

Clive Barker

Closing Joan's Book: Some Personal Footnotes

For many, the death of Joan Littlewood on 20 September 2002 at the age of 87 marked the end of a theatrical era – though in practice she had lived an increasingly reclusive life following her move to France and the death of her partner Gerry Raffles in 1975, interrupted only in 1994 by the publication of an autobiography, *Joan's Book*. Clive Barker, Co-Editor of NTQ, became a member of Littlewood's Theatre Workshop company in 1955, shortly after the change from a touring policy to a building-based company at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, had led to the departure of Ewan MacColl and others of the original group, and subsequently to the displacement of other members as critical success led to West End transfers. What follows is not a dutiful obituary but a highly personal memoir of the years that followed, and provides an ironic contrast between Joan's own published recollections and the experience of one of her 'slags' – liable to be called on to do anything and everything. Joan's own recollection of Clive Barker was that 'You could only do three things. Catatonics, menace, and I forget what the third was.' Here, with fearful glances over his shoulder for an apparition at the window, Clive Barker reminds her, and adds a few other corrigenda to *Joan's Book*.

IT IS not surprising that Joan Littlewood has died: she was, after all, in her mid-eighties. What is surprising is the manner of her leaving. I could imagine someone strangling her or pushing her under a bus, but to die quietly in her sleep was totally at odds with the nature of the woman. I would never have expected her to do anything quietly, least of all dying. I keep glancing nervously at the view from my window, expecting to see some frightening gargoyle appear outside, singing:

The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me.
O Death, where is thy sting-a-ling-ling,
Where grave thy victory?

If anyone could rise from the dead, it would be Joan Littlewood.

Her work, always, was a celebration of life. Hence the lines just quoted, which come at climactic moments in *The Hostage* and also in *Oh, What a Lovely War*. In my memory is a statement which she made in justification of theatre: 'Life is a walk in the light between two long periods of darkness. Whatever brightens up that walk is worth while.'

I salute that brightness brought into my life, and hope she is wrong in thinking that mortality puts a period to existence. However uncomfortable she may make it, Heaven will not be the same without her – and without her life for me would not have been the same.

Not that she ever made life comfortable for me. Part of this was due to the moment in Theatre Workshop's history when I joined it in September 1955. The company had stopped touring and moved into the Theatre Royal at Stratford, E15. Quite a few of the old touring company had left and been replaced by newcomers like myself, who were largely ignorant of the past and unacquainted with Joan's way of working.

The transition from touring to static company, which coincided with the departure of Ewan MacColl, one of the founders of Theatre Workshop, had thrown up certain contradictions. The greatest of these was that it was a full ensemble company, in which all major decisions were arrived at by a company meeting. The contradictions culminated in a company meeting which voted to remove Gerry Raffles as manager. This was never acted on, and at that point certain

things became clear: Joan led the company but Gerry held the power. I was entirely unaware as to how their relationship worked, really until I read *Joan's Book*, when a lot of things became clear.

What weren't clear at the time were the contradictory views of Joan and Gerry. Her considerations were aesthetic, his commercial. The actors were utterly confused. In my first week of rehearsal, I remember standing in the dressing room with Howard Goorney, the senior remaining actor, and him saying to me, 'Theatre Workshop is the only place in the world where you can stay a week and write a book on what has happened.' The refusal of Gerry to accept the company decision to remove him reduced the purpose of the company meeting to a forum for debating who was guilty of overuse of the toilet paper. This became so crucial that all toilet paper was given to the box office manager and had to be applied for in advance of need. Thus rationed, I retreated into confusion and read the *Evening Standard* each day to find out what was happening to me next.

Joan's way of working was equally confusing and not at all what drama school had led me to expect from a professional director. There seemed to be no coherence in the progress from one rehearsal to the next. Nothing was ever set, all was open to change or even reversal. In Howard Goorney's *Theatre Workshop Story*, there are a number of quotations from actors which dispute Joan's commitment to running an actor's theatre: 'In the end, after all the playing about, it was Joan who told the actor what to do in quite specific terms.'

