

These notes about Broadside were prepared by Kathleen McCreery in collaboration with Sara Scalzotto for the Unfinished Histories Broadside page, with assistance from co-founder Richard Stourac, and company members Maria Tolly, Paul Colbeck and Ian Saville.

Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre

Founders: Kathleen McCreery and Richard Stourac

Established: 1974

Reason

To create and tour thought-provoking, innovative, entertaining and accessible theatre which would contribute practically and ideologically to the struggles of working people, women and ethnic minorities in the UK. To support campaigns for solidarity with liberation and revolutionary movements in other countries.

The founders were members of Red Ladder Theatre from 1969 to 1974. When political and artistic differences surfaced they left to form Broadside, with Red Ladder's initial financial support.

Policy

To provide made to measure plays for trade unions, work places and communities of interest. The inspiration for the plays and much of the material came from rank and file workers, shop stewards and other organisers, and from people at the sharp end of discrimination against women and ethnic minorities. Broadside aimed to give a voice to workers: they facilitated post-show discussions with audiences, and participants' ideas and anecdotes often inspired rewrites.

Theatrically, the challenge was to develop forms capable of tackling complex issues, while offering scenarios and characters that audiences recognised, which moved them and made them laugh. The plays had to be relevant, comprehensible and specific, and offer an alternative to the mainstream media.

Structure

Full and candidate members. All had the right and responsibility to contribute to discussions of both long-term policy and day to day matters. The full members made the decisions if it was not possible to achieve

unanimity. Candidate members acquired full membership based on experience, commitment/contribution and qualifications. At full strength the company had 9 members (6 performers, including a musician/musical director, a designer + 2 administrators). All were paid the same wages and had equal working conditions. A board of trustees included Alvaro Miranda and Doris Bancroft.

In the autumn of 1980, founders Kathleen and Richard decided to leave. Kathleen was asked to direct one last production for the group, 'The Cut Price Welfare State Show, Part Two' (housing), before joining Richard in Berlin, where they went on to work with Theatermanufaktur.

In 1981, the Arts Council of Great Britain cut Broadside's funding. Some of the existing members, together with new members started an un-paid, part-time version of Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre.

Based

London. Toured nationally.

Mailing address: Holbein House, Holbein Place, SW1 8NJ.

Rehearsal space at Oval House and other sympathetic venues. NUPE – National Union of Public Employees – gave Broadside temporary use of empty premises at Old Town, Clapham, for a pepper corn rent. Eventually, the group was able to rent rehearsal and office space at 241e High St. North, London E12. After the loss of funding, the mailing address was Kelveden House, Guildford Rd., SW8.

Funding

Arts Council of Great Britain revenue grant 1975 – 1981. Income from trade unions and other bookings. NUPE (National Union of Public Employees) provided premises in Clapham at a peppercorn rent at one stage (*cut, see above*). Greater London Council grants from 1981-1986.

Performance Venues

Toured England, Scotland, Wales. Invited to Interdrama '78, an international youth theater festival in West Berlin for young workers/apprentices.

The company performed outdoors on building sites, at demonstrations and on picket lines, and at festivals. Indoor performances took place at trade union branch meetings, trades council meetings, national conferences, and at trade union weekend schools. These were usually in

hotels at seaside resorts such as Eastbourne or Scarborough, occasionally at union headquarters.

Broadside also performed in occupied factories and hospitals, for tenants' associations, for the Co-operative movement and WEA (Workers' Education Association), for the women's movement and anti-racist/anti-fascist events, including benefits, at colleges and universities, and occasionally in schools. Examples: The Big Lump toured building sites in Brent and Glasgow and was performed at Tower Hill in support of the jailed Shrewsbury building workers; Divide and Rule Britannia was performed on the Grunwick picket line; We Have the Power of the Winds (*The title came from a song by a Portuguese singer/songwriter Vitorino, we sang the song in the production.*) played to Portuguese migrant workers in West London and around the clock to the workers occupying the Plessey factory in Kirby, Liverpool; The Working Women's Charter Show was performed at a benefit (organised by members of Broadside) for the striking Grosvenor House Hotel chambermaids.

Audience

Working people, usually organised, often in struggle. Ethnic minorities, immigrants, migrant workers. Women (and supportive men) involved in campaigns for equality. Tenants and community organisations. Students and pupils. Supporters of Anti-Apartheid and the Portuguese Solidarity Campaign. The company would not perform for left-wing political groups unless they were engaged in broad front work with other organisations, where the issues were to the fore, not the party. An exception was sometimes made for the Labour Party.

