

The Place of Theatre in Nottingham in the 1960s

This paper discusses the place of theatre in Nottingham in the 1960s. Three themes will be focused on: ideas of metropolitan versus provincial culture; traditional versus modern; and performance cultures. These themes will be used to identify what it was that made Nottingham a place on the theatrical map of the 1960s and how within the city the theatres I mentioned worked with and against each other to identify themselves via performance. Many writers on space, place and landscape have noted these terms are inextricably interwoven.¹ For this reason my exploration of the theatrical places of Nottingham will also venture into the performance of spaces and landscape of the city.

Following closely on the great outburst of creative vitality in the English theatre – the wave of new playwrights and players, the achievements of individual directors and permanent companies – has come renewed interest in theatre building. All over the country theatres are being planned, opened or restored, in towns where the old theatres have been closed or become intolerable or inconvenient, and in places that have never enjoyed live drama.²

This quote is indicative of the responses that were being written from the mid-1960s regarding a post-war boom of theatre building that had started across Britain from the late-1950s. The very fact that I have chosen a quote from *Country Life* demonstrates that commentary on these new theatres was not solely restricted to the theatre press and review pages of broadsheets – this was something of national interest. When the new Nottingham Playhouse opened in December 1963 it was only the second civically funded repertory theatre to open in Britain after the Belgrade in Coventry which opened in 1958 and at this time it gained a reputation of being one of the top theatres in the country. In many ways the 1960s Nottingham Playhouse was in an extremely good position to receive attention as a key place for modern theatre in Britain. It acted as both a showcase for new and young talent and as a recipient of the largest subsidy from the Harold Wilson government's seemingly ever-increasing regional arts funding. Working from the

¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984); W J T Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago and London, 2002); Edward W. Soja, 'Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination', in D Massey, J Allen and P Sarre, eds., *Human Geography Today* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 260-78.

² Michael Webb, 'Monuments to a Theatrical Revival', *Country Life* CXXXVIII:3574 (1965), p. 563

assertion by Pred that 'Place is a historically contingent process that emphasizes institutional and individual practices'.³ I would like to suggest that the intersection between government arts policy and local interventions sought to render Nottingham Playhouse a place very much of its moment in the 1960s.

In 1965 Harold Wilson was the first Prime Minister to appoint a government Minister for the Arts. This marks the first systematic attempt to organise arts funding, but this was not necessarily a marked break with traditional concepts of the arts. Indeed, in the 1960s London based national companies such as the National Theatre, the Royal Opera House, the Royal Shakespeare Company and Sadler's Wells consistently received the largest subsidies from the Arts Council. During this period new channels were also opened up for provincial towns and cities to embrace the arts. At the same time the Labour government retained a very clearly defined notion of elite culture or 'high' art which was seen as 'civilising, uplifting and a barrier to commercial mass culture'.⁴ So whilst the regions began to receive significantly higher subsidies from the Arts Council this money was directed in the largest amounts towards the likes of Nottingham Playhouse, Bristol Old Vic and the Birmingham Rep. Via its policy of 'Housing the Arts' the Labour government was effectively encouraging the creation of theatrical places, notably in provincial towns and cities. This resulted in new theatres popping up in areas where Arts Council subsidy was complemented by civic funds indicating a certain confidence in the formation of cultural places such as new theatres. The years when Harold Wilson was in office are associated with a burst of cultural activity and unprecedented increases in arts funding, but this funding was still very much directed at traditional and elite forms of the performing arts (namely ballet, opera and theatre), with a particular bias towards metropolitan London.

Cultural histories concerned with the 1960s characterise London as the 'swinging city' – as a cultural centre of international importance. Rycroft comments that 'Like Vienna of the 1910, Paris of the 1920s, Berlin of the 1930s and New York of the 1950s... London was now the place that set the social and cultural markers for the rest of

³ Allan Pred, 'Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time- Geography of Becoming Places', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74 (1984): 279-97 (p. 280).

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 335

the world.’⁵ London is represented as the big city and the pivotal centre in a fully modern England. It was *the place* where everything happened. Or was it? Just as Sixties London was vying for attention on an international scale, provincial cities around the country were asserting their regional importance as demonstrated in this excerpt from *The Geographical Magazine* concerning Nottingham:

With its connections extending far over this part of the country, it is indisputably a regional centre. It has the regional headquarters for many organisations, government departments and other official bodies. Its University and similar institutions of higher education, its new Playhouse and other centres of cultural interest, as well as its large-scale retail and entertainment facilities, all give it a true regional status.⁶