Heading Home as Late as Possible

It was several years before I worked out this conundrum. The answer in practice was the secret of Theatre Workshop: that the art of directing lies in how long you can wait before facing up to the fact that the opening night is near, when there will be bums on seats. Bad directors work out the moves in advance in their studies. The rehearsals then represent one or two dozen actors illustrating the imagination of one person – the

director. The alternative is to mine the text in rehearsal. The process is best illustrated in a quotation from one of Joan's letters included in *The Encore Reader*: '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' (p. 133). The skill and art of the director lies in how long this process of exploration can be prolonged before the pressures of the opening night intrude. Littlewood was supreme at leaving this date as late as possible.

For *An Italian Straw Hat*, there wasn't a dress rehearsal. We ran the play in reverse order of the acts, so that the stage ended up prepared for the opening. Joan left it as late as possible before she headed home with a production. The proof of the pudding being in the eating, as Brecht said, to have the nerve to leave things that late rests on the technical skill of the director to shape the production quickly – to nurse the production patiently as long as possible, and then technically to take what the actors have found and shape, clarify, and articulate that. In this way the creative director does not lack the skill of those who shape the production in advance, but has confidence in her skill to leave that shaping until the latest possible moment. It makes sense when you understand what is happening, and can be confusing when you don't.

When Gerry Raffles died in 1975, Joan was looked after by Shelagh Delaney. After three months of this, Shelagh came to Brian Murphy and myself and asked: 'However did you put up with this woman for so long?' The best we could come up with was: 'Masochism.' Over the years, younger actors hearing about my time with Theatre Workshop would comment that, 'It must have been such a great experience, so exciting.' I try to let them down lightly: 'It was never comfortable and often deeply miserable. The reason we stayed was that the work was good. Even if we often didn't understand how it came to be so good. The best there was.'



Somewhere, at this moment, the lady is perhaps sitting on a cloud saying, as she said on one of the last times I saw her: 'You could only do three things. Catatonics, menace, and I forget what the third was.' Hopefully she still can't remember the third, which was my depiction of femininity. I can still recall the pain. Young, and desperately unsure of my masculinity, I was sent on to the stage to dance cancons and strut on catwalks. I did get rather good at it and, on reflection, using it as a fundamental induction was a clear example of how her mind worked – part of breaking down my character construct and opening me to a wider range of experiences and acting. One day I'll play the Dame.

Life with Theatre Workshop was never comfortable. Cosiness was a keyword high on Joan's list of hates. She was well aware that actors often bring their off-stage relationships on to the stage. They 'feed' each other and the character conflicts become softened or non-existent. She deliberately provoked animosity to counter this. Thus, in *The Dutch Courtesan*, she detected cosiness in the scenes between Richard Harris and James Booth. I recall how she then went round to their dressing rooms and let drop to Richard that Jimmy was complaining that Richard wasn't giving him anything, then went to Jimmy and fed him the same lie. Needless to say, both actors went on stage determined never

to take their eyes off the other, and the scenes sprang to life.

During *The Hostage* I went into rehearsal one day in a very optimistic mood. I passed Joan in the passage leading to the dressing rooms and offices. I smiled and said, 'Morning, Joan,' which seemed like a fairly innocuous way to start the day. She glared at me and greeted me with: 'You're nothing but a f...ing broomstick with f...ing bananas for f...ing fingers.' Try to go on stage believing in your genius after that.

