

# Charles Marowitz in London: Twenty-Five Years Hard

Charles Marowitz, who died on 2 May this year, arrived in England from his native New York in 1956, on a scholarship earned for service in Korea. He immediately found in Unity Theatre a venue for his first London production, and in the following year opened his own theatre – an attic in the headquarters of the British Drama League known as In-Stage. In 1981, after the closure of his last and longest London base, the Open Space Theatre in Tottenham Court Road, he left, disillusioned with his adopted country, to settle in California, creating companies in Los Angeles and in his new home of Malibu. But during the momentous decade of the sixties it was British theatre that Marowitz helped to reshape – not least in developing London's still flourishing 'fringe'. In this feature, *NTQ* co-editor Simon Trussler celebrates not only Marowitz's directing career, on which many obituarists have written, but also – through personal recollections of the man in those early years – the many other 'hats' he wore: as theatre critic, editor, playwright, and cultural entrepreneur. Marowitz's long-term professional partner, Thelma Holt, shares her own memories of the twelve years when together they formed and ran the Open Space. Marowitz contributed to the old *TQ* and to *New Theatre Quarterly*, but here we include some of the articles he wrote in later life for the online *Swans Commentary*, to which we are most grateful for permission to reprint. All are from 2012, when Parkinson's disease was tightening its hold, and so are among the very last pieces he wrote.

*Key terms:* In-Stage, *Encore* magazine, Theatre of Cruelty, Open Space Theatre.

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Simon Trussler

## Marowitz in the Sixties

MY FIRST, VICARIOUS, acquaintance with Charles Marowitz was at the top of a flight of stairs leading to an attic space in the old British Drama League premises in Fitzroy Square. Charles had somehow sweet-talked the management into letting him create there a tiny studio theatre called In-Stage, where as an undergraduate I went to see *The Trigon*, a play by James Broom-Lynne which he had directed. I don't think there was a charge for admission, but a begging bowl was rattled at the foot of the stairs as we departed.

That was 1962, and I remember nothing of the play, but the idea of using such a space and attracting an audience (largely of *New Statesman* readers, since there was no money for wider advertising) impressed and excited me. I had just been to my first Edinburgh Festival, and wondered why a 'fringe' such as flourished for a few weeks in Edinburgh

did not exist in London all year round. And it was largely thanks to the initiatives of Charles and two other American expats – Jim Haynes and Ed Berman – that London did begin to grow its fringe a few years later. Jim and Ed are happily still active, but in May this year Charles, at the age of eighty-two, lost a long struggle against Parkinson's disease.

He had arrived on these shores in 1956 – aptly the year of *Look Back in Anger* – as the beneficiary of a grant for veterans who had served in Korea. This enabled him to embark on a course at the London Academy of Dramatic Art – for which he was, of course, entirely unsuited. Somehow he scratched a living when the grant ran out – among other things teaching at Unity Theatre – but his autobiography, *Burnt Bridges* (Hodder, 1990), is elliptic about his rise to greater fame – or in some cases notoriety, as at the Edinburgh Festival of 1963, when John Calder assembled the great and the good for an 'international drama conference' in the McEwan Hall.

Assuming it would merely comprise the usual talking heads, and with an abundance of real plays to choose from even then, I did not attend. Later I wished I had, at least on

the third day, when the rather po-faced proceedings were interrupted by a pioneering 'happening', scored by a team which included Allan Kaprow and Ken Dewey. In this, a mock-solemn lecture by Charles (urging the need for a 'definitive interpretation' of *Waiting for Godot*) was disrupted by, among others, Charles Lewsen as a drunken heckler and Carroll Baker (she of the *Baby Doll* movie) clambering with leopard-like intensity over the audience towards the podium, while a nude model was pushed on a trolley to and fro across the gallery, accompanied by bag-pipes. (Only her top half was visible, and since she herself stayed immobile no law was broken, but the wrath of the wee-free city fathers descended on the organizers.)

In the following year Peter Roberts asked me to compile a feature for *Plays and Players* on the RSC's upcoming experimental *Theatre of Cruelty* season, to be directed by Peter Brook with Charles as his assistant. Fortunately, as a tyro journalist I did not realize quite how presumptuous it was to be interrogating the director still regarded as the *enfant terrible* of British theatre on his understanding of Antonin Artaud, about whom I knew next to nothing – and not much more after plodding my way through the Grove Press edition of the manifestos.

Clutching a borrowed tape-recorder, I met Brook after the day's rehearsals at the recently opened LAMDA adaptable theatre (now the MacOwan) where the experiment-in-progress was being conducted and eventually staged. (It was Charles who recruited Glenda Jackson, then in the backwaters of provincial rep, to the company. She was soon to appear stoically nude in a zinc bath in a sketch which conflated Christine Keeler and Jackie Kennedy. Don't ask.)

