

Circular April 2021

Not long now until the day we've all been waiting for, when we can open our doors again and this time, we very much hope, for good.

Here at the theatre, we're counting down the hours until 17 May, when we can welcome you back into the building. That first day will be fairly low key – our box office will be open for in-person bookings, and, of course, our brilliant friends at Eat Me Café will be back in business.

The following day, Tuesday 18 May, we'll be bringing our first show to you – *The Greatest Play in the History of the World...*, starring Julie Hesmondhalgh and written by her husband, Ian Kershaw.

This gorgeous show blew audiences away at the Edinburgh Festival in 2018, and we're delighted to be the first venue on the 2021 national tour. At time of writing, it's virtually sold out, but we're happy to take details for our waiting list.

A week later, on Tuesday 25 May, our cinema reopens with *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* – it seemed appropriate! With a peerless comedy cast including the immortal Terry-Thomas, Phil Silvers, Milton Berle, Spencer Tracy, Ethel Merman, The Three Stooges and - yes! – Buster Keaton, this joyous heist movie was nominated for six Oscars on its release in 1963, and kicks off a fortnight of movies that are Oscar-nominated this year: *Mank*, *Nomadland*, *Wolfwalkers* and *The Trial of the Chicago 7*.

Then in early June, we open a season of our own shows with the 85th show from our Director Emeritus, Alan Ayckbourn. *The Girl Next Door* is directed by the man himself, who says: "I was born in 1939, so my earliest memories are of a sort of lockdown: of crowding into Anderson shelters or subway stations; of sleeping in deckchairs or on my mother's lap. Things have come full circle for me."

"*The Girl Next Door* is an affirmation of love across the generations - I hope it's positive and hopeful for those today crawling out of their metaphorical Anderson shelters blinking into the light."

For more information on *The Girl Next Door*, and on our later shows – *Home, I'm Darling*; *The Offing*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* – and much more, please visit: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/whatson>

Old friends and new



Our two casts for Alan Ayckbourn's *The Girl Next Door*

Rehearsals start on Tuesday (4 May) for Alan Ayckbourn's 85th play, *The Girl Next Door*, and we're looking forward to welcoming some old friends and some new ones.

In a move designed to keep the show running if any of the company exhibit symptoms of Covid-19, the production will feature two separate casts.

The bulk of the shows will be performed by a cast of familiar faces: **Bill Champion**, **Alexandra Mathie** and **Naomi Petersen** will be joined by SJT newcomer **Linford Johnson**; the four will make up a bubble with their stage management team. But should any of that bubble show symptoms, the entire group will have to self-isolate – and a second bubble comprising four SJT first-timers – **Georgia Burnell**, **Michael Hobbs**, **Tayla Kovacevic-Ebong**, **Eliza McClelland** and a second stage management team – will be ready to step in. They will also perform the show on a number of dates throughout the run.

The SJT's Artistic Director, Paul Robinson, says: "The safety of our audiences, staff and visiting freelancers, including the actors, is paramount."

“For this first show of 2021, which opens before the final step of the government’s roadmap on 21 June, we thought it was important to have a second team on hand in case of any problems.”

In *The Girl Next Door*, Bill Champion plays veteran actors Rob Hathaway, stuck at home during the summer of 2020 with only his sensible older sister for company. Rob has little to do but relive his glory days when, as the star of the nation’s favourite TV period drama *National Fire Service*, he ruled the roost as George ‘Tiger’ Jennings: wartime hero, and living legend among firefighters.

Then one day Rob spots a stranger hanging out the washing in the adjoining garden. But the neighbours haven’t been around for months. So who is the mysterious girl next door? And why is she wearing 1940s clothing?

Written and directed by Alan Ayckbourn, assisted by the SJT’s Associate Director (Carne Trust) Chelsey Gillard, *The Girl Next Door* is designed by Kevin Jenkins with lighting design by Jason Taylor. Casting is by Sarah Hughes CDG.

The Girl Next Door can be seen in the Round at the SJT from Friday 4 June to Saturday 3 July. Tickets, priced from £10, are available from the box office on 01723 370541 and online at www.sjt.uk.com.



Do you know about our Access Requirement Register?

In 2019, we set up a free Access Requirement Register (ARR) in order to improve our service to those with access needs. The information provided for the Register will help us to find the best available seats for you quickly and easily when booking through the Box Office or online, when logged into your account.

To join the ARR, please [fill out this online form](#) with your details. If you can’t access the link for whatever reason, you can call the Box Office to request a form to be sent to your address by post.

