan Engel—Mrs Moore
Ian Gelder—Fielding
Daniel Hope—Rafi/Das
Nicholas Khan—Mahmoud Ali
Guy Lankester—Ronny/Ralph
Penny Layden—Adela Quested
Aaron Neil—Godbole

Other parts played by members of the company

Chandru and Sirishkumar—Musicians

Nancy Meckler—Director
Niki Turner—Designer
Peter Salem—Composer
Liz Ranken—Company Movement
Chris Davey—Lighting
Sowmya Gopalan—Indian Dance
Chandru, Sirishkumar and Ambika Jois—Indian Music Advisors
Suzanne Gorman—Assistant Director
Alison Ritchie—Production Manager
Annabel Ingram—Company Stage Manager
Rachel Tackley—Producer (until Sept. 2002)
Jon Harris—Administrative Producer (from Sept. 2002)
Ian Whitaker—Marketing Manager
Jane Claire—Administrator
Assistant Administrator—Liz Holmes
Jeremy Smeeth—Finance Manager
Kate Saxon—Education and Youth Theatre Director
Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale—Artistic Directors

First performance on 19 September 2002 at the Richmond Theatre.
London performances during 22 January 2003 at the Riverside Studios.
APPENDIX C

SELECTED INTERVIEWS WITH SHARED EXPERIENCE STAFF

INTERVIEW ONE

Mike Alfreds: 19 July, 2001

KC—What was the original guiding ethos for the company?

MA—...If you had performers; that’s all you needed. You didn’t need anything else at all. Except for the material that you were going to use. And that could be improvised; it could be a play; it could be a devised piece. It could be anything you wanted. The experience was the performance, and the ‘shared experience’ with the audience was the main thing; that the actor could create everything. The actor could become the sort of spokesperson, a host, an MC, a commentator on the action. The actor could have many, many roles. And we started off by exploring that sort of storytelling quite in depth, with quite a lot of complexity.

So, that was the brief. For five years we didn’t have scenery or costumes or lighting or any technology whatsoever. So, we could go anywhere. And the actors just packed their bags, and we could do it in this room, we could do it in a pub, we could do it on a table, we could do it in a theatre, we could do it anywhere. It was very flexible. And there was always open light on the audience, so we always had this very clear contact with the audience.

KC—Was it the original intent to start a company, rather than just experiment with one production?

MA—They were synonymous really because, I did a lot of workshops before I formed the company and I found a group of people through that. I workshopped for a couple of months, playing around with storytelling actually, and then through a series of nice circumstances we got offered a production by Sheffield, the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. It became our godparent in a way. And they gave us a budget for a
production, so within two months I actually had the possibility of doing a fully-fledged production, which was great. And very rapidly after that I got a revenue grant from the Arts Council—which was pretty much unheard of. The first show set us up very well.

We were starting to explore this preoccupation I had with the actor who could be everything. So, an actor would just come into a space and say hello to the audience and then start to say, “Once upon a time there was…,” and they would go through a series of transformations in front of the audience. There was nothing hidden. Everything was totally exposed. Whatever you did was there for the audience to see. The quality of theatre, the essence of theatre, was absolutely in the human ability to transform oneself—this capacity to be many people—and to suggest environments and spaces which actually weren’t there. It was always the power of suggestion, which I think is actually what good theatre is. Then each audience sees their own show. And the more realistic and the more heavily designed, the less that can happen. And in fact I’ve got this show, Cymbeline, at the Globe; and its very much going back to that, so there’s nothing on the stage. Yes, it’s a nice production; there’s six people doing the whole play. I did it twenty years ago with this [Shared Experience] company.

KC—You used a lot of actors from LAMDA?

MA—I used quite a lot because I taught there for five years, and then I lived in Israel for five years, and when I came back most of them were working professionally. A lot of them were in those original companies. They became founder members with me, I suppose. An actor called John Dicks was very instrumental—then another one called James Smith. They weren’t exclusively that at all, but there was a nucleus of people.

KC—They were already familiar with your methods?

MA—Yes, because a lot of what I was doing when I started Shared Experience, I’d explored while I was teaching at LAMDA. We had a shared language that meant we could move rapidly to where we wanted to go. Of course, during the five years I’d spent working in Israel, I’d experimented with a lot of those techniques because I had very long rehearsals there for the first time. I had three and four month rehearsals, and therefore I could develop a lot of rehearsal structures. When I came back and founded Shared Experience, I had those [structures] as well, which the actors didn’t know about. But the basis was there, the ethos. One of the very important things was that the actor should have as much creative freedom as possible—the actor as a creative force, in a sense…. A lot of this was exploring. We all talk about ‘live’ theatre very glibly, but what does it mean? It means that it is something that is happening right in front of you. And it’s my belief that however good a production is—however challenging—if it’s fixed it will eventually lose its spontaneity, its reality. It can be very well executed, and often audiences will buy that. But I think they’re getting second-rate goods. It’s got to be free. All my productions are ‘free’ in the sense that there are ‘rules’ that the actors know for each production. But they play greatly with freedom, so they make new choices all the time; Not only in where they are moving, how they are moving around the stage, but also
in the level of how they play a scene—the emotional input into it, the intensity. The only constant is the material itself. If they’re doing a play, they don’t improvise with the text and they retain a basic Stanislavski foundation of having objectives. As long as you know what you want in a scene—you explore your character, your relationships, and the environment—then you have all that as part of your life. And you come on stage with your intention and you play off your partner, what your partner gives you, and you respond to that, and your partner responds to you. And the scene can often move quite radically, and be very, very different. Because you’re exploring the same material over and over again, it creates over a period of time a huge resonance—there’s a richness to it. Whatever choice the actor is making, it’s also imbued with a sort of resonance, all the ghosts of all the other choices they’ve made.

Apart from a couple of set pieces in *Cymbeline*, it’s very free for them to go and play with a great deal of openness. It’s a fairly self-censoring process, because if the actor makes unhelpful choices, they’ll soon know it and they won’t do them again. I watch the shows a lot, and if I feel the show is slightly tipping off in the wrong direction, you can always pat it back. But I don’t want to go and see old staging. I’m not interested in seeing what they did in rehearsal. You have to be very brave. You can’t cling to results, you have to give up even the possibility of laughs. Because if you’re playing for a laugh, it means the focus goes off your partner and onto, “Am I going to get a laugh from the audience?” So, little moments of unreality sweep in. If the actors are central, it should be free. And it should respond to the environment and whatever is happening that day, as much as the rules of that particular production will allow. Some shows are more open than others. If you’re doing storytelling, and you’re talking directly to the audience, you can incorporate the audience’s reactions and you can almost have a dialogue with them. If not literally, you can respond to their responses, and so forth, and catch their eyes. If you’re doing Chekhov, then you’ve got a great deal of freedom internally within that world because you have less contact with the audience. I always compare it to playing in soccer, or any team game where you learn the rules. You practice and train to the ‘n-th’ of your ability, and then you go out and improvise. You don’t know how the ball’s going to come at you. You know your role on the team, your position in the team, you’ve studied the form, you’ve studied the form of your opponents. You know whether it’s dry or hot, or cold, or muddy. You deal with it. They’re variable, but you’re basically improvising. If the ball goes there, I do it this way. If the ball comes that way, I do it that way. And that, in a sense, is what theatre should be. You know the ball’s going to be thrown at you, but you don’t know how it’s going to come at you.

KC—Were there specific things that were dissatisfying to you that were happening in the theatre at the time?

