



The Circular

July 2020

Welcome

Hello and welcome to the July 2020 issue of the Circular, the newsletter just for our Circle members. In this month's issue, we bring you news of our imminent re-opening and our fabulous new online summer school; a trip down memory lane to celebrate our 65th birthday earlier this month; and an appeal for information from a Circle member.

We're (almost) back!

Our big news this month is that, very soon, we'll be able to welcome you back into the building.

It's going to be a very steadily-paced and careful return, and we'll be monitoring every inch of the way and talking to you about how it all feels in terms of safety and comfort – although don't wait to be asked, we'd welcome your feedback and thoughts through any of our usual channels!

From Thursday 30 July until further notice, our great friends Martyn and Stephen from the award-winning Eat Me Café – named as a Local Gem in *The Good Food Guide* every year between 2015 and 2020 – will be operating from our first floor bar lounge for three days each week. Eat Me @ The SJT will open from 11am to 8pm on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

From Thursday 20 August, we'll be bringing screenings back into the cinema, starting with a programme of films and streamings including classic adaptations and hit West End musicals.



The key thing, of course, is live theatre – we suspect that, like us, you really want to see some! The good news is that our Artistic Director Paul Robinson is hard at work planning a programme of live theatre that can be presented in the Round safely and within current government guidelines as soon as is feasible.

What we can't currently tell you is when that will happen. The government has developed a five-stage plan to allow theatres to re-open – at time of writing, the industry as a whole is at stage three (which allows outdoor performances). We need to be at least at stage four, which allows indoor performances with a limited audience, before we can re-open.

Paul says: *"I'm confident that we've come up with some really innovative and entertaining ideas, and we hope to be able to start announcing those in the very near future, with a view to seeing live theatre on our stage again as soon as government guidelines allow."*

Both Eat Me @ The SJT and the Stephen Joseph Theatre will be re-opening in accordance with current legislation and guidelines: both have been awarded the VisitEngland 'We're Good To Go' industry standard and supporting mark, demonstrating that they are adhering to government and public health guidance, have carried out a COVID-19 risk assessment and checked they have the required processes in place.



Eat Me @ The SJT is by reservation only, using the Eat Me Facebook page or on 07445 475328. .

Summer School

We'd normally be working towards our annual Summer School for young people at this time of year, but we can't do that this year for obvious reasons. Instead, our OutReach Associate Director Cheryl Govan has worked up a really exciting online programme for all ages.

On 11, 13 and 15 August, we'll be running three different sets of online classes aimed at different age groups – and there'll be some very familiar faces in there.

Tuesday 11 August (9-13 years)

11am to noon: Movement/street dance – Marcquelle Ward (Jim Hawkins in last Christmas's *Treasure Island*)

1pm to 2pm: Puppetry – Andrew Kim (from Todmorden-based Thingumajig Theatre Company)

3pm to 4pm: Performance Poetry – Nadia Emam (recently awarded a placement with the Regional Theatre Young Director Scheme at the SJT where she curated the sell-out poetry evening *Still I Rise*, celebrating female poets)

5pm to 5.30pm: Streamed Performance Poetry Film 1 (curated by Nadia and filmed by award-winning filmmaker Brett Chapman)



Thursday 13 August (14-18 years)

11am to noon: Musical Theatre – Alex Weatherhill (a musical director, orchestrator and arranger who's appeared in the West End and toured the UK and Europe with musicals and light opera)

1pm to 2pm: How to do accents – Alix Dunmore (a vocal coach and actor who played Andy in last summer's *Stepping Out*)

3pm to 4pm: Performance Poetry – Nadia Emam

5pm to 5.30pm: Streamed Performance Poetry Film 2

Saturday 15 August (18+ years)

11am to noon: Conducting an orchestra, a beginner's guide – Shaun Matthew (Musical Director of the Scarborough Symphony Orchestra)

1 to 2pm: Deliver that Killer Speech – Frances Marshall (you'll remember Frances from *A Brief History of Women*, *Joking Apart* and *Season's Greetings*)

3pm to 4pm: Performance Poetry – Nadia Emam

5pm-5.30pm: Streamed Performance Poetry Film 3

The 5pm poetry performances will be available to anyone, whether you've booked on a class or not, via our website.

The online Summer School cost £18 per day for all three sessions. Individual sessions can be booked at a cost of £7 each.

To book, please visit: www.sjt.uk.com/event/1050/online_summer_school

When we're 65...

by Simon Murgatroyd

On 14 July, the Stephen Joseph Theatre celebrated – or would have celebrated had it not been for the unfortunate circumstances we all find ourselves in – its 65th birthday. I thought we'd take a trip back in time and reflect upon what it would have been like to attend the opening night of the Library Theatre on 14 July 1955.

To attend, you would either have been a member – or a friend of a member – of Scarborough Theatre Guild or have been specially invited by Stephen Joseph.

The Theatre Guild – which had played a vital role in establishing the theatre – was responsible for distributing the majority of tickets for the evening, which was promoted in a newsletter alongside an application form for 'invitation cards'.