'Go on Stage to Fail'

My introduction to the company was even worse. In *Schweik* I was given the role of a Military Policeman who under provocation ends up in a lunatic asylum as a catatonic wreck (hence my reputation with Joan). In rehearsal I did my bit, drawing on my experience of the more lunatic areas of military drill, on which I prided myself. She was overjoyed. She lauded me to the rest of the cast as a new comic genius. They were not impressed, and some went so far as to shake their heads knowingly. I put this down to professional jealousy. In later rehearsals, she was less enthusiastic about my performances and, exaggerated as it may seem, my memory is that before every performance of the production she came round the dressing room and distributed notes to each actor – except me. I was eventually pushed to pursue her and point out that she had said nothing to me. 'You weren't there!' I was in despair. 'What can we do?' I asked. 'We'll find some time,' was the only answer, but we never did.

The problem haunted me for several years in the time I was with Theatre Workshop and in between other work. I finally worked out what she meant and it has stayed with me ever since. She did at a later point put it into words, when she begged the actors 'to go on stage to fail. If you go out to succeed you will never do it. You will always fail. If you go out to fail you might be creative.' The ramifications of this principle are manifold, and explain why I 'was never there'. When the actor goes out to succeed, to put it across,

to affect the audience, there is a tendency literally to knock them dead in the aisles – to push the audience away, to lift the centre of gravity of the body and to scatter energy outwards. This diffuses the energy and destroys the clear focus of any action. To go out and have the confidence of failing means that the centre of gravity is lowered and the flow of energy is gathered and focused. The audience is drawn into the action and there is a relaxed flow of communication to and fro.

There are one or two odd consequences of this. Very often actors give their best performances when they are ill, tired, or feel they are not prepared for the performance, because this lowers the centre and brings the energy and focus under control. It is a joke among actors I have worked with that, when they feel on top form, I advise them to go and eat two pork pies to lower the centre and create some resistance to work against. Then the actor, in Joan's terms, 'will be there'.

I don't remember Joan ever teaching me anything. I learned on the job. This might have been her judgement of my character – that I learn best what I work out myself. Or perhaps she had relegated me as restricted to menace, catatonics, and femininity, for others claimed to have been taught. Richard Harris claimed to have learned more in half an hour with Joan than he had in two years in drama school. He related how Joan gave him a class in which she asked him to take his clothes off, gradually overcoming his reluctance, until he was stark naked, and then asked him to act as if he was fully clothed.

Well, each to his own or her own taste. What I learned was from odd remarks, mostly off the cuff, during rehearsals – which I used to attend assiduously, even when I wasn't called. I taught myself to direct by watching her work. At the outset, I divined that her greatest asset was the speed at which she could think. She thought on her feet faster than anyone I knew. I sat through rehearsal after rehearsal trying to think ahead of her and guessing what the next instruction would be. I finally achieved this one day when she had a streaming cold. For the rest, she was always ahead of me, and I could only benefit by replaying her direction and



Scene from Joan Littlewood's production of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1959), for which she received Best Director award at the Théâtre des Nations season in Paris, 1960. The IRA Volunteer on the right is Clive Barker.

trying to reconstruct the mental processes she had gone through.

Underpinned by Notes – and Knowledge

There were other sources. Principal among these were the sheets of written notes pinned up before a performance. We can only hope that when her wardrobe is opened she has stacked away all these sheets. Put together they would be a national treasure, a primary source on the art of the actor. She was eagle-eyed and never missed a trick. All the

moments of lapsed concentration, loss of focus, generalization instead of clarity, loss of objective, would be there in the next night's notes. I once received a postcard from Orange in the South of France telling me she couldn't hear one of my lines in the performance before she left England.

It was a favourite joke among the older actors that, after the last performance of a pantomime they had done in a Yorkshire theatre, the actors found an envelope in their pigeon holes. Expecting to find some note thanking them for their work, they tore the

envelopes open and found Joan's notes on the performance they had just given.

When I had discovered things in my own reading and research, she was always ready to discuss – but, madly, always ahead of me. I read through *Henslowe's Diary* and discovered the existence of Henry Chettle, the oil on which the Jacobean theatre largely ran. I went to Joan and told her: 'I have discovered this marvellous man called Henry Chettle.' Instantly she chimed in, 'There's only one of his plays extant. There's a facsimile copy in the British Museum.' I discovered the existence of Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, an intellectual of the late eighteenth century – inventor of mass catering, founder of the Royal Institution, one of the early chemists to isolate heat as a quality not a quantity, and many other achievements. I bore my prize to Joan. 'I've found this marvellous man, Benjamin Thompson . . .', I began. 'Count Rumford,' she completed.