MA—Yes, tremendously, there always is. You have to remember also that this was in the middle of a very thrilling, or towards the end I suppose actually, of a very thrilling period where an awful lot of alternative companies had suddenly, in the sixties into the seventies, had grown up. And that’s where interesting theatre was, and that’s where one wanted to be. The established theatre then was very dull—very correct, manipulative,
controlled, and un-spontaneous. I wasn’t particularly, in a narrow sense, politically oriented. A lot of the fringe work was very political at that time. Joint Stock, which was a wonderful company, usually took very social and political themes. But I was much more interested in the nature of theatre, and what theatre is, and the essence of what theatre is: What is theatre? I think a lot of people who work in theatre never ask that question: Why are they working in theatre? Why are they not working in film or television? What is the difference? Do I want to go on working in theatre? What is the essence of theatre? It seemed to me that you could reduce it to the very simple thing that it’s one group of people, pretending to be another group of people, in front of a third group of people. That’s theatre.

KC—Did you have the same kind of dissatisfaction with contemporary playwriting at the time?

MA—There were good playwrights. Yes, there were interesting playwrights, but I wasn’t interested in plays. I always felt, at that point, that plays locked you into certain conventions of theatre, because they are written in certain ways. The first play that we did, in fact, was Cymbeline, in our fifth year. The first play was a lot of storytelling, doing endless sorts of stories. I mean we did three or four different groups of stories in different styles and so forth. Then we did a whole novel, Bleak House, which went on for four nights. That was very exciting. And then we did an improvised clown show. It was improvised every night. Then we thought we’ve got to face the reality of doing a play. Shakespeare seemed the most obvious thing to do because of the freedom of how one imagines those plays were originally performed. After that, I started to go back to a mixture of plays and adapting novels. There were strands of adapting novels, as I still do, in that sort of storytelling.

Yes, there were very few playwrights that sort of hit my susceptibilities, shall we say. If there was something very good, like Pinter. Yet, if you saw a Pinter production, it was like everything has been said. There’s nothing more for me to say. I can’t say anything more than that production I saw. It was very good. It was wonderful. I have nothing more to add to that, so why do it? So, I wasn’t interested, I suppose in new writing for itself. Again, that was an area of Joint Stock that was supporting new writers. I did, in fact, not with Shared Experience but afterwards with Method and Madness, start working quite a lot with a writer called Philip Osment. I’ve done four plays of his. He was an actor with me in Shared Experience days.

But that was the ethos—to strip things down…less is more. And it’s really about stimulating the imagination of the actors and then the audience. ‘Shared Experience’ was that the actors come out and provoke the audience in a sense or stimulate them by suggesting, not being literal. The audience can create their own shows. And I think that’s quite important. The proof of it was that when we were storytelling, we’d go into schoolrooms in jeans at nine o’clock in the morning, and the kids would sit in the front in a semi-circle. And we’d play out these stories. The teachers would sometimes send us drawings from the kids who had gone to the productions, and of course they were full of
color and costumes and landscapes and monsters…it was wonderful. They’d seen what wasn’t there. Which is really what the essence was—it’s not really there. We’re all just watching the play and you could stop it like that [snaps fingers] and say it’s not there—an agreement to ‘suspend one’s disbelief’. And also, when I was doing *Bleak House*, people would say to me after, “Oh God, the lighting was wonderful…the candlelight, and the firelight, and the gaslight.” And it was just white light the whole time. There wasn’t a moment when the light was changed, because the audience had given themselves the story, the suggestions in the way people were miming holding candles…and they’d actually been a very creative audience. They’d really participated the way an audience should, by genuinely using their imaginations. So, people very much took away their interpretation of the show.

And I’m also very much against interpretation. What I mean is interpretation in the very narrow sense; that you choose a very tight concept and force the play through it. I much prefer to say, ‘Well here’s the play. It seems to have this theme, and this theme, and this theme. It’s got a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, themes in it,’” and I will try to release them all for the audience. What the audience get is the show they see. I don’t want to tell them how to think, how to feel, how to react. If they think it’s funny, they should laugh. If they think it’s moving, they should cry. And if they’re bored, they can go. Because I found the longer I ran a show, in this free way, and the more performances I saw, moments that you thought were funny became very moving. Moments that were moving often became very sour, or ironic. And you find a lot of moments contained everything in them.

Anyway, it’s very much about the audience being allowed to see their own show, and not being dictated to or dominated. Because, you can manipulate an audience very easily, with heavy music, and a lot of lights going off, and calculated performances. I find that a very false sort of theatre. I think theatre’s got to be very human. I think theatre, first of all, is very human. It’s the most human of all the art forms. It’s people being people in front of other people.

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KC—Did you have any kind of difficulty with the press at all, as far as them not understanding what you were trying to do with the adaptations?

MA—On the whole, there was a lot of spontaneity about the storytelling. People loved it. And, there was one critic, Michael Billington, who was against novel adaptation. He just dismissed practically everything I did. Now, if I do an adaptation, he doesn’t come to see it. He was always going on and on about it. And there was quite an argument in the press about it. When *Nicholas Nickleby* was done at the RSC, they very much acknowledged the *Bleak House* I’d done a few years earlier. And of course it was a huge success. Michael Billington turned his nose up at that. And so there was a big battle going on, back and forth. That’s his point of view, that theatre’s about plays. Well, I don’t think theatre is about plays. And it’s perfectly true a novel’s not written to be performed. But I think those nineteenth-century novels were very theatrical, because I think a lot of those writers often talked about their work. Dostoyevsky does as well...and
Dickens, and Wilkie Collins, in theatrical terms. Because the theatre was not a very exciting or artistic milieu in the nineteenth century, I think a lot of that theatrical energy went into novels. The characters are incredibly exciting and dramatic. The stories, the plots, are thrilling with the environments and the moods they create….Even Dickens will say, “Enter Mr. So and so,” and describe, “At that moment, Mrs. Guppy is standing on the stairs, and Mr. So-and-so is crouching,…” He’s giving you strange pictures, and there’s lots of plot because he was writing serials. People would read every month, and then wait for the next month. So, there’s something very theatrical, and they do talk in theatrical terms. Certainly those nineteenth-century novels are huge. They could lend themselves to a certain degree to theatre. It’s not true, I think, of a lot of contemporary novels, because they are very internal, very ‘inner’. There’s no protagonist driving through them. I don’t think, by any means, every novel is adaptable. But, if you can see your way to adapt a novel, you do it. People have different takes on that. It doesn’t matter—adaptation—now. Because there’s a limitation in a funny way. What I loved about novel adaptation was that it forced me to find new theatrical solutions to certain problems. It forced me to discover new conventions for myself. How do I transfer this sort of writing onto the stage? How can I do that? Because novels take place over a huge amount of space and time, how do you move rapidly from one thing to the other? I got very good at it. My shows are very fluid. I think I can say that about myself. They flow and dissolve very freely, and you move from one thing to another. The less you have on stage in terms of technology and sets, the sharper and quicker those scene changes can be. It’s almost like a jump-cut in a film. [unclear on tape…gives example from Bleak House] Esther Summerson’s traveling up to London in a carriage and she’s sitting in a chair and she’s saying, “Oh, I came up to London, and it was very foggy, and I looked out the window and I saw people in the street, and then the carriage drew up at a tall house with big steps and I was led into a room where I slept by a huge fire.” And she could just stay in the same chair and by the way she changed her body, [snaps fingers] she made a sort of jump cut. Rather than getting out of the chair and walking to another part of the stage and sitting somewhere else, being very literal, you could actually change things on the spot. Or, you could change a character, if an actor is playing several characters. Somebody would come and talk to them as though they were one character, and then the scene would change and they would be addressed by somebody else. They’d become somebody else in the chair. So, you could get these very exciting, very theatrical, very swift changes of story—changes of focus and place. Adapting novels was very, very good for exploring conventions and opening up your stage language. This practice would, to a certain degree, filter through into your working on plays. They would inform your plays in some way or other.

INTERVIEW TWO

Nancy Meckler: 2 August 2001
KC—If you could talk first about the biggest influences you as an early director, prior to working with Shared Experience. Perhaps discuss your experience with LaMama or Freehold.