Matless⁷ argues that the region emerged as a key scale for the articulation of a new authority of reconstruction in post-war Britain, and I would add that it increasingly became necessary for cities such as Nottingham to promote, perhaps even elevate, their positions within regions in order to present themselves as important players at a national scale and they did this not just by promoting local industry and economy, but also culture. In this way cities could define themselves as more than the backward provincial cousins of London. In short the rhetoric of the regional was being used to create places, and in the case of Nottingham the Playhouse was used as a key signifier during the 1960s to show off the city’s modern credentials, this ‘power-house’⁸ for the arts became an instantly recognisable landmark in the city. The distinct architecture of the theatre with its striking drum-shaped auditorium quickly rendered it part of the city’s iconography and entwined this place into the cultural landscape of the city. I would like to suggest that Nottingham’s theatres weren’t just representative of Nottingham’s cultural in the 1960s, but also reproducing it via associations with theatre and performance.

⁵ Simon Rycroft, 'The geographies of Swinging London', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28 (2002), 566-88. (p. 576)

⁶ K.C Edwards, 'Nottingham: Queen of the Midlands', *The Geographical Magazine*, 38:5 (1966), 329-347. (p. 336)

⁷ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998).

⁸ Colin Bishop, 'Theatres For Today', *In Britain* (February 1967), p. 22

Figure 1. The Playhouse, Wellington Circus, (1976)



(George L Roberts www.picturethepast.org)

The building of the new civically funded theatre in Nottingham followed fifteen years of rather acrimonious local political disputes which covered a series of electoral defeats that postponed progress. It was built in the ‘halcyon days of post-war dreams and post-war planning.’⁹ The decision to start work on an entirely newly built theatre came about in 1961 by casting vote on the part of the Labour section of the local Corporation.¹⁰ The decision was taken to locate the new theatre in Wellington Circus as the site was large enough to incorporate additional facilities such as spacious foyers and a large restaurant. This was, after all, a modernising project that sought to provide functions that exceeded merely those of a theatre – this was also to be a social and cultural hub. In the December of 1963 the newly finished Nottingham Playhouse opened, and in 1994 the building was awarded Grade II* listed status for being ‘stylistically a crucial link between the Royal Festival Hall and the Royal National Theatre’ two places of performance that embody British Modernity.¹¹

⁹ H Willat, 'The New Nottingham Playhouse', *New Theatre Magazine*, 2 (1959), pp. 13-6.

¹⁰ N Hayes, *Consensus and Controversy: City Politics in Nottingham 1945-66* (Liverpool, 1996).

¹¹ R Mackenzie, 'The Nottingham Playhouse: Space for Art or Art for Spaces', in S Mulryne and M Shewring, eds., *Making Space for Theatre: British Architecture and Theatre Since 1959* (Stratford, 1995), p. 71.

Prior to the opening of the new Playhouse, Nottingham's repertory company had been housed in a converted Edwardian cinema on Goldsmith Street, just north of the area in the city referred to as Theatre Square. The formation of Theatre Square, which is located north of Nottingham's market square coincided with the opening of Nottingham's Theatre Royal in 1865, a century earlier than the area of this paper's discussion. However, the Theatre Royal has proved to be a lasting landmark in the cultural landscape of the city. For almost a century this area at the top of Market Street and Parliament Square acted as a centre for entertainment in Nottingham. In 1897 an addition was made to the Theatre Royal on vacant land to the east of the theatre – the result being the Empire Palace of Varieties. Throughout the twentieth century additions were made to Theatre Square, including Barrasford's Royal Palace of Varieties (1908) which later became the Gaumont Cinema. We get the impression of a vibrant evening economy pivoting around performance on both stage and screen.

Even so, several developments throughout the 1960s, including the demolition of the Empire, the relocation of the Playhouse and the opening of the new Twin Odeon Cinema on Angel Row in 1965 saw a shift in focus away from the nineteenth century Theatre Square to other modern sites in the city centre. In terms of theatrical Nottingham this shift was biased towards Wellington Circus, a leafy corner to the south of the city bordering on The Park, a middle-class Victorian suburb. By relocating to Wellington Circus the Playhouse realigned the sleepy Victorian street towards contemporary architecture. However, it was not necessarily an obvious place for an ultra modern theatre, being sheltered by St Barnabas Cathedral and the Albert Hall.

Figure 2. Theatre Square, Nottingham (1959)



(George L Roberts www.picturethepast.org)

The architect appointed to the new Playhouse was Peter Moro (1911-1998). He was recommended for the commission by the Arts Council following his work on the Festival Hall and came to England prior to the outbreak of the Second World War on a promise to work under Walter Gropius, a prominent figure in the Modernist Movement. Gold names Moro as one of the ‘significant figures in the interwar British Modern Movement,’ along with the likes of Erno Goldfinger and Ove Arup.¹² This gives an indication as to why Moro was held in such high esteem when he was commissioned to work on the Playhouse, although the architectural historian Sadler comments that ‘architects were never at the forefront of the [Sixties] cultural revolution.’¹³ This is an interesting interjection, after all, the 1960s are characterised as the decade of change, both in terms of social and cultural developments, but the importance of the places that were created at this time is often overlooked.