Brook seemed more concerned to parry my questions than answer them, and his few remarks overlaid Artaud's opacity with his own. He eventually, and I suspect with relief, handed me over to Charles, who was far more articulate and helpful, and whose answers fleshed out the substance of my *Plays and Players* feature.

Charles was a fellow contributor to that magazine, and also wrote theatre reviews

for the *New York Times* and *The Village Voice*. Throughout his life he was as incisive a critic and commentator on theatre as he was active in creating its product, and some of his reviews from this period are collected in *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic* (Methuen, 1973). He was also one of the editors of *Encore* magazine, a bi-monthly which was the brainchild of Clive Goodwin, by this time being run from a cluttered office above an oriental bookshop near the British Museum, under the management of a charitable impresario called Owen Hale. Tom Milne, Michael Kustow, and Charles were Clive's co-editors.

In 1965 Clive resigned to care for his wife, the pioneering pop artist Pauline Boty, who was pregnant but had been diagnosed with cancer (she had less than a year to live). So an advertisement appeared in *Encore* for a new co-editor, and I of course applied. And got the job. I was vetted and approved by Owen, Mike, and Tom, but Charles was away somewhere. He had, understandably, forgotten his interlocutor of the previous year, and Owen showed me his reply when told by mail of his new colleague: 'Who is this Simon Trussler? Vanessa Redgrave in drag?' I took this as a veiled compliment, but I later learned that Charles took a dim view of Vanessa's acting abilities as of her on-the-sleeve politics.

However, we got on amicably, although the magazine survived for only a few more issues, when Owen's coffers ran dry. It had served honourably and influentially as the 'voice of vital theatre', as it proclaimed itself on its masthead, for while British theatre was gaining in vitality it had need of such a voice. We used some of the leftover material in a special issue of *The Drama Review* (XI, No. 2, 1966) on the 'New English Drama' which Charles guest-edited. Then Geoffrey Strachan, drama editor at Methuen, asked Charles if he would compile a book of interviews and case studies on recent drama, and Charles asked me if I would like to collaborate. It would be my first real book between hard covers: so yes, please.

We met with Geoffrey in the café basement of that most eccentric of bookshops, Better Books in the Charing Cross Road, then managed by Tony Godwin, and made plans for

what became *Theatre at Work* (Methuen, 1967). It was fun to put together, despite the many hours spent typing up interviews on my old steam typewriter when I should have been churning out chapters of a PhD.

Included, besides those interviews, was Charles's 'Lear Log', a commentary on his earlier work with Brook on the memorable Brook–Scofield production. In 1966 Brook took issue in print at Charles's hostile review of the abysmal *US* in the first issue of *International Times*, which became the voice of the underground. Slightly above ground, I wrote a no less damning review in *Tribune* of that flailing, wailing production – which took unctuous pride in proclaiming its own impotence while condemning others for theirs – and for this I was joined in verbal battle with Mike Kustow, by then Brook's new collaborator.

The launch party for *Theatre at Work* on its publication in 1967 was at Jim Haynes's Arts Lab in Drury Lane, the let-it-all-hang-out venue created in the freewheeling spirit of the original, rather seedy Edinburgh Traverse that he and Charles had helped to create. Of course it didn't last. But there was a more durable London Traverse under that name – under Charles's direction at the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre, where he staged the first London production of Joe Orton's *Loot*.

Among the many interviews I contributed in those days to *Plays and Players* there were two with Joe Orton. Both were conducted in the little flat in Noel Road, Islington, that Joe shared with his lover Kenneth Halliwell, who loomed over us bearing or offering cups of tea, as if wary that Joe would try to seduce me (he didn't). The first of the interviews was about Joe's early theatrical success with *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, the second focused on *Loot* – but only after Charles had retrieved the play from the savaging the critics gave its first production, which, despite (or because of) the presence of Kenneth Williams, had collapsed on its pre-London run.

Charles wisely treated the play's wilder flights of fancy with deep seriousness, which of course made them all the funnier; and his version, after opening in the Cochrane, transferred to the Criterion for a long West End run in September 1966. Eleven months later,

from the top of a bus passing Leicester Square tube, I noticed a newspaper placard blaring 'Famous Playwright Murdered'. Somehow I knew it would be Joe. Charles's production of *Loot* was by then nearing the natural end of its run, but was suddenly a hot ticket all over again. The shade of Joe Orton was surely relishing that.