NM—I studied drama at Antioch College in Ohio, and I was very influenced by one of the professors there. His name was Meredith Dallas. I took a basic directing course from him, and always remembered the basic principles from that course when I began directing. Then I studied acting at the HB studios in NYC, which gave me a basic way of talking to actors and approaching actors and understanding their process of acting. I did a year of postgraduate study in classical acting at LAMDA in London. But I don’t think that was such an influence on me. I think probably the biggest influence after that was working with an experimental company at LaMama, which was called LaMama Plexus. It was run by a man called Stanley Rosenberg. He had worked with Eugenio Barba, who was a disciple of Grotowski—living in Denmark with him for about a year. So, the exercises that he brought back were very much those experimental Grotowski exercises that have a lot to do with starting from the physical and taking it to a mental state—almost a kind of trance—before they explored the space and the material. And I was very influenced by the things I saw happening in that company. I was in that company first as a kind of assistant director. Then I did a little bit of acting with them, but we never really performed very much. It was more to do with process. We didn’t perform much at all. I certainly didn’t perform with them. So, that was very influential, because when I came to England just after that, I joined a little fringe group that had started—which was another LaMama group. It was started by another American who was over here. It was called LaMama Warehouse. I joined them, once again as a sort of assistant director. And was able to put into use a lot of the techniques we had done at the LaMama Plexus. And that company became the Freehold. We were together for about three or four years and did fairly expressionistic productions, starting with Antigone, our biggest success.

So, I always had a great love for that way of working. Though, once that company disbanded, I was trying to just work in straight theatre. So, I did a lot of new plays for awhile. Then, when my husband and I went to the Leicester Haymarket, I was able to do classic plays. But, to really use the rehearsal process as an experimental, exploratory piece, I was only really able to touch on that for a little while, while I was at Leicester. The rest of the time I was really trying to work in a much more conventional way. And, so when I came back here in 1988, it was like a return to techniques that I hadn’t really been using full-force for about fifteen years. Soon after I got here, I went to Edinburgh and saw the work of this man called Mladen Materic, who I was completely taken with. I spoke to him and invited him to do workshops. And for many years he came and did workshops here. He did a production here. I found that his exercises were very closely connected to what I was trying to do. So, now I use a lot of his exercises in the work. It has helped to define what I was trying to achieve.

1 Nancy Meckler is married to David Aukin.
KC—Are there specific exercises that you have taken from him that you regularly use in rehearsals?

NM—There are. They are exercises for getting people to feel very connected with each other. I think I did some of them in the workshop that you came to. I mentioned that they were his exercises, didn’t I?

KC—The ‘answering’ exercises?

NM—Yes.

KC—Could you comment more on this influence? Is it about creating less emphasis on the words?

NM— I think that what we were after was a larger than life expressionistic style of acting. Any exercises which trained the actors to be more physical and more expressive in their bodies means that the work will be as expressed in the body as it will in the words, but I don’t think it’s about less emphasis on words. It’s about heightening the physicality and still having the words. I think what’s very different particularly about us as a company is that we work with text-based actors. Then introduce them to a physical way of working, so that the text is always very strong in our productions. Whereas a lot of companies that are very good at physical theatre, they are not brilliant at text. Often the text plays a minor role to the visuals, but in our productions it doesn’t tend to be that way.

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KC—Your productions during your first season with Shared Experience—were those things you had been interested to work on?

NM—I thought they were good things that would allow me to use the rehearsal process as an experimental arena. We did the Bacchae first, because I think Greek tragedy really does lend itself to that kind of thing. I think after that we did True West, which is a Shepard play. Once again, it is not a naturalistic; it requires a very heightened physicality. I suppose I was asking myself the question of why have companies like this unless you are using it to take risks and be experimental. Why would you do it? Why would a company like this exist? I know the Arts Council want you to tour, but they claim that although a huge amount of the money that they fund you is for provision—which means touring—they are funding you for innovation. I felt it was important to do things that I wouldn’t be able to do in the same way somewhere else; that Shared Experience would give me extra rehearsal time, or very idealistic rehearsal conditions,

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3 While working on the Shared Experience archives in 2001, I was invited to participate in one of the company’s ‘process’ workshops.
and a real understanding of process. So, I was trying to choose things with that in mind, and not do things I felt I could do very happily elsewhere.

KC—The word ‘expressionism’ has been very much associated with the company. When did that connection between SE and expressionism first happen?

NM—I think the work has always been very expressionistic, but we’ve hesitated to use it in publicity because it just confuses people. Because nobody knows what it means. If people do, they think of expressionist painters like Munch, and they just think of horror gothic, which isn’t really a definition of expressionism. I think expressionism is when you express things which are not normally seen. It’s usually expressing a layer of reality which is hidden to the naked eye. But, as I said, we’ve avoided using that. Instead, we say things like, “We’re interested in theatre that goes beyond the everyday.” Yet, the other way of looking at it is that we were avoiding naturalism, wanting theatre to be a medium that is hugely expressive and isn’t just imitating life.

KC—You have various ways of expressing more about who Shared Experience are: through workshops, websites, school workshops, publicity. Have any of these helped to explain the company’s goals and values? Have they helped secure venues?

NM—I don’t think so. I think the venues are fairly pragmatic: “Is this a title I can sell?” I don’t think they’re that interested in the process. Very often it might be someone who is interested in the process, but won’t have us because he doesn’t think he can sell us. That happens sometimes: “I think you’re amazing, but we can’t have you here.” Occasionally you get a very idealistic venue manager, but if they’re very small venues, it is financially problematic to go to such tiny places.

KC—Mike Alfreds talked about his interest in getting a core of permanent actors. Is that something you have also been interested in?

NM—Well, I think a core of permanent actors is quite a difficult thing to maintain. I’m not quite sure why you would do that in this climate, because you can’t keep them year round anyway. Recently he did that with Method and Madness and they had to go out for thirty weeks. It’s exhausting, and very difficult to find thirty venues. I don’t actually think there is a need for it. If you were permanently based in a community, that might be different. But I don’t think that it’s that advantageous to have people together for too long. I know Mike tried for a couple of years. I think we really value it when people come back, because that feels almost like having a core. It’s brilliant. You get productions with three people who have all worked with Shared Experience, but have never worked with each other. They immediately connect with each other as soon as they meet and start working together. That’s fantastic. In some ways I think that’s more stimulating than trying to keep a group together the whole time. Maybe if you had very, very specific projects you wanted to work on and you really thought you needed people
to be together for a year. There hasn’t been the impulse to go down that road. I think just to have them be permanent for the sake of it doesn’t seem attractive.

KC—For actors who are coming in to audition for Shared Experience, are you pleased with the kind of background, drama school training, they are bringing with them?

NM—A lot of them think they have been doing a lot of physical work, but it isn’t anything…it depends who the teachers are; whether we would think any of it was in line with what we are doing. But drama schools do lots more physical stuff now because it’s more fashionable for productions to be physical.

KC—How much time do you spend together as a group before going to the text itself?

NM—Usually, I think we tend to spend the mornings doing lots of physical work, but taking it into images for the piece. As weeks go by, you spend less and less time doing exercises and building a company. In the first two weeks you try to grab as much time as you can to create an ensemble, to share a vocabulary. But it’s always a bit if a race with time. You never get the amount of time you would like. Ideally, you might spend three weeks just forming the company, then start working on the piece. When you’ve only got five or six weeks rehearsal, you just have to throw them in quite quickly and hope that it sticks.

KC—With the increase in funding you got from the Arts Council for the next few years, how do you think that is going to impact the direction of the company?

NM—Well, the irony is…First of all, we don’t get it until the third year. But also, all it will do is fund us properly. I don’t think it gives us new opportunities, because what we have been doing is re-staging our very successful productions and taking them abroad as a way of getting more money so that we can keep going. So, it means that we don’t have to do that as often. It just means that now we’re properly funded. So you can do big projects more and not have to keep re-vamping old ones in order to get more money. When we re-vamp an old one, we don’t just do it for the money, we have to have real interest in it and believe it still has more of an audience, and that we can find something new in it. But it is partly why we’ve been able to keep doing two shows a year, because we don’t have the funding at the moment for two shows a year. And this extra money will mean we can do two a year.