Company Work and Process

Broadside's working methods developed out of Kathleen McCreery and Richard Stourac's practical experiences with Red Ladder in Britain and Die Komödianten in Vienna, as well as their extensive research into the international workers' theatre movements of the 20s and 30s (See the book Theatre as a Weapon, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). They visited and learned from contemporaries such as the Chicano and Puerto Rican theatres in California and Spanish Harlem, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Alive and Trucking Theatre of Minneapolis.

Bertolt Brecht was an important influence for both founders, who believed that art and theatre could contribute to the class struggle, by dynamically engaging with workers and progressive organisations and campaigns.

Broadside was aware that for theatre to be a revolutionary tool they could not impose the results or conclusions of a learning process, but had to take audiences on a journey, starting from the existing consciousness of audience members. Their plays had to be responsive to the concerns of audiences, topical, and flexible enough to fit into a variety of non-theatre venues and events.

They drew on popular forms such as Irish music, cabaret and commedia as well as shadow play, living newspaper, montage and the epic theatre forms developed by Brecht. When Ian Saville joined, he contributed his considerable skills as a conjurer.

Broadside was sceptical about 'professional politicians' only too willing to use and abuse the group's appeal to workers, and try to impose their analysis and party line. The company preferred to tell workers' own stories and draw on their first hand experiences in their plays, without being dogmatic or patronising.

The subject of their first play, the 'lump' –(casual employment in the building trades, cash in hand, no tax or insurance) was suggested by Tom Durkin of Brent Trades Council. We Have the Power of the Winds – (1977) was written by Kathleen in response to a request from Alvaro Miranda, who said the Portuguese Solidarity Campaign could do with a play to attract people to their meetings.

Once a particular issue was chosen, the company would do extensive research. As an example, while working on The Big Lump – (1975), Broadside members met with and interviewed shop stewards: 'We spent hours on Sunday mornings in their kitchens, when they were off work, recording these wonderful conversations with them about the industry...' (Kathleen McCreery, 2013). The material gathered was then used to devise a script, which showed who benefited (Wimpey, Laing and Co., and layers of contractors and sub-contractors) and who suffered (the workers injured due to the frenetic pace and appalling safety standards, the tenants whose council houses were shoddily built) through a humorous yet poignant story, on a set made of scaffolding, with Irish music played by Andy Hudson on the accordion. The stewards attended rehearsals, showed the actors how to lay bricks, brought them costumes and props ('fell off the back of a lorry!'), and organised performances for them. One of them, a blacklisted scaffolder, performed in The Big Lump for a time.

In this way Broadside developed a repertoire of plays, of different lengths and styles, which could easily be adapted, sometimes at short notice, to

suit a number of issues relevant to the organisations they were working with. For example, The Working Women's Charter Show (1975), devised to show the interconnectedness of women's issues, and to expose the limitations of equal pay legislation and the discrimination women faced at work, home, in education, became popular because it was made of a rolling programme of sketches and songs that could be adapted to whatever was topical. Its subjects, ranging from child-care to equal pay, contraception and abortion to domestic violence, suited a variety of venues and organisations, including nursery campaigns, women's refuges, the National Abortion Campaign, and trade union schools.

The company developed warm relationships with their audiences, often staying with them while touring or supporting occupations, strikes and picket lines. The workers' feedback after the show was vital for Broadside, and they encouraged discussion, enabling people to share their criticisms and doubts, beliefs and personal dilemmas, and tell their stories. Discussions were recorded or transcribed by cast members and used for their learning process, with the stories, comments and criticism often inspiring rewrites. 'They taught us and they informed our plays. It wasn't about us coming and telling them what to do, it was them telling us how it worked... We would then use our own political abilities to analyse and look at what was going on and put that into context, and give it back to them...' (Kathleen McCreery, 2013)

At trade union socials, the company performed songs following the show and discussion, and encouraged audience members to sing, play, recite poetry too. Scottish and Welsh audiences in particular were ready to raise their voices.

During the last 5 years of its existence, with support from the GLC, the company produced two new plays: Cinderella and The World of Work (1982/83) about women in the workplace, and Brits (1985/85), an anti-imperialist play, as well as revue shows of songs, interspersed with short sketches. When the Greater London Council was abolished in 1986 the company disbanded.