You might also need to provide evidence, depending on your access needs. All this is explained in our [Access Requirements Information Sheet](#).

Booking online: Once you’ve joined our ARR, you will be eligible to book access seats online. This is particularly beneficial for wheelchair users, as up to now, they haven’t been able to book the access spaces online.

All you’ll need to do is log into your account and book for a show as normal, through the ‘BUY NOW’ button. You will notice a  and a  symbol which are access seats that you can now select. Then just follow the rest of the booking process to complete your order. Please note that the discounts will not be taken off until you get to the Checkout page. If you’re on our ARR and don’t require a wheelchair space, you can book any available seat and your discounts will be applied on the Checkout page.

If you’re having any difficulty with booking, please let us know by [email](#) or by calling our Box Office on 01723 370541.

Access to the building: As it's been a while since we've all been in the building, we thought we'd help refresh your memory of access into and around the building. All that information about access and specific access performances can be found on our website. If you do have any further queries, don't hesitate to contact us on 01723 370541 or email us.

On-air and online treats from our youth theatre groups



15+yrs Rounders in Twenty Three Twenty One

Our wonderful youth theatre groups have continued to meet via Zoom throughout lockdown, and they've come up with a couple of real treats.

Two of our groups devised and performed radio plays, which were broadcast by our good friends at BBC Radio York. You can hear them here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p09cc1ch> until mid May. There are interviews with director Cheryl Govan and some of the young people involved throughout the whole hour, and you can find the plays themselves, *You've Been Schooled* and *The Conference of Inspirational Teens*, at around 20 minutes and 44 minutes in.

Listen out, too, for guest appearances from two of our favourite Radio York presenters!

A third group, meanwhile, has put together a 'documentary' called *Twenty Three Twenty One*. Set in, you've guessed it, the year 2321, it looks at 'historical' footage from primitive social media like Twitter, from the years 2020-2110 (when the last survivor of the Great Pandemic was uploaded to the after-life).

Recorded live on Zoom, this collection of memories, sketches, real life accounts, poems and songs is about what it was like to be a teenager in 2020/21. It contains many laughs and a little strong language.

You can find it now on our YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_sGw-0RxMM

A Trip To Scarborough



Stephen Joseph directing at the Library Theatre © Scarborough Theatre Trust

As we continue our celebration of the centennial of Stephen Joseph's birth, we turn to his connection to Scarborough and the creation of the Library Theatre.

As we saw last month, Stephen had never even visited Scarborough. Yet he became inextricably connected with the town through this theatre and his protégé, Alan Ayckbourn.

So why and how did he end up setting up a revolutionary new theatre in a seaside resort on the Yorkshire coast?

When Stephen returned from North America in 1952 intent on setting up a theatre-in-the-round company, one imagines Scarborough did not feature high in his list of preferred locations. Indeed, his eyes were set firmly on London as he sought somewhere he believed would support and have an audience for a new company expounding new ideas and new plays.

There was one significant issue: Stephen had no money to invest, nor many prospective investors. Despite apparently looking at several hundred London venues, Stephen found them all either unaffordable or inadequate.

Depressed, he put his plans on the back burner and returned to teaching. This led to a fortuitous encounter in Yorkshire with an education officer, John Wood, and a possible solution.

"It was on a weekend course in acting at Wrea Head that he challenged me to put theatre-in-the-round to the test of professional performance to the public. I told him of the difficulties in finding a suitable hall, in London. So he took me to the concert room in the Central Library at Scarborough."