KC—What kind of projects are you looking at now? I know you are working on an adaptation of a more contemporary novel. Are you looking more now at contemporary novels?

NM—The thing about contemporary, twentieth-century, novels is that it’s very difficult to get the rights to do them; so that you don’t have the huge choice that you have with the nineteenth-century novels. And as the writing becomes more naturalistic, it becomes less interesting for us. It’s quite difficult to say; we’re always asking questions about, should
we be trying different ways of doing adaptation? Should we be having the writer in the room and collaborating with people, rather than asking people to go away and write an adaptation? Are there others ways of finding writers who could be right for the company, because so far our attempts to find writers who can write for the company haven’t worked out that well. So, we keep asking ourselves how we can address that, talking about doing more workshops. We’re constantly asking ourselves whether we’re still being experimental and exploratory and trying new things. But it’s difficult to say WHAT those new things are at the moment because they come up one at a time.

KC—This company has such a strong history of women working with it, and the adaptations often deal with the experiences of women, and silenced women. Could you talk about your attraction to those kinds of works, or the responses you’ve gotten to them in other countries.

NM—Well, obviously, when we go to countries where women still don’t have much of a voice, they can really relate to the material. But, I think although feminism has come a long way and people are more educated, it doesn’t mean that the average woman is totally free to speak her mind, and isn’t being stopped somewhere along the career ladder because she’s a woman. I don’t think that feminism has released women completely. So, people can still relate to these stories. I think that Polly and I are probably quite intuitive in the way that we work. If we’re interested in something, we don’t analyze why we’ve chosen it so much. Obviously, as women, we are very touched by stories of women finding their voices, and having the courage to follow their own dreams, or find their own freedom in a repressive situation. Or, very often, it’s about a woman trying to be true to herself—which I think is still very difficult for women, even though consciousness has been raised. I think for women to really be able to say “I’m living a life where I feel I’m true to myself and my needs” is still very difficult. We have very patriarchal systems, don’t we? It’s a much more male-oriented society. If you look at something like Question Time on television, they very rarely can find a woman who will get up in public and be opinionated. They’re lucky if they have one woman in four participants. What’s that about? So, I think, yes, we are fascinated by women’s stories. But, we don’t have a political agenda. We don’t say, “We must do women’s stories because we feel women are disenfranchised.” It’s more, “We are women, and of course we’re interested in women’s stories.” And when we’re choosing people to work with, we do bend over backwards to give a chance to women because in a lot of organizations it would be rare for a woman to be in some of the positions that we have one in. I don’t think it’s as much of a political agenda, as it just feels like a natural impulse. It’s a very collaborative company. I have a hunch that women do collaborate well, perhaps better than men do. I’ve been told that’s so. I don’t know whether it’s true. We certainly find it to be true. You can get together quite a large group of women and still be very collaborative.

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INTERVIEW THREE

Polly Teale: 31 July 2001

KC—I just want to start with a little background and when you started with Shared Experience. I know you mentioned in the process workshop that you started as an assistant director for Nancy on her first show here. How did that connection first happen?

PT—Probably my very first connection with the company was at school, and Shared Experience, way back when Mike Alfreds was running the company, used to try out a lot of their shows in Sheffield where I grew up. They came and performed Arabian Nights, which is a show of theirs that became much talked about and everybody remembers, in our school dining room. And I remember sitting there on the floor, watching this show—which was wonderful, it was a real actors’ theatre piece where everything was conjured up out of thin air, no props, no costumes…very, very simple. That was my first encounter with Shared Experience, and I must have been thirteen or so. In fact I saw Cymbeline, and several of the other early pieces in Sheffield. Then, I became interested in Nancy’s work, which was completely independent of Shared Experience before she came here. I saw several pieces. I think I saw My Sister in This House, which she directed. It finally turned into a film…wonderful film. I saw Low Level Panic, a show she had done at the [Royal] Court. And I wrote Nancy a letter to say that I had really loved these two pieces of theatre and could I come and meet her? And she said yes, amazingly really, thinking about it…because we get such a lot of letters from people and obviously few of them do you get to meet. But I came and I met her and she asked me to come and assist on The Bacchae, which is probably thirteen years ago now. It was wonderful. It was a very long rehearsal period. I think we had nine weeks or something, which is longer than we have now. It was really fascinating to me as a young director because there was lots of movement work. It just seemed to open a door into a completely different way of thinking about theatre.

I went off and did my own thing for a few years, and Nancy was fantastic in coming to see things and we always kept in touch with each other. Then, it must be about six, maybe seven years ago, Nancy was going to adapt Anna Karenina, and she spoke to me about doing the adaptation. As it turned out, in the end I was unable to do it because I got a place on a television course. But I recommended Helen to Nancy because she was an old friend of mine and I thought it might work. Little did I know with that recommendation, I was about to begin this amazing collaboration [laughs] that was going to go on for years. I saw Anna Karenina, which I thought was absolutely wonderful. I was very, very excited by it. And I wrote to Nancy again saying I was thrilled. And we got together and started talking about Mill on the Floss because Nancy had committed to doing Sister my Sister, the film version of the play, and she knew she wasn’t going to be able to be in rehearsals a hundred per cent of the time. So she needed somebody to collaborate with her in order to give her some flexibility. In the end, it turned out that she
was actually really quite caught up with the film the first time we did [Mill on the Floss]. For me it was an amazing opportunity, because suddenly I was working alongside Nancy, working with this wonderful company, and on this fantastic text. Mill on the Floss, is a really, really wonderful adaptation. I went on to become the Associate Director here. I’ve done quite a lot of work for the company, and now Nancy and I run the company together.

KC—How did your first experience of seeing Nancy direct or working with Nancy impact you as a director in those years in between, before you came back to the company?

PT—That’s a really interesting question. Well, I think it had a enormous effect, though I probably couldn’t have articulated it at the time. I think it did open me up to that possibility of making theatre that is about expressing or making visible things that are usually hidden inside. And I think I talked a bit about this at that process workshop where I talked about an exercise I had seen Nancy doing, where she had actors playing out the inner life of the character. I think it was a situation with lovers and one of them was feeling very jealous, and they had a actor who was like a very raw expression of that jealousy and rage. That set me off on a whole train of thought which was to do with that journey that we make from being small children where everything is very expressed and visible, towards adulthood where we’re much more contained and controlled and we conceal a lot of what we feel. That really took me to the place where I created the workshop I did with you and the others the other day. So, that journey was very interesting. When I came back here it was as though I’d been on a journey that had begun here, and ended up here. 

KC—What characterizes the artistic difference between you and Nancy?

PT—One of the fantastic things, for me, about co-directing is that I get to watch Nancy at work, which is fantastically valuable. Because, very often actors go from rehearsal room to rehearsal room, and be in all sorts of different ways of working and get experience with all kinds of different processes. Whereas directors tend to sit in their own rehearsals. So, it’s been fantastic having that opportunity, and I think that there are lots of things that Nancy does from which I’ve learned a huge amount. One of the big things that I think Nancy’s always very good at is working out what’s driving characters, and she very often does improvisations in rehearsal. For example, improvisations where you really try to hone down and pinpoint [the characters’ motivating forces], and set up improvisations that test that until the actors are very, very clear about what it is that’s really driving them. That is something that I’ve found incredibly useful. I think I had all sorts of slightly chaotic, instinctive ways of getting at that, but it’s helped me to be able to analyze it and define it more clearly, both for myself and for the actor.

KC—At what point would you bring Liz, or another choreographer, into rehearsal with you?
PT—With Liz, we tend to talk…we would have a good few conversations before we began rehearsals about what we were going to do. But with the adaptations, she tends to be in rehearsals quite a lot…perhaps anything between half the time to all of the time depending on what her availability is. Which is partly her own choice—you could say…it’s partly to do with the way she works. She really likes to feel that she has that sort of involvement, and it’s great for us, I think.