Writing in 1965 Peter Moro commented on the difficulties with theatre architecture:

¹² John. R Gold, *The Experience of Modernism: Modern architects and the future city, 1928-53* (London, 1997).

¹³ Simon Sadler, 'British Architecture in the Sixties', in C Stephens and K Stout, eds., *Art & the 60s: This Was Tomorrow* (London, 2004), pg. 131.

In theatre architecture we have the intricate and unusual situation where one art form is not only housed in another but is strongly dependent for its proper functioning on its architectural setting.¹⁴

In this way Moro regarded architecture – the art of forming space and place – as an essential medium that could be utilised to house the artistry of theatre. In some ways the Playhouse followed (or perhaps kick started) a trend in theatre building in the 1960s whereby theatres were proudly functional. As Reid comments on the Playhouse, 'This was not just a matter of modernist building style, it was a manifestation of serious purpose.'¹⁵ Part of this purpose was a levelling out of culture, a marked attempt to shake of middle-class and elitist associations of theatregoing. A commentator in the *Yorkshire Post* in 1965 dismissed the likes of Nottingham's Theatre Royal as 'the architectural embodiment of the outdated class structure'¹⁶. Modern theatres such as the Playhouse dispensed of tiered seating, and features such as separate entrances depending on how much had been paid for the seats. If you bought a cheap seat for a show at the Theatre Royal you would have to enter via a side entrance. By contrast the large expanse of forecourt leading up to the entrance of the new Playhouse acted to showcase a theatre that was open and accessible to all, emphasized by its glazed walls which at night illuminated the entrance halls and foyers, exposing the theatre. As writer and broadcaster Ray Gosling describes the Playhouse was:

*the fashionable place of town... the controversial and plushiest – cost too much money but isn't it all worthwhile now? – civic theatre... Ah, the days when we were proud of our drains, and now were proud of our theatres. This was where on Saturday mornings the in-crowd swung. Ah, those clichés of the day. We didn't use them, but we purred inwardly when we heard people use them about us'*¹⁷

Gosling indicates that Nottingham Playhouse was popular among local theatregoers, but at a wider scale provincial repertory theatre was viewed as being fashionable at this time. This is demonstrated by a very particular type of performance culture that the Playhouse was cultivating. In this way it was not simply the architecture that *made* the Playhouse in the 1960s integral to this was how the space was used. Here I call on De Certeau who

¹⁴ Peter Moro, 'Penultimate thoughts on theatre design', *Tabs*, 23 (1965), pp. 25-8.

¹⁵ F Reid, 'Seeing, hearing and contact', in S Mulryne and M Shewring, eds., *Making Space for Theatre: British Architecture and Theatre since 1958* (Stratford, 1995), p. 292.

¹⁶ W.T Newlyn, 'The Price of the Theatre', *The Yorkshire Post*, July 21 (1965).

¹⁷ Ray Gosling, *Personal Copy: A Memoir of the Sixties* (London, 1980), pp. 113-114

theorizes space as practiced place, 'composed of intersections of mobile elements'.¹⁸ Tuan also discusses space and place as linked to movement, action and flows: 'If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for 'location' to be transformed into place'.¹⁹ The Playhouse and Theatre Royal can be thought of as two pauses that mark different periods of Nottingham's theatrical history with the Theatre Royal struggling to keep its place amongst modernising drive of the city in the 1960s.

Rose takes De Certeau's notion of space as practised space and furthers it by saying that, 'Space is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, it forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations'.²⁰ Rose is referring to the performance of different gendered and sexed bodies in space, however, her ideas of performing space suggest a relationality that is inherent in the performance of space. Roach also suggests that performance can be thought about in relational terms.²¹ Suggesting that performance events can intersect to bring about and establish distinct cultures. In the case of Nottingham we have the relations between metropolis and provincial cities and also within the city as modern versus traditional theatre. Roach also takes the idea of practiced place and applies it to the term 'vortices of behaviour' which are explained as 'a combination of built environment and performative habit' which not only enable cultural reproduction but also cultural transmission.²² Thinking of the Playhouse and the Theatre Royal as behavioural vortices allows us to consider the intersections between theatre architecture, actor and audience that combined to transmit Nottingham's theatrical culture.