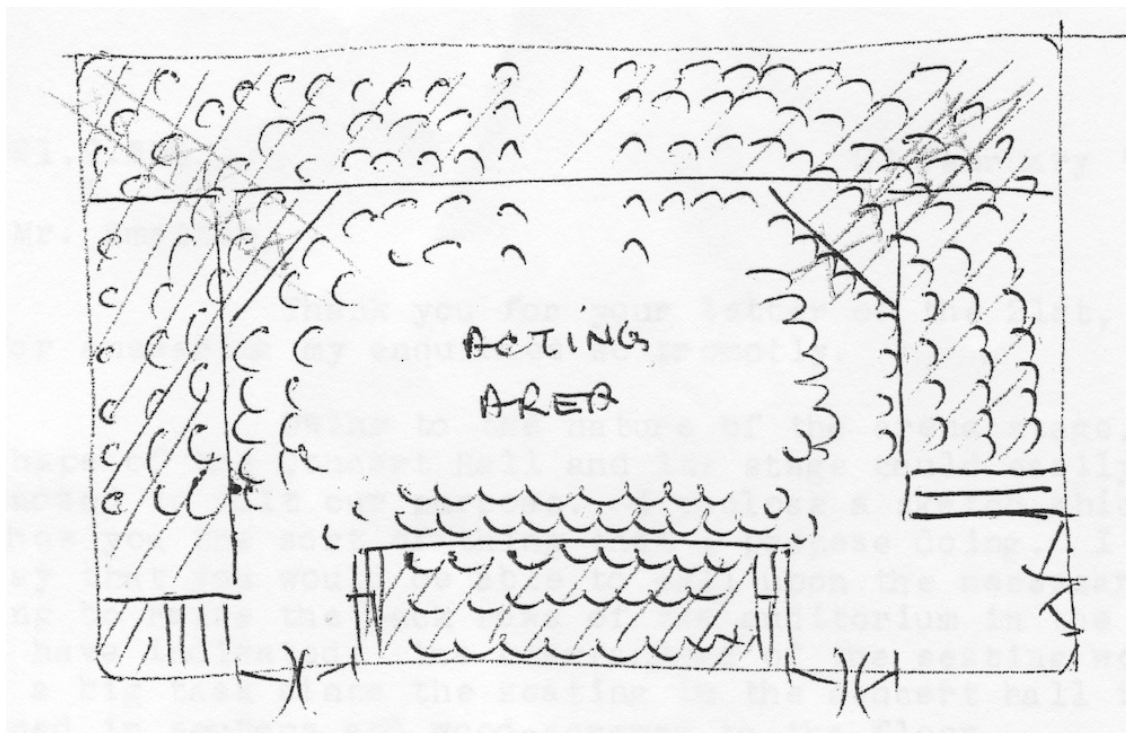
This led to Stephen writing to the Chief Librarian, William Smettem, on 17 February 1955 with a proposal.

"I now feel that the theatre is badly in need of an organisation concerned with putting on new plays... I hope shortly to form a company to carry out this project. It is our particular wish to present the plays arena style – a stage is not required: this is a particularly exciting production technique suited to the plays and likely to be of interest to people used to the powerful intimacy of the cinema. The company will be a non-profit distributing one, and it is being formed in consultation with the Arts Council who may give their support – moral or financial! In particular, the sort of place required for the enterprise would be the Harrison Room; if this were available from mid July to early September, a festival of new plays might be a good holiday attraction besides a real service to the theatre."

Mr Smettem replied to Stephen four days later, tentatively welcoming the proposal for the use of the Concert Room (formerly the Harrison Room) and providing a detailed description of the venue, noting:

"The Concert Room has certainly got an intimate atmosphere which no doubt suit your purpose, how strongly such a festival would attract the holiday crowds is a matter which it is difficult to say, but given a good send off and properly publicised I think it would be successful."

The cost of hiring the room was given as £9 per day and £1 per day for an adjoining smaller room. Stephen quickly replied offering a fuller explanation of his plans alongside an illustration of how it would be 'no big task' to convert the room – the first image we have of the proposed theatre-in-the-round.