It’s that simple idea that everything should come from the actor. It’s all about using processes that allow the actor to discover their own language for whatever it is that they’re expressing. I think that’s very crucial to us.

KC—Regarding the process workshop and improvisations used with scene work, do you bring in particular lines of text from the adaptation?

PT—It would probably be a mixture. We often do a lot of physical improv. Once you’ve found the character wants, it can be very useful to just spend time working with those wants without language. Which means evolving a whole physicality and finding a way of creating the kind of tension and the conflict between two characters without any language first of all.

Once you’ve decided, for example, that little Maggie wants to go and experience everything, and that Second Maggie wants to be in control of herself, or wants to be a good daughter…you can put those two actors into the space and you can play with those two wants without having any kind of language. Or likewise, with Rochester, you’ve got someone in the room with Jane Eyre, and…within a scene…he wants to unmask her or pierce her reserve, make her reveal herself in some way. Also, Jane has this enormous want to hold on to her dignity, and she feels that she’s being very humiliated or manipulated. So, you can work with those wants without having any language first of all. I think that can be a great way of really finding the energy of the characters, and what the battle is that’s going on between them. Of course also you need to do all the work on the language as well. And we might also do improvs away from the text as well. Nancy’s very fond of doing improvs where you put things into a modern context, and you find a parallel, equivalent situation. I don’t think I’m quite as clever as she is at finding the parallels. That’s something that she is particularly good at.

KC—How has Mladen Materic’s work influenced you?

PT—I did a workshop with Mladen way back…years and years ago when I first got involved with Shared Experience, which I think was a week-long workshop. It was completely revelatory. It was really wonderful. Apart form anything, my main memory of it is that it was so freeing, and it was very joyous about feeling my body wake up, feeling that I could be so physical without feeling self-consciousness. I’ve since come to
understand what he was actually teaching better than I probably did at that first session, and I’ve done one or two other workshops with him. Also, Nancy uses a lot of his exercises, and always has, so that’s been great because it’s given me a chance to really familiarize myself with them. Certainly there’s a whole set of exercises that he does that both of us use in rehearsal.

KC—Do you have any examples?

PT—A lot of it has to do with that notion of re-discovering movement from inside, and the pleasure of experiencing an inner impulse to move that comes from deep within the body. I think it’s often about really working off of another person, so that you’re freed up from that idea that movement has to be something that you ‘think’ of. It becomes something very organic, and it’s all about ‘energy’ between two people. It’s also about pursuing a want, something with a life of its own.

KC—You have a really strong focus on sexuality and desire, as well as repression. A lot of things that the company has done have to do with ‘silent’ women, whether that’s literal or metaphoric. What attracts you to keep coming back to these characters?

PT—That’s a very interesting question. Well, firstly I think we are very interested in characters where their conscious and unconscious motivations are quite different. An example might be somebody like Jane Eyre, who has this kind of ferocious pride and this huge need to hold on to her dignity and therefore to be in control of herself. Yet, of course, she also has this enormous need to be loved and this huge kind of hunger and curiosity, and appetite for life and sexuality. All this stuff she has to bury because as a small child she’s so humiliated and crushed. This need to protect herself by holding on to her dignity has become so strong that that she’s prepared to do that at almost all costs. You’ve got a tremendous contradiction between her inner world, her inner life, and her conscious objectives. So, that notion of a locked room and that part of herself that’s had to be locked away and that is…gradually erupting and struggling to escape. I think that’s something that we’re very, very interested in, as well as characters who are repressed, or who are in some ways trapped, if you like, whether it’s by society or themselves, or in fact a combination of the two. Well, that’s very true of Anna Karenina, and, of course, the Maggies. That’s a kind of very interesting, explosive situation, isn’t it? I think, for me, I’m very interested in the idea of people being trapped within themselves in some way, because I think, to a certain extent, all of us have that. Perhaps women have it more than men—the sense that they are in some way trapped, and struggling to find a way to express themselves and to live in the world, to be visible to the world.

KC—In the nineteenth-century novels, there are many women characters who are silent in some way. You’re doing an adaptation of an Angela Carter novel. It’s a contemporary novel and the problem is still there. It’s not something that has been solved with the twentieth century.
PT—But I think what is so interesting is that in some ways we seem to have traveled so far, don’t we? We seem like we are in a completely different world. And yet, in other ways, quite clearly we haven’t. I mean it’s still true probably that about ninety per cent of theatre directors, or the people who create theatre, are men. You look at statistics for things like anorexia, which is at an all time high. It seems very clear that women’s desire for male approval...we’re talking about women feeling trapped in somewhere, that is absolutely what anorexia is about, isn’t it? So, in some ways we really have moved forward enormously. I think it takes more than a hundred years to really change our thinking, [Teale mentions article in A Doll’s House program] because changing one’s fundamental sense of being and one’s thinking is a much deeper process than changing that kind of surface of male/female relationships.

KC—The success of these shows speaks to that phenomenon. In various countries, especially the success of the shows in a country like India, show that these issues are very, very current and a very urgent need that you are addressing.

PT—It’s always fascinating touring these plays because when we set off to India, I think we thought, “What will this novel have to say to people living in such a completely different culture?” Well, in some ways, it was even more pertinent in India than here—the idea that you’d educate a boy but not a girl. And in China, you’ve still got girl babies being killed or aborted or adopted so that they leave the country. I think that’s what’s amazing about these kind of epic stories, that they prove to have such resonance in all kinds of different places.

KC—Do you feel that a lot of the contemporary plays on offer do not speak to that possibility?

PT—I think, partly, that we are always looking for material that will allow us to explore the inner lives of the characters and go beyond naturalism. Something about those old novels is that they have a sort of mythic context. It’s not the modern world where one might become much more entranced by all sort of surface detail, and it has a sort of mythic quality by its very nature, a sort of universality if you like. I don’t know if that makes sense. It’s probably harder to do something that’s completely contemporary unless it has that sense of a kind of mythic context to it. And I also there’s something about the novel that lends itself to our style because what we’re interested in is the characters’ inner worlds. The power of a good novel is that you get this tremendous insight into this inner life. A good novel is wonderful, because you really know what the characters are thinking and feeling and you know their secret innermost thoughts. I think that’s why we’ve been so drawn to the novel because has allowed us to explore [the innermost thoughts], to find ways of expressing that physically on stage.

KC—As an artistic director, what are your main concerns for the company as far as the direction that it will take in the next few years? I know you’ve got some significant funding coming up.
PT—I think one of the real challenges for us, because we’ve had such huge successes with the adaptations, is to find a way of continuing to grow and move forward and create material that feels experimental and bold and exciting. That is a challenge at the moment, because I think that Helen Edmundson is not going to be so available. We are trying to find processes, ways of working that will yield material that allows us to go beyond naturalism. I think that is a challenge for us to be able to keep doing something that’s fresh.

INTERVIEW FOUR

Liz Ranken: 31 July 2001

KC: Could you first give me a little bit of background on your training and the influences on your work?

LR: Well, I’m a very odd fish because I come from a very academic family—scientists. At school, though I was very strong at the arts, I gave up all the arts because I didn’t really understand the value. My mother was a brilliant architect and my sister is an electrical engineer who is pioneering the development of the Internet at the moment. And she was winning scholarships to Cambridge for electrical engineering. I would dance a solo and they wouldn’t come and see it! I would think, “what does my dance solo mean against [the scientific achievements of my family]?” My father owned a building company, then designed libraries, buildings, and what does my dance mean next to that? So I gave up all the arts and my first degree was in biology. Then, part way through that I thought I couldn’t bear the fact that I’d given up all the arts and started doing dancing again. I began ballet when I was five, and then gave it up at A-levels. So I began ballet again. My teacher was really encouraging saying, “you should join a company!” So, then I went to the Central School of Speech and Drama and I actually read Speech Therapy! And, again, it was being driven by my family. It was like saying, “Do something of practical worth.”