It is worth considering that although new arts funding was being directed towards both metropolitan and provincial theatre in the 1960s the general taste for theatre in Britain remained very much rooted in old favourites. As the critic Kenneth Tynan commented:

¹⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), p. 117

¹⁹ Yi-Fi Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977), p. 6

²⁰ Gillian Rose, 'Performing Space', in D Massey, J Allen and P Sarre, eds., *Human Geography Today* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 248

²¹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996).

²² *Ibid*, p. 88.

I am writing in the spring of 1963, and as I look at the list of productions available in the West End, my heart sinks a little. Old had retains its ancient preponderance over new wave. In 1950, two out of three London theatres were occupied by detective stories, melodramas, quarter-witted faces, debutante comedies, overweight musicals, and unreviewable reviews: much the same is true today.²³

This quote although referring to the West-End also sums up the case at Nottingham's Theatre Royal whose status was under some doubt in the 1960s. If the 1960s was a time of expansion in publicly subsidised theatre, the reverse was true for the commercial theatre circuit whose numbers were declining²⁴ – this was a period when many towns and cities were witnessing the closure of their Alhambras, Coliseums and in the case of Nottingham, the not only symbolic, but literal demolition of its Empire. The Empire Palace of Varieties had been an 1897 addition to the east side of the Theatre Royal but it closed its doors in 1958, by the mid-twentieth century old music halls and variety palaces were outmoded, rundown and as local press commented, they were 'being killed by the continual weeks of striptease shows and rock'n'roll boys who drove out the family audiences never to return.'²⁵

An article from a series concerned with the status of theatre in provincial noted that, 'Especially in the summer, the stage doors of the Royal seem open to almost any show on tour... While the Royal inevitably relies on pre- or post-West End material, the present and past Playhouses have offered frequent opportunities to new dramatists.'²⁶ In addition to musicals and drama there was an equal measure of variety acts – the likes of Max Bygraves and Bruce Forsyth. This demonstrates a major difference between the Theatre Royal and the Playhouse, namely the difference between a commercial theatre that hosts touring productions offering a wealth of light entertainment, and a repertory theatre that has its own company of trained professional actors.

If the Theatre Royal mainly showed West-End productions contrast this with the new Playhouse. In an interview from 1965, the then artistic director of the Playhouse made the proud statement:

²³ Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan On Theatre* (London, 1964), p. 16

²⁴ J Rosenfield and D.K Cameron, 'Boom or Slump? The Provinces' Two Faces: Belfast and Edinburgh' *Plays and Players*, (July 1964), pp. 12-13.

²⁵ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 March (1961).

²⁶ Barlow, G and Parr, R, 'Boom or Slump? The Provinces' Two Faces: Manchester and Nottingham' *Plays and Players*, (August 1964), p. 13

The two prongs of our policy...are classical revivals and new writing...we are *not* a try-out theatre, doing plays with an eye on London.²⁷

Although shunning London as the natural stage for productions the policy of Nottingham Playhouse did mirror those of the newly formed British National Theatre Company, and for a period in the 1960s it was common for the Playhouse to be referred to as the ‘national theatre of the provinces’. Thereby the status of provincial reps in the 1960s was boosted not only by increases in Arts Council subsidies but also by the kudos that became attached to working for theatres such as Nottingham Playhouse. As one commentator explained:

Though many leading players do play lip-service to the idea of strong, decentralised provincial theatre in theory, there aren’t many who are prepared to do something about it in practice.²⁸

The Playhouse was to benefit from the likes of rising stars such as Judi Dench and Ian McKellan joining its company for stints throughout the Sixties, adding to the movement, circulation and flows that made the Playhouse a theatre that was arguably at its peak in the 1960s. In addition repertory theatres differed from commercial circuits such as the Theatre Royal as they offered much shorter runs of plays which offered the discerning theatre-goer the opportunity to return on a regular basis for their next fix of Shakespeare, Chekhov or Osborne.

This paper has discussed two theatres in Nottingham in the 1960s and the historic moment that worked to forge relational interactions between these places and also with metropolitan London. The 1960s was a decade when increases in government arts funding acted to create modern centres for the arts, but it was also a time when traditional theatre had a less certain future. Here we have the interesting situation whereby Nottingham Playhouse was characterised by its new modern theatre, yet it was only able to benefit from this by an association with traditional or ‘high’ culture. We see this played out not only through the architectural fabric of these two theatres in Nottingham, but also via the contrasting ways that the Playhouse and Theatre Royal performed space.

²⁷ John Neville, ‘Rep in the Balance’, *Plays and Players*, (September 1965), p. 8.

²⁸ Anon, ‘John Neville’ *Plays and Players*, (August 1963), p. 9.

Acknowledgements: Figures 1 and 2: East Midland Photographic Record. www.picturethepast.org