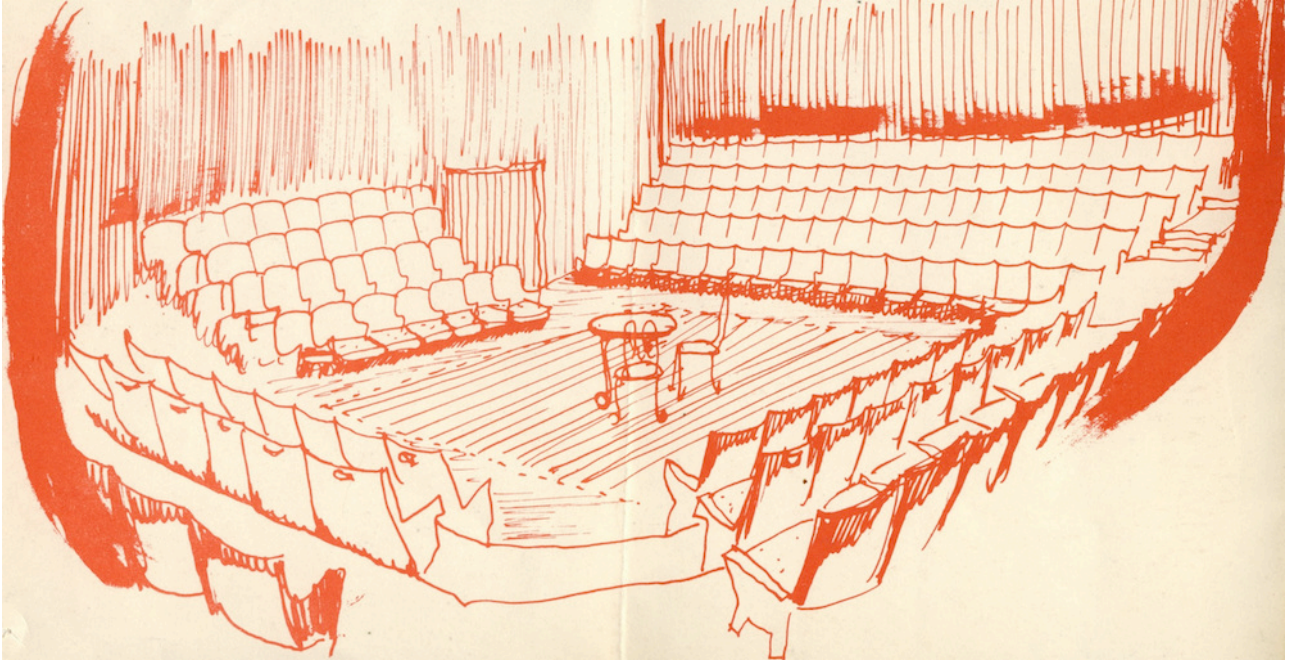


*Stephen's sketch of how he imagined the Library Theatre would look like, held in the archive by Scarborough Library
© Scarborough Theatre Trust*

Stephen's main concern was cost – optimistically he could not afford more than £20 a week for an eight-week season. At this point, Stephen's financial assets were £500 his

father had given him in lieu of receiving anything in his will and a share scheme for investors – largely friends and family – at £50 a share.

On 12 March, Stephen met Mr Smettem for the first time and visited the Concert Room to discuss costs and issues relating to setting up the theatre – notably the raising of the seats and the fact the Library only had a license for singing and dancing!



A sketch by Stephen Joseph of the Library Theatre © Scarborough Theatre Trust



Compared to the Round auditorium now at Westborough © James Drawneek

Fortunately, these were quickly resolved and on 16 April, the pair met again to finalise season dates, the possibility of refreshments as well as organising booking and publicity.

Having formed a company, Studio Theatre Ltd. earlier in the year, Stephen pulled together an acting company largely drawn from Central School where he still taught: Ralph Nossek, Helen Towers, Morris Perry, Karen Aldridge, Joan Cibber, John Sherlock and Shirley Jacobs. He also picked four new plays by writers he had worked with on his evening playwriting courses: David Campton, Ruth Dixon, Eleanor D Glaser and Joan Winch.

The new endeavour was publicly announced on 28 April 1955 in the Scarborough Evening News.

"A kind of play production new to the town is coming to Scarborough this summer – 'theatre in the round'. During an eight-week season the Studio Theatre Company will present four plays on a stage in the centre of the audience..."

"The centre stage is a practical innovation and not a stunt, he [Stephen Joseph] said... 'What about seeing the front row of the audience behind the stage?' 'You shouldn't notice them,' said Mr. Joseph. 'Just like a football match, all your attention should be concentrated on the players. If we cannot manage that, we shall know we have failed'."

This story was carried in most major Yorkshire newspapers, *The Stage* and *Plays And Players* with Stephen promoting not just the theatre but also explaining the concept of theatre-in-the-round to the public, frequently making comparisons to boxing rings.

On 30 April, Stephen confirmed the company would arrive in Scarborough for technical rehearsals on 11 July with daily rehearsals from 10am to 5pm for the rest of the season's productions. The season would begin on Thursday 14 July and end on Saturday 10 September with daily performances – except Sundays – at 8pm, and Wednesday matinees at 2.30pm. This also marked the first time Stephen referred to it as the Library Theatre.

Stephen also appointed Ken Boden as manager, who brought with him a retinue of enthusiastic volunteers drawn from the Scarborough amateur dramatic scene; something Stephen was keen to promote.



