

Circular March 2021

It's the end of March, and we're that little bit closer to our re-opening on 17 May. But before then, of course, we have Easter to celebrate – we hope you all have an egg-cellent (sorry, but it had to be done!) time.

This latest issue of the Circular – the newsletter exclusively for our most valued supporters, you, our Circle members – will bring you up to speed on what's happening behind our currently closed doors...

Please Mr Postman

We know that you're all straining at the leash to find out what we have planned for 2021, but we need to ask you to be patient for just the tiniest while longer.

We'll be announcing our season from June through to Christmas very soon after Easter, and you'll be among the first to know – just keep an eye on your email inbox, or doormat if you receive the Circular by post. We promise it'll be worth the wait!

Greatest Play



Julie Hesmondhaigh, The Greatest Play in the History of the World © Sid Scott

As you know, we re-open our doors on Monday 17 May – and present our first live show a day later! We have to be honest: it wasn't originally planned that way. We were supposed to be the third venue on the new national tour of *The Greatest Play in the History of the World...*, but the roadmap put paid to that, and now we're the first.

We can't wait to see this show, starring Julie Hesmondhalgh, who many of you will remember as Hayley Cropper in *Coronation Street*, and written by her husband, Ian Kershaw. And it seems you feel the same – it's selling fast! It may well be sold out by the time you read this, so if you've missed out and want to add your name to the waiting list, do drop us a line at box.office@sjt.uk.com (don't forget to tell us which date and how many seats you want) and we'll get back to you as soon as possible if anything comes free.

Film fix

If you're missing our cinema, watch out for news on films from 25 May – we're opening it a week later than the rest of the building just to give ourselves time to iron out any glitches that might arise.

Eat Me @ The SJT



©Eat Me Café & Social

We're delighted that Eat Me Café will be continuing their successful residency in our first floor bar lounge until at least September.

Eat Me @ The SJT will re-open on Monday 17 May, from 10am Mondays to Saturdays, with last orders at 6.30pm on Mondays to Wednesdays, and at 7.30pm on Thursdays to Saturdays.

Eat Me owners Martyn Hyde and Stephen Dinardo say: "We have a long-standing and close friendship with the SJT, and they're just across the road: their spacious first-floor bar lounge has proved to be a perfect space for us recently.

“Keep an eye out for special deals linked with cinema and theatre productions at the SJT, and follow our social media for exclusives!”