Tickets were free but would normally have cost 5/- (approximately 25p or £6 adjusted for inflation) or 2/6 if you were under 18 (approximately 13p or £3 adjusted for inflation).

Of course, you'd probably have had no experience of theatre-in-the-round previously, given it was virtually unknown at this time in the UK and, anticipating doubters and nay-sayers, the Theatre Guild had provided a taste of what was to come: *"Theatre-in-the-round adds a flavour of excitement which should satisfy those who expect from the theatre something more than what is often termed 'mere entertainment'."* Not terribly informative, to be honest.

The performance would have started at 8pm ('You are particularly requested to be on time' stated the invitation card) and the invitation included the post-show opening of a theatre-in-the-round exhibition organised with the support of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

The Library Theatre was located on the first floor of Scarborough Library in the Concert Room – which still appears largely as it did back in 1955 – but which would have been more familiar at the time as the Harrison Room.

Upon entering the 'auditorium', what would you have seen? Stephen Joseph described the layout in his book, *Theatre in the Round*.

“The concert room was reasonably suitable for conversion into a theatre in the round; in plan nearly square, 40 ft X 50 ft approximately. Perhaps a bit on the small side. Ceiling height about 24 ft, with a good deal of complicated plaster work above a heavy cornice. The room was on the first floor and its main disadvantage was that of its three doors one was an emergency exit leading directly to an outside fire escape, and the other two were both in the same wall, 12 ft apart. Thus all the entrances would have to be made from one side of the acting area. Two adjacent rooms were to be made available to us; one for a dressing room (big enough to be simply partitioned off as two rooms) and the other for an exhibition and refreshment room. On the whole, a very good place in which to make experimental first steps.”

In contrast, Alan Ayckbourn – although he would not join the company for another two years – has slightly different recollections...

“It was a makeshift auditorium. Borrowed seats on rickety rostra in a small airless room of the public library. On hot evenings, senior citizens would be supported from the theatre gasping for fresh sea air. Small children would, when carried away by the action, occasionally slip through the gaps in the seating and require rescuing. The stage floor was parquet and treacherously polished; the walls covered in untouchable, light green flock wallpaper. All in all an unpromising venue to present – as we saw at the time – new work in new ways to new audiences.”

It wasn't an ideal theatre-in-the-round as the seating block on the side with the two entrances was very small and limited to just four rows with 36 seats, but – of course – no-one had anything to compare it with as theatre-in-the-round in 1955 was virtually non-existent outside of Scarborough.



The rest of the auditorium had five rows on rostra with a total seating capacity of 24 seats. The layout would not be dissimilar to what we see today. It would, however, have also been quite uncomfortable given the town was in the grip of a blistering heatwave at the time – apparently the hottest for five decades – and the Concert Room containing no air-conditioning or fans.

There was no numbering of the seats, so it was very much first-come, first-served as to your choice of seating. The opening night was well-attended, but for the next two weeks numbers would consistently dip well below 100 people. This almost led to the closure of the Library Theatre before it has even been established; what saved the company was, as many of you know from my talks, the heatwave breaking and the Scarborough weather returning to its default position of rain!

Programmes were free, something which Stephen Joseph had experienced whilst studying in North America and would be the norm at the Library Theatre during its first decade.

You'd also have been advised to use the somewhat limited facilities as there was no interval in the play (although the programme notes, very specifically, there would be a two-minute break

between the two acts!). Stephen was notoriously not fond of intervals, and this hit its eventual apex when the company performed a four-hour unbroken production of *Hamlet* whilst on tour in 1962.

The play – like all those in the inaugural season – was a new one: *Circle of Love* by Eleanor D Glaser, who Stephen had encountered during the playwriting classes he held in London. The combination of a new work and a female writer would have been extraordinarily rare in the UK at the time – even in London – so Scarborough audiences were, in a sense, pioneering for the time.

The British Drama League described the play in advance as ‘highly entertaining’ and a ‘romantic drama, with a great emotional theme’. A more balanced description can perhaps be ascertained from the reviewers who attended the first night, which included *The Guardian*, *The Northern Echo*, *The Yorkshire Post* and *The Stage*. Presumably *The Scarborough Evening News* also attended but no review is held in archive.

Circle of Love was described by *The Northern Echo* as ‘a moving play’ and by *The Yorkshire Evening Post* as ‘good theatre’. More in-depth commentary came from *The Stage* which noted: “This is a workmanlike play.... [Glaser] draws her story out too long and comes to a rather abrupt ending which lacks dramatic force.”

The Guardian was not a fan of theatre-in-the-round and felt it gave the ‘somewhat embarrassing feeling that we were eavesdropping on actuality’. This is ironic given that the sense of intimacy is now regarded as one of the great strengths of theatre-in-the-round.

The cast consisted of Kara Aldridge, Joan Cibber, Shirley Jacobs, Ralph Nossek, Morris Perry, John Sherlock and Helen Towers with Stephen Joseph directing. None of the actors had had any prior experience of acting in the round, although the reviews suggest they acquitted themselves well and many would return for the company’s second season.