The principal at Central…the principal of the Speech Therapy College was fantastic and said, “You ought to be doing something creative. This is ridiculous.” I started doing contemporary dance and ballet, and putting on solo shows and devised work for the College, while I was studying speech therapy. I got into Laban, because there were options there for movement in special education as well as choreography and technique.

3 National university entrance exams for British students.

4 The Laban Centre is an institute for the study of Rudolph Laban’s dance and movement techniques.
I don’t regret the first two degrees in a way, and I’ll come back to that in terms of source material. At Laban, after the one year of postgraduate study, I took off as a performer and choreographer. And they said, “Stay on.” I either had the option of doing an MPhil, PhD, or an MA. They were saying, “Don’t go down the academic path again. You’ll be frustrated as an artist.” I don’t think I’m brilliant at academics. I don’t have that sort of systemic mind, but. I do think, you know! And so I did the MA, though I fell out with the College towards the end of it. It was the first time the MA in Dance had ever been run, and there were enormous problems with the course. It was run by pure academics who had never danced. The second year they wanted you to do pure theory: sociology and aesthetics. Sit on your arse in the library. If you’re bursting with passion, having finally decided to go into dance and choreography against this [academic study], and that wasn’t what I wanted to do. So I didn’t—I mean I was there for nearly three years but I didn’t complete it in the end.

I started doing work. I went up to Edinburgh Fringe, and then after leaving Laban I worked with someone called Jacob Marley and a group called ‘Company of Cracks’. It was with people who were both dance trained and not. Then I met Lloyd Newson and was the first woman to work with DV8.5 That was incredibly exciting and fantastic. I would say that I wasn’t brilliant technically—like I wasn’t brilliant at ballet. I was good. I loved dancing in clubs, and there was something almost wild about me. Lloyd was trained in psychology. I had this background in speech therapy, and I was working at the same time—during the MA and at the beginning of DV8—with adults with a learning difficulty...profoundly handicapped. Somehow the drive into doing work that was politically driven and where the movement was driven by intention, rather than taking movement from a known technique, was something that was immediately ‘up there’ for Lloyd and me. I was working a lot with non-verbal communication: with sign language… and how you stimulate people who can’t speak to communicate. It all fit together. It was quite a pioneering chance to work with handicapped people as well because I triggered a PhD with someone else around multi-sensory integration. Up until then people who language were very handicapped were being given flashcards and pictures to try and stimulate—which actually is ridiculous. What they needed was tactile and motor stimulation. It was about stimulating tactile and vestibular stimulation, the fluids in the inner ear. So, it all fit together really.

During the first work with Lloyd, I was catching all the men and throwing all the men, so it was all rather political. And, I danced in DM’s! I was probably the first woman in Britain to wear DM’s, and I danced in them!6 It felt really exciting. After that I worked with the Gloria Music Theatre that Neil Bartlett ran. Then I did my own work. I won the Place Portfolio Choreography Award for a duet with language-based and movement piece. It was based on the autobiography of someone that got married and had a breakdown. So, it was like using a real autobiography and putting movement with it. I

5 DV8 is a physical theatre/dance company.

6 Doc Martens brand footwear.
won that with Matthew Bourne who did Swan Lake. It was the “choreographers to watch out for” sort of thing. Then I did New Moves seasons at the Place, and then I moved to Scotland and did work up there that had some text in it and movement..... I’ve worked with adults with a learning difficulty with the New Moves, and I’ve worked at the Grassmarket Project, and did a piece with prostitutes and strippers in a piece about prostitution. We actually did research by going into the field and getting involved in the lives of real people [laughs] who actually were prostitutes and strippers! Then I did a project with homeless and with prisoners. After that, I did another project that was based on language, dance, and gymnastics. I won an award for skills that were indigenous to the people. Rather than asking for pure dance technique, if you see what I mean, I fed my roots in the theatre world. And then I also did work in prisons. I did a show using material from prisons which was then put together with devised work.

And then Nancy saw a theatre piece I had done the movement for and asked me to work with Shared Experience.

KC—What was your first show?

LR—She had done a show about Shakespeare’s sonnets and I came back and did more detail on the movement for her. I’ve done all the shows in the last six years apart from one, Which was Trilby and Svengali.

KC—What does the ‘expressionist’ style of the company mean to you in terms of your work with them?

LR—I suppose I’m interested in the metaphysical approach, actually. I try to work from what I think the essence of the work is about, and I often work with things like color, and explore themes. I suppose, ultimately, being able to take something into an expressionistic style does come from whether the script allows it. Mill on the Floss and Anna Karenina were written by Helen Edmundson who would often suggest ideas which would be movement ideas, which I would follow up. For example, in Anna Karenina it’s as though Anna’s riding a horse, when in fact, there’s a cross-reference between being at the races, riding a horse, and having sex between Anna and Vronsky. [Helen] would suggest that there was that crossover. Then, when she developed Mill on the Floss and War and Peace, she’d leave places slightly more open to me. [For example], she would say, “in Mill on the Floss there’s a flood.” And I would find the flood, with Nancy and Polly all very much pooling idea [...] For me, a flood would be—again going to a metaphysical place—centered around heightened emotion connected with water. In Mill on the Floss I’d start with a sequence about putting stones on points of the body where there was the most tension around an inner conflict. Then I would have the actors releasing the stones with a phrase of text that released some inner secret they’ve never expressed to anyone, releasing that into movement. That [kind of approach] pretty much drove the whole of Mill on the Floss rehearsals—this sense of releasing a tension.

KC—At what point do you come into a rehearsal, and for how much of a rehearsal?
LR—I was full-time on *Mill on the Floss*. In fact, Nancy wasn’t there in the first construction of *Mill on the Floss*, but she came in occasionally. She was working on a film. So, I was there full-time with *Anna Karenina*, *War & Peace*, *Mill on the Floss*, and the sonnets. It depends how much the expressionistic level will be visible ultimately. *House of Bernarda Alba* is slightly closer to naturalism, so I didn’t work on that production full-time. It was the same with *A Doll’s House*.

KC—Did you start abstract or metaphysical explorations without specific lines of text?

LR—Yes, because I’d want to draw from their lives…Deborah Warner once said that she felt that theatre should be about shining light on the parts of a human being that would connect with the work…. Things like finding images in yourself that would connect with the central themes of the work. In *Jane Eyre*, I would talk about creating an animal that was to do with a sexual passion that was out of control, an addictive drive around the sexual passion. Then, I would take that animal further into a sense of isolation, and link it with trauma—but then push it further to imagine that you were locked up in a room and what that would do to your sanity. The actors would evolve into being Bertha, into someone who was labeled as mad.

KC—So, you were working on the actor’s personal experience rather than the character’s?

LR—Yes, yes. Fire was a big theme in *Jane Eyre*, that energy linked with a fire meridian. In fact, there are 198 references to fire in the book. I feel that the elements are really important. Call me a madwoman—it’s interesting. In the adaptations that have been a big success, I think that reference [to the elements] is big, and it’s there in the writing. *Mill on the Floss* is all about the water; *Jane Eyre* is all about the fire.

KC—So, you found conflicts and tension around the water and the fire. Are there exercises you do with a new company to get them working with a common language?

LR—There’s a little of overlap between Nancy and Polly by now with me. I would work with things like pure color, because I think it opens out the energy. I’d get them to lie on the floor and say, “imagine you’re breathing in white air, you’re in a white room, it’s got white walls—what does that do to the quality of your movement, or the center of your movement?” It does link people in a universal way. It’s quite amazing. And so I’d work with different colors. I mean this whole business about people being responsive, this answering work that Nancy believes in. Yet, I go with the idea that you can extend energy between people. I work with some healing. So, I wouldn’t say that I have standard exercises, but I develop this kind of work.