Stephen Joseph: a celebration

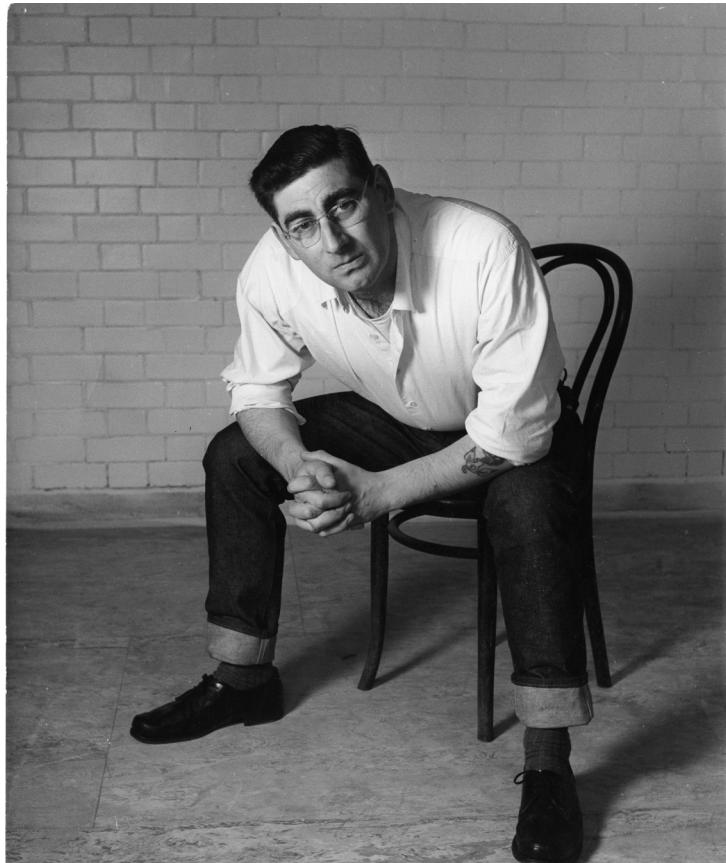
By Simon Murgatroyd

2021 marks the centenary of the birth of Stephen Joseph, founder of the theatre and company which bear his name today. Yet I’m frequently asked:

Who was Stephen Joseph and why is he significant to this theatre and Scarborough?

Stephen was an unsung hero of British theatre in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Responsible for pioneering new theatre forms in this country, he was an unwavering advocate of new writing and writers. Those who knew him remember an extraordinarily passionate, knowledgeable and inspirational figure. His protégé Alan Ayckbourn said in 2017:

“He was just extraordinary. I’m still carrying some of the things he said to me and I’m passing them on as if they were mine!”



The founder of the company and theatre: Stephen Joseph
© Scarborough Theatre Trust

Stephen was born in Marylebone, London, on 13 June 1921, to actress Hermione Gingold and publisher Michael Joseph. At 16, he became the youngest person to be accepted at the Central School of Speech and Drama, graduating with a First Class Certificate. After serving with distinction in the Royal Navy during World War II, he returned to his studies, gaining an MA in English Literature at Cambridge before launching into a professional career in theatre in 1948, initially at Lowestoft and then Frinton. Whilst at the latter he had an experience which would change his life.



The Library Theatre, Scarborough, circa 1955 © Scarborough Theatre Trust

He experienced theatre-in-the-round – practically unknown in the UK at the time – and was so excited by it, he wrote he had 'a bee beginning to buzz at the back of my mind'.

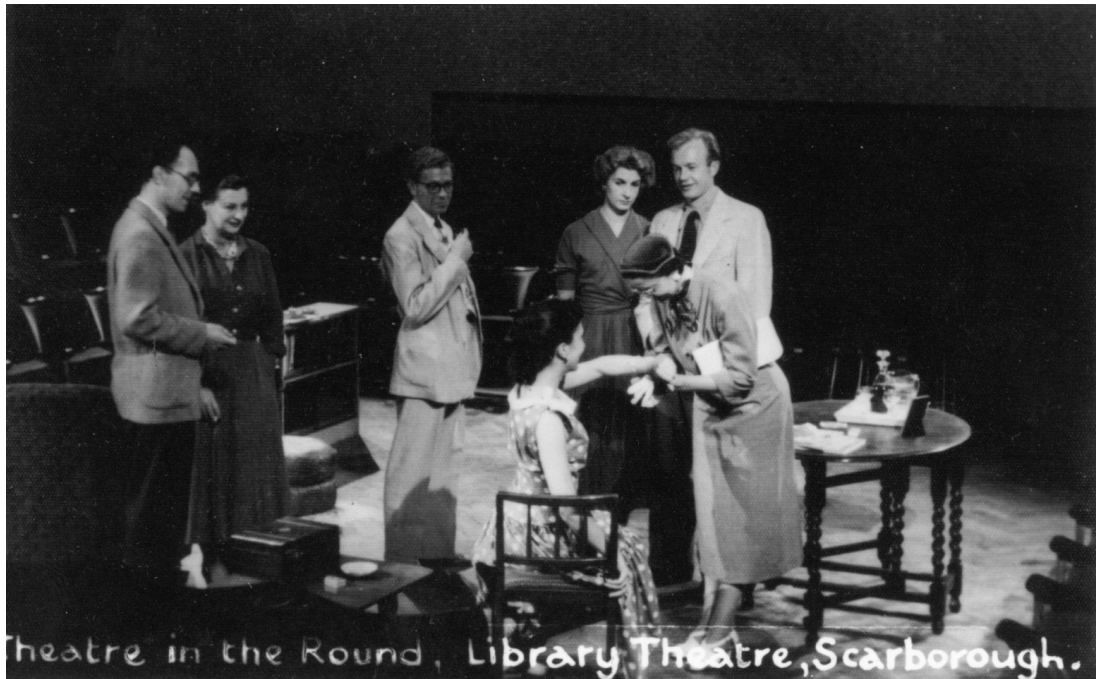
Stephen began tutoring at Central School in 1949, before visiting North America in 1951 to study at the University of Iowa,