Her knowledge was encyclopaedic. Whatever her practical achievements, she was one of the leading theatre researchers of our time. If I couldn't think fast, I would try to research and comprehend more widely and in more depth. I like to think I have achieved something in my search. I owe her a great deal for provoking me. On reflection I think there was something deliberate in Joan's provocation. She was unbelievably generous in the time she was prepared to give to other people.

She shared two contradictory characteristics with Ewan MacColl, her first partner and co-founder of Theatre Workshop. Both were an uncomfortable mixture of generosity and megalomania. I worked with both. With Joan, I had got to get there first myself. After I had shown her what I had learned on my own I was given open access to her store of treasures. The work I did with Ewan showed similar generosity. We were both involved in recording and collecting actuality. Ewan had a huge collection of folk tales, which he was good enough to copy for me. But, like Joan, he was paranoid about being given credit for his originality, and his volume of early autobiography, *Journeyman*, contains a number of quite serious slanders of colleagues involved in the Radio Ballads,

diminishing their contribution. So with Joan: as Derek Paget has pointed out in NTQ, when *Lovely War* opened in Stratford East it was billed as Charles Chilton's *Lovely War*. When the Stratford production was seen to be a success, it became Theatre Workshop's *Lovely War*. When it became a West End hit, it was billed as Joan Littlewood's *Lovely War*.

Discourtesies in 'Joan's Book'

There are two unattributed references to me in *Joan's Book*, and they are both incorrect. (I never expected any references at all. Those who got away or had some success were always downgraded.) Of the two references, one concerns a meeting about the Fun Palace, which she claims that she attended, when, in fact, she decided not to go and face the hostility, sending me in her place. The second is more discourteous. The day before she returned the proofs of the book to her publisher, she phoned me about the production of Shelagh Delaney's second play, *The Lion in Love*, which Joan had rejected out of hand and which I directed on tour and at the Royal Court. Joan doubted Shelagh's recollections and asked me to fill in a load of details for her. This I did. When the book came out the passage reads that the play was directed by someone who had at one time been an Assistant Stage Manager with her company. I had at that time been employed by Joan as an actor for three years.

One regret in her passing is that I will never get the chance to kick her backside for the offence. If I too may be getting paranoid, I am, however, more offended by references to others who do not get full acknowledgement for their efforts. The book, I accept, is an ingenious work of eighteenth-century romantic fiction, but some hurts are real. Joan agreed to make three television programmes for the BBC. In the event she made the first and didn't turn up for the other two. In the one she made, she rehearsed Brian Murphy in a badly handled scene from *Hamlet*, supposed to represent his audition for Theatre Workshop. Her recorded comment is that Brian had fallen into the hands of some amateur who played with theatre.

COMPANY PLEASE NOTE

BIG CUT IN MRS BULSTROPE SCENE
 TONIGHT — STEVE } GET TOGETHER
 MYF } PLEASE
 SANDY }

RE-NEW BIT ACT I (2)

PLEASE PRAY ACTION
RHYTHM

AND THE "CRACKS" "WORDS" AS
 THROWN AWAY — — — — — HERE

AS PART OF STREAM — (NOT "MONUMENTS"
 AS NOW)

DON'T BOOTHER ABOUT WORD-WIT LAUGHS
 THIS CHARMING SLOWS
 DOWN WHEN YOU DO SO —
 THE WHOLE ENTERTAINMENT
 IS BOILING WHEN YOU
 "PLAY FOR LAUGHS" — AS
 YOU ^{ALL} KNOW

CUTTING ACTION
 IS ONLY LAZINESS
 AND WE ALL KNOW IT

JL
E

One of Joan Littlewood's notes to the company — this, during the run of one of her last productions for Theatre Workshop, *Mrs Wilson's Diary*, by Richard Ingrams and John Wells, which opened at Stratford East in 1967 before a transfer to the Criterion Theatre in the West End.