…

KC—How does this layer with sound or text?
LR—...I feel it does open out layers of energy in the body to bring voice into all the physical work. I say voice probably more than language because I think that can start to use the intellect. And a lot of the time we’re trying to get very instinctive in first responses. So, it’s a truth coming from inside someone.

...  

KC—Do you always talk together about what the company is looking for and what the core ‘wants’ are?

LR—Yes. I would say with Nancy, we’d have discussions about what the core wants are for each character and how you would physicalize them. She would tend to put that in a contemporary context. So, I would be there to discuss. I would say Polly, now, tends to ask everyone to bring in research; everyone would look at a certain area. With Jane Eyre, she’d read Wide Sargasso Sea, writings on how women were treated, and the restrictions on them. That type of research research has driven a lot of Mill on the Floss and Anna Karenina; these women living at a time when they weren’t supposed to be particularly educated or well-read, and became bored out of their heads! I do think political issues do drive the energy of these historical adaptations.

KC—For Mill on the Floss and Jane Eyre, one adaptation is driven by water and the other one is driven by fire. What parts of the body do you concentrate on for these elements and tensions?

LR—I would say that fire energy, the passionate energy, the sexual meridian...is located in the groin. But it’s also a quality of movement. Fire is a much more driven quality than water.

KC—Certain characters, perhaps with fire, are going to be much more externally expressive. Others who aren’t as expressive, who will hide their emotions. How did you account for the characters’ emotional repression?

LR—I would say Bertha in Jane Eyre was like the raw, passionate, released, fire side of Jane. So much of the time it had to have a ‘lid’ on it because of the social and political constraints on her situation of the time—being a governess and a woman. So, there is a sense of the released side and the constrained side of Jane, and Rochester pushes her almost deliberately to release her passion. By flirting with Blanche, and pretending he’s going to marry another woman, he pushes Jane to the edge of declaring her passion for him. There’s this final amazing passionate dialogue between them when she says, “Do you think I’m an automaton?” It is all about releasing that passion, and it’s very much always there underneath.
HE—[Nancy Meckler] was looking for someone to adapt Anna Karenina. She had quite a strong feeling that she wanted a woman. Polly said to her, my friend, Helen’s, just had her play done. Read this [Flying], it’s interesting. She read it and really responded to it, and so asked if we could have a meeting. That was how the whole thing started. So, I met Nancy, had a meeting, hadn’t read Anna Karenina, had never seen Shared Experience, though I had heard about them. I had only just moved to London, and it is quite a kind of different scene up in Manchester. We got on really well, and we talked about theatre. When we talked about the novel, we seemed to respond to the same things, and we got excited about the same sort of things. She just took a huge chance with me, because they were actually really running out of time. They’d got this tour booked and nobody was working on the adaptation. So, I think she was under a bit of pressure. I suppose what was there in Flying that she liked was that it was not a naturalistic sort of play. People’s fantasies were realized on the stage. A fantasy man would come on stage and dance with the woman who was pretending to be somewhere else. People were very exposed; it was very raw. The writing was simple and poetic, but quite pared down. I think [Nancy] thought there were things there that might work very well for a Shared Experience-type thing. She thought they were good signs.

I had seen a couple of adaptations. They were very dull adaptations where there was a narrator on the other side of the stage, saying, “And this happened,” and then you see a bit of a scene. I just thought that was rubbish. I remember saying to [Nancy], “If I do it, then I’m going to make it very, very immediate. I don’t want there to be a narrator. I don’t want there to be any distance.” I mean, I hadn’t seen anything that Mike Alfreds had done. Nancy tried to explain to me about the technique that he had of having the actors talk about their characters in the third person, where they would say, “And he said.” It was that kind of thing. She explained that to me, but I still kind of felt that wasn’t really what I wanted to do. I wanted the audience to be right there with the characters from the very word ‘go’. I wanted them to be let in, and I wanted them to believe in them. I wanted that illusion of theatre to remain. So, Nancy said to me, which was hugely helpful: “Go away and read the book and try and think about it almost as a ballet or an opera. If it was an opera of Anna Karenina, what would you want to be hit with? What would you expect to see? Or, if it was a ballet, how would it be acted out? How would one do it without words?” That was really, really helpful.

KC—So you were working with the physical image, rather than starting with ‘how do I work with the words’?
HE—It was a good way of thinking of it—how to start with the physical aspects. I really loved that and it unlocked something for me. I was able to just go with it. We did a research trip to Russia and that was great—very, very helpful. Also, we did a workshop before we went to Russia where Nancy got some actors in who were quite used to working with Shared Experience. We would do things like take a key scene from the novel and split up into groups and try to find three different ways of dramatizing that scene: some of which were very text bound, others which were wild, and some of which were somewhere in between. I think it’s great to actually have the actors in a space, and see what actors can do in that space, and what they can create and what they can’t. Shared Experience mostly seemed to be able to rise to any kind of challenge, physically. But it’s just good for me to have that in my head, so I don’t go off into some sort of literary world. But, it’s very grounded in what the actors can actually do, given that we’re not in a room devising it. That’s the next best thing really.

KC—Did you bring various drafts in for the actors to explore, and then revise those drafts? Or, did you bring a finished script in?

HE—I had so little time, to be honest, that we started rehearsals with half the script. I had done the first half, and in the first two to three weeks of rehearsals I was going home and writing the second half. But we changed it in some ways. In a lot of ways it didn’t change at all. And the subsequent adaptations have changed even less: Mill on the Floss and War and Peace. It’s mostly been a question of cutting. With Anna Karenina, I think we certainly moved things around a little bit, and swapped scenes about. We certainly cut quite a lot. Because I was going home and working on the second half, Nancy would say to me—she was getting worried about how long it was—“Is there any way we could combine those scenes?” For example, there’s a little bit when Kitty and Levin get married. And, Dolly does a little speech to the audience about how beautiful Kitty looks and how it reminds her if her wedding day, and now look what’s happened to her. She’s had so many children and her husband’s having affairs and she just remembers the time when she was a girl. That was going to be a separate scene, but Nancy would say, “Is there any chance that we could put that into the Kitty and Levin marriage scene? Could that be happening while we see them getting married?” It was a brilliant idea. Because I was still working on that half, it was good because I could just go off and do that. It was kind of an odd mixture.

Certainly with Mill on the Floss and War and Peace, the main thing that has happened to the text once we’ve gone into rehearsal has been the cutting. Not that much gets changed. Lines get cut out and the odd scene gets cut. Really, the scenes are pretty set going in to rehearsal. There’s no time really to start messing about, so I try and get them as near as possible. With Anna Karenina, we were working on the hoof all the time. So, it was a slightly different experience, and it was my first one. And Nancy was having kittens! [laughs] It was very, very scary for her. I found it quite stressful because I was working work so hard, but I hadn’t really grasped what a terrible mess it could be if the script didn’t work. It didn’t even occur to me that it wasn’t going to work. Obviously it wouldn’t matter if it was a bit too long. So, I think it was much worse on Nancy.
KC—So you came in with a lot of those scenes? There are several places in *Anna Karenina* with very powerful simultaneous scenes.

HE—I think that was something that Nancy suggested as possibilities, and I could just run with it. I think a lot of the images, virtually all the physical images, are there in the text. That was how I envisioned the scene. That was just how I did it. What was good, what was encouraging was that I don’t think we ever found one that didn’t work when we actually came to realize it. That was great, because I would come with these things in my head, and it’s all very well coming up with them, but obviously I didn’t really know whether they were going to work. Actually they did, and that was really gratifying.

KC—Your writing and Shared Experience’s style are so complementary. Was that just an excellent fit from the beginning, or were you also influenced by their expressionistic interests?