Another ingredient in the heady broth of the times was the underground press, and Charles, following his involvement in *International Times*, had an input into the creation of *Ink*, a *soi-disant* successor to *Oz*, for which I occasionally wrote – including a review of one of Charles's Open Space productions, his adaptation of Oscar Wilde's essay *The Critic as Artist*, in which Tim West played the Wilde persona. The cut-and-paste artist of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Faustus* could equally turn his hand to the cut-and-thrust of a seduction in the guise of a literary debate.

And he knew his stuff not just about the Elizabethans and Oscar Wilde. There is no space here to enumerate all of Charles's literary and intellectual interests, to which some thirty published volumes bear witness. No wonder he made enemies in the theatre, for he was no luvvie, did not suffer fools gladly, and had the erudition to back up his judgements. When the theatre had no place for him, he might well have found his way (as I did) into a university post – but would have put just as many backs up, for academe can be just as prone to bitchiness as the theatre, and just as reluctant to recognize an original mind when the call is for a 'good committee man' with a chat-up line to the sponsors.

The multiple reports and applications and justifications were of course becoming as endemic in the theatre as in the academy, and to handle them Charles was fortunate to find Thelma Holt, to whom I shall shortly hand over the keyboard. But I can't resist a footnote about the first Open Space production, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, ostensibly an exposé of the American prison system, but which Charles made 'environmental' by having the audience conducted by warders down the outside fire escape into the basement – transformed into a prison cell, where we had our fingerprints taken, were gruffly bossed about

by the warders, and only allowed a few at a time from the cell into the seating area. But the memory that lingers is of the eminent but disabled theatre critic of the *Sunday Times*, Harold Hobson, unable to tackle the fire escape, being carried down like a babe in arms by one of the warders. ('It was,' says Thelma, 'the best entrance I have ever seen.')

And so, as more and more attics and cellars and upstairs rooms in pubs became theatre spaces, a year-round London fringe at last began to flourish. Back then we called it 'underground' theatre – there was even a guide to it under that name in the very first issue of *Theatre Quarterly* in 1971. That was compiled for us by *Time Out*, which had begun publication in 1968, the year in which so much happened – including the opening of the Open Space. But a lot had also happened in the earlier sixties to prepare the way, and Charles was there from the first, in that attic space in Fitzroy Square.

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Thelma Holt

## Marowitz Remembered

CHARLES MAROWITZ and I were introduced to each other in the early 1960s when the actor I was playing opposite in a William Saroyan double-bill at the Duke of York's announced he was about to revive his performance of Hamlet, which he had played for Charles in Peter Brook's *Theatre of Cruelty* season. Charles had seen me in a play at what was the Hampstead Theatre Club where I prophetically played a lion-tamer. Neither of these performances indicated what he saw in me to play Gertrude as a mother merely eight years older than her son, Hamlet.

In his flat, the first sight of Charles was forbidding: he was very tall, unhealthily pale with a lot of black hair, a dead ringer in my eyes for Rasputin. He offered me a cup of coffee and, when he went to fetch it from the kitchen, I hastily scanned his bookshelves, to see if they would tell me something about the man. The books were terrifying as he was

so obviously very well read in terms theatrical from A to Z, and historically from the beginning of time to contemporary theatre. His smile obliterated the Rasputin impression: it was a wolfish grin. So I slipped into thinking I could play Little Red Riding Hood to his Big Bad Wolf.

He asked me what I knew about Artaud. I confessed that I knew nothing except one horrifying story: when he was seriously unwell mentally, in order to aid his recovery the psychiatric staff at Rodez, where Artaud was incarcerated, recognized his magnificent command of the English language, and gave him a children's classic to translate into French. Unfortunately, the book was Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Clearly, in my opinion, Rodez should have been closed down.

Charles did invite me to play Gertrude, after what seemed like a very long pause in our conversation. I asked him to tell me about the work that would be involved. It was a truly exciting rehearsal process, unlike anything that I and the rest of the company had learned in drama school. Journey? What journey? There is no journey as you are constantly changing gear (as Gertrude I had some of Polonius's lines, so there was no path that a character trod from the beginning of the play to the end). Charles was ruthless and very funny at the same time. It was clear that we would have more business together and that this production was not a one-off.

We played a small venue in London followed by a foreign tour. For the next eighteen months we talked endlessly about the possibility of building a theatre together. He would direct the plays and I would 'run the joint', as he expressed it. I would, when occasion presented itself, act, which it was understood would be very often. He would adapt more Shakespeare and explore the best of Off-Broadway, which was not coming to the UK very much at that time. A major part of my responsibility was finding the money to make it all work, and sort out how we would run our small theatre, which would in our ideal world hold no more than two hundred seats.

Why he thought I could this I do not know. I had never shown signs of it before, but he