Before he joined Theatre Workshop, Brian had been a member of an amateur company based on the Borough Polytechnic, run by Tom Vaughan. It does not do to belittle Tom, who had a major place in the contemporary theatre, and among whose company, apart from Brian, were Richard Briers, Stephen Moore, and the designer who later achieved fame as Patrick Caulfield.

When Unity Theatre hit troubled times, Tom Vaughan almost single-handedly kept the doors open and work on the stage. I directed two shows there which could not have got on without Tom's dedication and professionalism. Later, as theatre critic for the *Morning Star* and as a member of a fund-

awarding trust, his encouragement of developing new theatre companies was sensitive, informed, and helpful. We owe much to Tom Vaughan, and his memory does not deserve to be diminished by Joan or anyone else.

I think it fair to say that when Joan retired from the theatre she lost touch with her roots and her values. Stories filtering back in her later years accuse her of poor behaviour at conferences and of a dismissive tendency. We might have expected more generosity in her writing and television appearances. When Joan gave up, a new generation of actors and directors were maturing. If she had sat in on rehearsals and delivered notes, what a service that would have been. She did generously

come to visit a group I led at one time in Birmingham University, and she talked with the students for a long time, something they deeply appreciated. She left accusing me of fostering cosiness. Little did she know.

But I can understand that she may well have lost the appetite to run a theatre without the support of Gerry Raffles, and even that she was becoming disillusioned with directing plays. After all, the whole Fun Palace project was predicated on the assumption that machines were changing the world, and there was no point in putting on plays to illustrate this: we should learn how to control the machines. I have a card from her in her elegant handwriting saying: 'Sir Clive, don't build any more theatres' – ironically perceptive, since I was at that time planning a theatre conversion in Hackney to explore some of her ideas on the relationship between theatre and the wider community. As it happened the Hackney project died the same week as the idea of the Fun Palace was killed by the local authority in East London.

I gave up trying to found the Henry Chettle Memorial Theatre, and little remains of the concept of the Fun Palace. There is almost nothing in print about the way she hoped it could work. After it was dropped, the original architect, Cedric Price, joined me in a scheme to build an archetype in Birmingham in response to an invitation to bring the Birmingham and Midland Institute into the twentieth century. The plans for that are not relevant here, except that it suffered a similar fate – a palace revolution in the Institute leading to the plans being abandoned.

Ironically, I was sitting in the coffee bar of the Midland Arts Centre in Cannon Park a few years ago when I was approached by an elderly man who asked if he could talk to me for some market research he was doing on behalf of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, which had lost its way and was desperately seeking a new direction. I offered to show him several bulging files of argument and plans for precisely that purpose. Needless to say, he never came to see me and the Institute totters on. Who knows what we would have learned if Joan had ever been allowed to build her prototype.

The Workshop Legacy

Little attention has been paid to Joan's work outside the theatre – largely, I think, because she appears not to have documented it. I have written elsewhere of the work she did with the children living around the Theatre Royal. All that remains of that is in the memories of people who saw the work or took part in it. I live in dread of someone phoning and asking me to edit her papers, but who knows, until someone does edit them, what of her work is preserved? Bits of articles and some interview transcripts can be researched but, again, most of what took place is in the memories of those of us who worked with her and, perhaps, something of that experience that we passed on to our students at second hand.