majoring in playwriting. It was a turning point: he discovered a world away from the British theatre experience. He visited theatre-in-the-round and adaptable theatre venues and was so inspired, he returned home determined in some way to bring these 'new' theatre forms to the UK.

His passion for encouraging playwriting was also gathering pace. At a time and place which neither embraced new theatrical ideas nor was particularly open to encouraging new playwrights, Stephen's interests merged into a desire to open a theatre-in-the-round based around new writing.

Which leads us to 1955 and arguably the defining point of his career. On 14 July, he launched the UK's first professional theatre-in-the-round company: the Library Theatre in Scarborough. Over the next dozen years, he became inextricably linked with this theatre and town alongside many other extraordinary achievements.

During an exhausting period of activity, not only did Stephen successfully launch the Library Theatre, he also founded the Victoria Theatre (1962) – the UK's first professional theatre-in-the-round venue in Stoke-on-Trent. A talented theatre designer, he was a founding member of both the Association of British Theatre Technicians in 1961 and the Society of Theatre Consultants in 1964. He was appointed the first fellow of the Department of Drama at the University of Manchester and ran its first postgraduate diploma in drama in 1963 before becoming instrumental in creating the University's Department of Drama. He wrote four books about theatre design and new theatre forms and was a prolific writer of articles for theatre journals.



*A scene from the inaugural play at the Library Theatre, Circle of Love. A new play by Eleanor D. Glaser.
© Scarborough Theatre Trust*

He was also a provocateur, who regularly railed against the theatrical establishment in an almost desperate desire to have his ideas heard. He was a man ahead of his time. Many of the concepts he championed are conventional now, but he was seen as a provocative and disruptive fringe figure in his day. He was constantly looking forward, embracing new ideas and interests: many have noted that no sooner had he started something than he would focus on something else that had caught his imagination.

Stephen died of cancer at just 46 on Thursday 5 October 1967 at his home in Scarborough. It was a short life for such an energetic and brilliant figure. Who knows how he would have been remembered if he'd lived longer and seen his ideas and achievements accepted and recognised?

Why is Stephen significant to Scarborough?

Theatre-in-the-round: Stephen made a pioneering decision in 1955 to found the UK's first professional theatre-in-the-round company in the most unconventional place – Scarborough! It attracted national media attention: theatre-in-the-round was a largely forgotten form of staging, regarded by many as a novel new fad.

Stephen didn't believe this. He thought theatre had become staid and predictable, confined to the proscenium arch and threatened by the advent of television. He believed new theatre forms, such as theatre-in-the-round, were exciting and immediate and could attract people back to the theatre and draw in younger audiences.

We mustn't forget that modern professional theatre-in-the-round in the UK essentially begins in Scarborough in 1955; this town broke the mould thanks to Stephen, and many of the most important in-the-round venues which followed can be directly traced back to him and his work here.

Playwriting: Theatre-in-the-round was not the only pioneering decision Stephen made in 1955. Equally important was founding a new company predicated on new writing at a time when there was little interest in or support for it. He passionately believed in encouraging new writing and that it was essential to develop new writers. This is one of the reasons he championed theatre-in-the-round: it provided a cost-effective means of producing new work with less financial risk than was traditionally accepted.



An audience watching David Campton's *Dragons Are Dangerous* during 1955 © Scarborough Theatre Trust

In a historical context, it was a revolutionary idea. It's generally accepted that the first company dedicated to producing new work was the English Stage Company when it opened the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1956 and under the management of George Devine. Look at the year – 1956. A year after Stephen Joseph had founded a company devoted to new writing whose inaugural year consisted entirely of new work.