Come the climax of the play, you might have had the luck of spotting a genuinely famous face attending the opening night as Stephen’s mother, the actress Hermione Gingold, had been invited. Famously, she enjoyed both the performance and the town – which she had never visited before – and was reported to have said: “*Oh, but it’s just like the Mediterranean... It’s perfectly wonderful. I think I shall stay a day or two.*”

Post-show, you would have had the opportunity to meet Stephen Joseph and the cast as Stephen was very keen on breaking down barriers between audience and actors: impromptu post-show discussions were frequent occurrences during the theatre’s formative years.

The theatre-in-the-round exhibition – which still survives in the archive at the SJT – would also have been of interest. Curated by Stephen and featuring many of his own photographs and drawings, it explained the history of theatre-in-the-round and its present state in theatres across Europe and North America.

And what would you have thought of this exciting new theatre venture? Of course, we have no idea what the vast majority of audiences thought other than that the inaugural season was successful enough to lead to a second. And a third. And so on. But we do have some reactions from the letters page to *The Scarborough Evening News*.

“*The mistake made by this young company is not their choice of new plays rather than old, nor young actors rather than stars. It is in their theatre. Not only is the Library a stern and forbidding edifice hidden in a side street, but it has no proper stage, and the seats are arranged like at a boxing ring. We are not used to this sort of thing.*”

While that letter writer obviously struggled with the concept of theatre-in-the-round, the next writer seemed to have a struggle with imagination – or perhaps the economics of theatre – and for him, at least, the play is obviously not the thing.

“When, as in the current production, I note from my theatre programme that the action of a play is to take place in living room, I expect to see a living room, with doors and windows that open and shut. If the social status of the residents is sufficiently high, wallpaper does not come amiss. Yet here we are presented with a miscellany of furniture and expected to use our imaginations! To enter a theatre and to be told to create the décor for ourselves is equivalent to entering a restaurant, being presented with a dish of raw vegetables, and being told to imagine the cooking.”

However, among the criticism there was some hope and in the case of one letter, a remarkable amount of prescience – arguably what is written can be applied to attitudes still found today. *“I am surprised by your correspondents have felt it necessary to criticise Theatre in the Round as they have. There is nothing wrong with the choice of plays, or of actors, or of theatre – and certainly not with the idea of Theatre in the Round (which has happily been accepted in every country in Europe, and in America). Indeed, outside Scarborough an extraordinarily (sic) amount of attention is being paid to this little theatre. It is being talked about in London, in Paris, and in New York. Scarborough alone seems to be unaware of the importance to the theatre world of what is happening at the Library Theatre.”*

There probably aren't that many people left today who attended that first night at the Library Theatre, but how lucky they were, even if they didn't realise that evening was history in the making.

If there are any readers who were there on that first night, we'd love to hear from you what it was like to be there at the start of this extraordinary theatre company which still continues 65 years later.

Simon Murgatroyd is Alan Ayckbourn's Archivist and happens to also celebrate his birthday on 14 July!

By George

The Circular can take us down some interesting roads. In the last issue, we ran a piece by Simon Murgatroyd about theatre ghosts and ours – or lack thereof – in particular.

Soon afterwards, we were contacted by Circle member Pat Riley. Pat is the author of a biography of Githa Sowerby, writer of *Rutherford & Son* – you may remember our production of it down at Westwood back in the 1990s, or, more recently, Northern Broadsides' visiting production.

As part of her research around Githa, Pat had read the book which Simon quoted in his piece, *Theatre Ghosts* by Roy Harley Lewis. She's interested to know if any Circle readers can help her with the following:

“On page 99 of Theatre Ghosts Roy refers to a story he says was told by theatre producer George R Foss, father of then veteran actor Alan Foss, who was apparently connected with a ghost legend of London's Old Vic theatre.

"I'd like to find out more about George R Foss because Githa is quoted in a newspaper article of 1912 as referring to 'my producer, Mr Foss' when interviewed about the overnight success of her debut play Rutherford & Son. I've never been able to find out anything about this elusive 'Mr Foss' but I think this George R Foss must be the one, as he died in 1927, so was working in the London theatres at the right time."

If anyone can help, please drop a line to Jeannie.swales@sjt.uk.com, and she'll forward to Pat.

Membership renewal

Thank you to all of our members who have continued to renew their memberships. Please be assured that your membership renewal has gone through on our system, but there will be a delay in getting your physical packs out to you. Once we are able to open up again we will be posting all packs out to members who have renewed during this period as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience at this time.

Keeping in touch

We're doing everything we can to keep in regular contact with all of our customers, especially Circle members and those who may not have access to the internet.

You should be receiving regular emails or mail-outs from us, keeping you up to date with all our news – if for any reason you're not, please do tell us!

And if you know anyone else who you think would like to hear from us, now's the ideal time for them to sign up to our mailing list here: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/maillinglist-signup>