In her book, Joan claims there was no 'Workshop style', which somehow personalizes what was an objective technical approach to creating theatre. Very few Workshop productions were directed by anyone other than Joan, so that it was 'her' style that came to be identified with the work. But when she was away for some time, John Bury directed a season of plays, including *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Treasure Island*, which were clearly identifiable as Workshop productions. And I was caught in Torquay one rainy night, unable to get home, when I saw that the local theatre was showing a Fiona Richmond production, remarkable for the expanse of naked flesh on offer. The show had been directed by Victor Spinetti. I chanced it to see what he had made of it. The production was badly in need of some time spent cutting out the 'improvements' and 'good ideas' the cast had introduced, but the basic show had all the signs of Joan's hand, which probably would have throttled Victor had she seen it.

So there *was* a method, although this was often disguised as Joan worked specifically on each play to find the style of performance through which the play could communicate to its audience. No production was ever the same, but there was an underlying technique and obsessive search for perfection underlying them all.

The East 15 Acting School was founded by Margaret Bury to carry the Theatre Workshop approach into the training of actors, and many very talented actors have passed through that school: but Joan never once entered its doors, never mind worked there. Without a continuity of technique, it remains a crowning irony that the clearest signs of Littlewood's presence in the British theatre, apart from our residual memories, lie in sitcoms and soaps – Harry H. Corbett in *Steptoe*, which Joan despised; Yootha Joyce and Brian Murphy as the Ropers; Glyn Edwards, a most undervalued and sensitive actor, propping up the bar in *Minder*; Barbara Windsor in *Eastenders*; Stephen Cato in so much.

More Farewells

Since I started this piece, two important members of the Workshop company at different times have followed Joan to the bone yard. I first met Fanny Carby in 1954, when she played the Christmas show at the Bristol Old Vic. She appeared with distinction in all the major soaps and could be depended on to do it big and do it true – the epitome of a strain of Theatre Workshop actors known as the 'slag', who were called on to do everything and anything: bit parts, background, counterpoint, texture, improvisation – you name it, we did it, and none better than Fanny, a most unselfish actress. One of the scenes in *Lovely War* which sticks in most people's memory of the show is Fanny and Bob Stevenson doing the 'Itchy-Koo' number, and I have fond memories of dancing a pastiche Nureyev and Fonteyn routine with her in the *Merry Roosters* show, which we played as Christmas matinees under the main *Lovely War* evening shows. And soon after Fanny Carby departed we also lost Richard Harris – and the theatre has lost one of the potentially greatest productions of our time, if only he had played Lear, directed by Joan. There are fewer of us left.

As I was writing this, I became aware out of the corner of my eye of some grotesque female jumping up and down outside my

window, waving a piece of paper. 'Bloody hell', I muttered, 'she's done it.' But closer analysis revealed that it was only one of my neighbours trying to attract my attention, the piece of paper just a long-awaited date for hospital admission. I breathed again. Only Joan could have played that scene. Would that she could. It would be nice to think that we may see her like again but I fear we won't.

In an article in this issue, Eugenio Barba returns to his theme of the way in which masters pass on their experience to those who follow them – seeing masters not as teachers but as a channel through which understanding flows, with each channel reaching back to the masters who preceded the master. Joan was my master. I am very aware that her understanding pervades my own writing and work. I have many times been asked to write a book on her work, but when I have trailed this in articles I have found it very difficult to separate what I learned from her and what comes from my own personal ideas and experience.

But of one thing I am sure: that through her I was able to access the history and experience of the European theatre of the late years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. Through Joan I met Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Copeau, Laban, Jouvet, the Constructivists, the Expressionists, the Futurists, the Bauhaus, not to mention Chinese theatre – and Brecht, however much Joan protested that she was detached from him. I tried to trace the line or channels of influence, and I learned much from watching her. I am nothing but grateful, and consider myself rarely fortunate that she had the patience and generosity to let me watch her work and access her genius.

Despite all my criticisms of Joan, I have to say that, leaving my family out of the equation, my time with her, in the 'slag', was the most rewarding time of my life. She was the best. It was and is a great privilege to be counted in her company – as Shirley Teague once said, we are marked with the sign forever, never to be allowed to escape its stigmata, no matter what else we might do in life.