The Library Theatre may not have had its equivalent of *Look Back In Anger* during its first year, but that's to ignore the point that Stephen essentially created in Scarborough the first professional new writing company a year earlier than the Royal Court.

Playwrights: Stephen was well ahead of the game with regard to the writers he encouraged. He advocated – perhaps slightly misguidedly – that anyone had the potential to write and applied that principle to his company. In the first five years, he showcased male and female writers aged from 20 to 80! No other company in the UK could say that at the time. Its early years demonstrated an uncommon and daring willingness to employ female writers: three of the four plays in 1955 were written by women and from 1955 to 1958, of 18 new plays staged, eight were by women.

And the Library Theatre did produce significant new writers in its formative years. Alan Ayckbourn wrote his first play in 1959; David Campton was writing regularly from the first year. And we mustn't forget Harold Pinter. After his first play, *The Birthday Party*, spectacularly bombed in the West End, it was Stephen and his Scarborough company which produced the second professional production – for which Pinter made his professional directing debut – reaffirming both the quality of the play and, as Pinter himself noted, his own faith in his abilities as a playwright.

Stephen founded a company which more than 60 years later still champions new writing, producing almost 400 new plays by more than 100 playwrights. In the history of 20th century theatre, Scarborough can stand proudly as a leading light in nurturing new writing talent.

The theatre audience: Stephen was a natural teacher who enjoyed passing on his experience, passions and knowledge to as wide a circle as possible. He believed people – company or audience – should understand as much about theatre as possible. Performances were frequently followed by impromptu post-show discussions with the company, and he organised exhibitions in order to increase knowledge and enthusiasm for theatre.

This can't be underestimated: he was creating a theatre-literate audience which was discussing and experiencing a form that was a mystery to the majority of theatre-goers at the time. He developed an audience willing to embrace both new writing and established works; as Alan Ayckbourn noted during the '80s, Scarborough audiences were more theatre-literate and willing to take risks with new work than most other places he visited.

I'd also argue that the fact this theatre still survives and thrives despite the many existential crises it has faced over the decades is due in no small part to this loyalty from its audience and supporters. Without this, the SJT would arguably have ceased to exist decades ago.



Stephen Joseph & Alan Ayckbourn circa 1957 © Scarborough Theatre Trust

Alan Ayckbourn: I have to say this, don't I? But let's be clear, without Stephen not only would Scarborough and the SJT not be the home of one of the UK's most successful living playwrights, there probably wouldn't be a playwright called Alan Ayckbourn. Or at least not as we know him.

Alan set out to be an actor in 1955 and his initial stint in Scarborough from 1957 to 1962 is dominated by his acting. It was Stephen who encouraged him to write – Alan saw it initially as a means to showcase his own acting abilities – and then to continue writing, despite the odd flop early in his career. He then encouraged Alan to direct: by 1965, Alan had given up acting to concentrate on what we know him for today – writing and directing.

Stephen allowed Alan to learn and, more importantly, to fail and learn from failure; an opportunity he may not have had elsewhere. If Alan hadn't joined the Library Theatre, it's unlikely he'd have been encouraged to write and, even if he had, he wouldn't have developed in the same way and, arguably, never reached the same degree of fame.

Because Stephen died young and Alan felt a responsibility to this theatre and to Stephen's legacy, he took on the reins of this company. But this also defined him – he was commissioning and directing himself. Can anyone argue that he would have had the opportunity anywhere else to be so experimental and prolific as a writer were he not in that position? Certainly many of his works would never

have been commissioned if Alan had not been in the position to produce them himself!

Stephen and Scarborough are inarguably crucial elements which allowed Alan's talents to flourish and led him to become a theatrical powerhouse.

I feel strongly that Stephen Joseph is enormously significant to this theatre and to this town. He created something which has grown far beyond anything he imagined, whilst still staying true to his original principles.

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