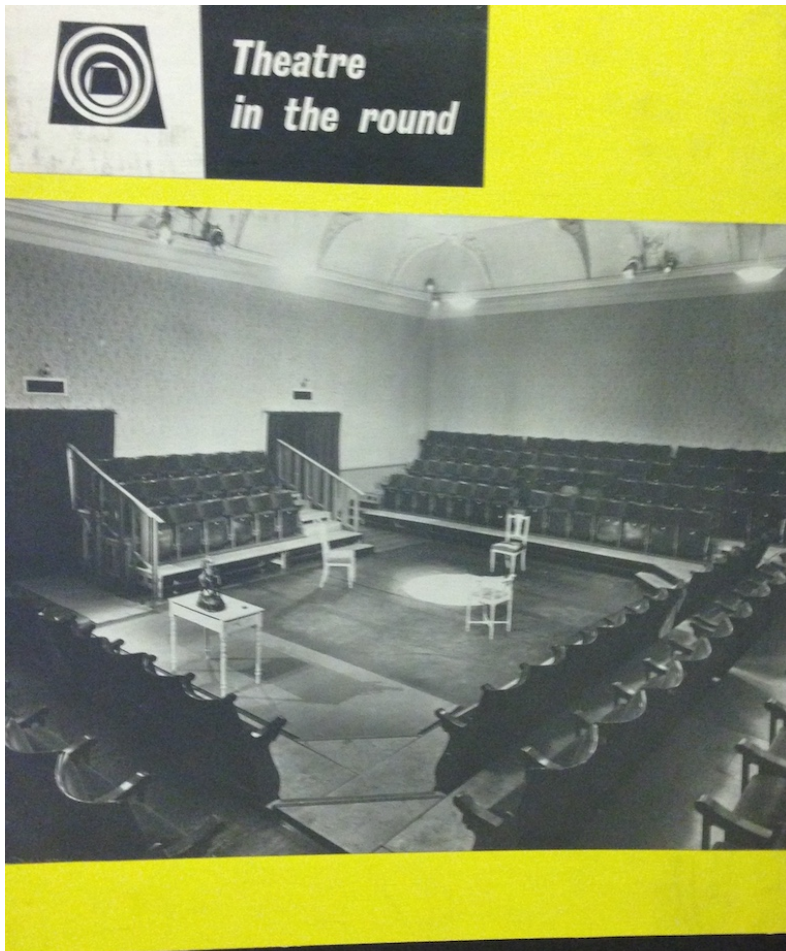
Ken Boden with several of the front of house staff © Scarborough Theatre Trust

“Front of house help was recruited from volunteers, and prop-hunting, costume-finding and the distribution of publicity material were all aided by voluntary help.”

Everything was managed on a shoestring budget but Stephen saw this as a positive. With theatre-in-the-round, there was no need for expensive props – give the right actor the right material and the right direction and nothing more was needed.

A stage license was granted on 11 June and with seating in place, the theatre was completed, as Stephen describes.

“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... The room was on the first floor and its main disadvantage was that of its three doors one was



A image from Stephen Joseph's theatre-in-the-round exhibition showing the Library Theatre © Scarborough Theatre Trust

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.”

The rent had been negotiated down to £10 a week and the only major expense was the actors. While Stephen was frugal elsewhere, he did not skimp on the actors. During the season, the acting company was paid £10 a week despite the Equity minimum rate being £7.

Advertising followed soon after announcing ‘a new form of entertainment’ consisting of a

season of four new plays with all seats priced at 5/- (under 18s 2/6). The programme changed every Thursday, allowing holidaymakers staying for a week to see two different productions.

The first play of the season was *Circle Of Love*, 'a romantic tale' by Eleanor D Glaser. The press made much of the fact she was a housewife writing plays, conveniently overlooking she was a qualified teacher who worked with boys with special needs, an experience which the play drew on.

The opening night was attended by an invited audience and by newspaper critics. There was also a famous guest present: the actress Hermione Gingold, Stephen's mother. She was reported as saying Scarborough was 'just like the Mediterranean.... It's perfectly wonderful. I think I shall stay a day or two.'

The reviews were largely complimentary, despite most critics still struggling with the conventions of the theatre form and treating it as little more than a fad.

The season also featured a number of innovations for British venues, which Stephen brought back from America. All tickets were the same price and were unnumbered, programmes were free and refreshments were served at close to cost price. Post-show discussions were also common with Stephen and the actors discussing the evening's production with the audience.

One short-lived element was the use of a prompt for the actors which the actors wanted, but which Stephen felt 'killed some of the magic'.

And so, in the most unlikely of places, a revolutionary new theatre project was launched which would achieve a place in British theatre history unimagined by Stephen Joseph.

Simon Murgatroyd is Alan Ayckbourn's Archivist and the Administrator of his official website www.alanayckbourn.net.