HE—It’s kind of hard to say. It seems so organic, that it’s almost impossible to pin down. I hadn’t seen their work before I did those adaptations. Nancy definitely opened those doors in terms of talking to me and saying, “Think about it like this, and think about it like that.” But I think it was just luck really. It was an amazingly good marriage. If I hadn’t had that meeting with Nancy, I probably wouldn’t have thought of doing an adaptation. It wasn’t something I was thinking of; it never occurred to me. Yet, the way that I chose to do it, once I’d been given the given the all-clear to do what I wanted, was very much ‘me’. That was the way my writing was going; it was very much a reflection of me. So, it was an amazingly good coming together.

KC—Another good fit seems to be the focus on women. That seems to be something you also have an interest in with your earlier cabaret work. Could you talk some more about what grabbed you? A lot of these adaptations deal with silenced women. What appeal has that held for you? How have you tried to liberate these women who are silenced?

HE—Part of it is that the women’s stories do tend to appeal to me more because I’m a woman. I suppose it’s also that that is very dramatic. There’s an awful lot of dramatic potential in somebody having to hold back or having to behave in a way they don’t want to behave. When they start to break out of that it is very, very dramatic. I think that appealed to me. I think people’s secret lives have always appealed to me; people’s hopes and dreams that they keep under wraps. What really, really makes people tick? I think quite often with men, even to some extent nowadays, men are often playing out what they want to be playing out. It doesn’t enter their heads that they won’t be able to do what they want to do. They often have a much more confident and enabled attitude towards life, which I think women quite often don’t have. We are very often brought up to feel that we have to fit into all the little corners that nobody else is taking up. We have to meld ourselves and shape ourselves around somebody else’s game plan—usually a male game plan. I think that’s such an interesting area to explore. The more one brings that out into the open, the better really.
KC—Is that something that has been voiced in meetings with Shared Experience. It’s one of the few companies with so many women working with them, and one of the few where I see this kind of work about inner lives of women being explored.

HE—It’s so strange because I don’t think it is something that we consciously talked about. Obviously we now recognize that that is something that is there very strongly in the work, but when we talk about projects that we might do, quite often they are ones that don’t necessarily feature women particularly strongly, or don’t necessarily have that as a starting point. And yet it just seems to be the way that we’re gravitating towards them. [laughs] It really isn’t a conscious thing. I remember, for example, Nancy talking about doing *A Passage to India*, which I suppose does have that element there, but there are so many other things going on. Again, I say this, but, in a way, if you think about something like *War and Peace*—that is so much about the men as well as the women. In fact, it is more about the men. There are many, many more pages devoted to the way the men are getting on, than to the women. But that was just my response to it, to feature the women very strongly; to make so much of Maria, who in the novel doesn’t feature half so much say as Andrei did. But when I adapted it, I switched it round so Andrei doesn’t feature so strongly but Maria is very central. So, I think it is probably that as well—that we respond like that. The next one that I will probably do for the company is again very much about a woman who has to repress feelings. But, I don’t think it’s something conscious. It just happens.

KC—Does your gut response to a novel keep you from feeling you have to be devoted to an ‘idea’ for the novel, or somebody’s interpretation? Has Shared Experience given you a free license to have a passionate response to something in the novel?

HE—I think that’s the most vital thing; that you keep that there—that kind of gut response to something. But if I’m going to adapt something, I do read lots and lots of essays and criticism; lots of different people’s views of it and interpretations. I try to find out as much as I can about where the author was coming from, and what the author seemed to be wanting to say with the novel…or talk about. I try to get an overall view, but then the choices I make when I am adapting it are based on what works dramatically and physically as well. You have to have a different sort of mindset from when you are approaching it as if you were going to make an argument in an essay. It’s a kind of three-dimensional interpretation of it; it has to be. There are so many different demands. I try to identify a central theme, a central idea which is very dramatic and has lots many tensions within it. I use that as my way of driving through, and everything else can stem from that, and hang from that. It doesn’t matter if we reach the end and the audience hasn’t worked out what my initial argument was, or what my original theme was. Hopefully, it just gets lost in there.

When I think about the storytelling, obviously I try to tell the whole story. And I don’t really know why I do that, but I think it’s basic. I remember Nancy saying to me when we first tackled *Anna Karenina*, “You don’t have to do the whole of *Anna Karenina* by
any means.” I don’t think she wanted me to do it, because of time. She said, “You could feature in on one aspect of it. If you just want to do Anna and Vronsky’s relationship. If you don’t want to have Levin in it, don’t have Levin in it.” So, why I ended up feeling that I wanted to tell the whole story, and why I’ve always done that—I’m not absolutely sure, except that I think it is probably that I love a good story and that I love reading novels. I think to take people on that kind of journey is so thrilling, and to actually really work it through and reach the end is so satisfying. I suppose I didn’t want to feel that people would come to see Anna Karenina, but in actual fact just see this kind of take on it with only a few of the characters involved. I thought if we’re going to do this and we’re going to call it Anna Karenina, I want to tell the whole thing. So, I search around for this central theme which gives me the drive through that I need. It helps me to make all the choices I need to make about which characters are going to be to the fore and which are not going to be featured so much, or which are going to be cut altogether. As long as I stick to that theme, it’s always worked out quite well.

KC—Where do you get your inspiration for adaptations? Is it finding something new?

HE—This time I really felt like I had to look for something a bit different. I mean I could do another Eliot. I could do Adam Beade, but I just feel like I need a new challenge. Obviously War and Peace was very, very challenging, but the weight of the narrative was so enormous that, in a way, it became a burden that I had to get through all this story and make sense of all these characters. I don’t want to do something like that again, and I need a new challenge. I suppose that’s why this poetic, heightened material has really appealed to me. I’ll try and do something new. It’s so important to do something new.

KC—Is it something that Nancy and Polly found, or something you found?

HE—It’s something I found. Mill on the Floss, Nancy and I both found together. Neither of us had read it, but we were both talking about what we could do next and her husband, David, said, “Why don’t you do a George Eliot?” My agent, almost the same week, said, “What about George Eliot?” So, we both had a look at George Eliot and hit on The Mill on the Floss, and both loved it immediately. That was great because we were both coming to it at the same time. War and Peace was my idea. It was a slightly mad idea that ended up on this list. We had this whole short list of possible projects; some of which were much nearer to the front of my head and would have been much easier to do. There was a Zola novel, and Nancy wanted us to do Great Expectations. We had this list of about eight possibilities, and the National had asked us to do a co-production and it just so happened that we went to this meeting with Richard Eyre and ran by him this list of possibilities. And as soon as we said War and Peace, which was last on the list, he said, “War and Peace, what a fantastic idea!” [laughs] We all came out feeling a bit kind of sick. I thought, “God, I can’t believe this.” And then, he was really keen, and so that’s what happened. I was happy to do it. Obviously, it was a great challenge. It’s brilliant getting to know the novel so well. It was fine. But this one [Gone to Earth, by Mary Webb] is my idea. I think Nancy feels good about it. She read it. It’s very hard, the first kind of three or four chapters are very heavy going and it puts
people off. It’s a very strange beast—so, so different from a lot of novels of those sort of standard Victorian. And it’s nice to be doing something which isn’t Victorian at all. We can move forward in time a little bit.

KC—You have that kind of relationship with Shared Expereince that you can suggest ideas, or they can suggest ideas to you?

HE—That’s right. It’s a brilliant relationship really. It’s very fruitful.

KC—Are you happy to stay with Shared Experience, as a kind of resident writer?

HE—In a way I am, although they can bring in lots of other writers. And I have had a break. I haven’t actually done anything for them for five years. But it feels like I have because of things being resurrected. I decided after War and Peace to call it a day for a little while and wait until I really found something that I wanted to do for them. I hope that I will work with them intermittently over the years, because I do think our styles suit each other so well. I think they’re great directors and they’re a good company. I have just written a play for the Royal Court, and I’ve finished a film script that I’ve worked on for a number of years. I’m about to do a musical; my first big musical. So, I do other work as well, but Shared Experience always feels a bit like coming home. I always feel very confident about what I’m doing with them. It’s nice to mix it around a bit.
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