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Rethinking the Post-war British Theatre: Monumentality, Sean Kenny, and the State c. 1963-1973

The introduction after 1946 of state and local subsidies for British theatre recast it as something of a public service – even an institution – that was implicated in debates about meaningful recreation. New theatres of the 1950s and 1960s were thought by some to connote their new role through their contemporary appearance and their planning, but they remained relatively traditional pieces of public architecture. For Sean Kenny, an architect and stage designer who had worked with Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop, a more fundamental change was needed. His 1967 scheme for the Welsh National Theatre proposed a mobile theatre that would be transported on five lorries.

Kenny rejected established ideas of public building (epitomised by Denys Lasdun’s massive National Theatre in London) for something ephemeral and anti-institutional. Yet the Welsh proposal was enthusiastically championed by Jennie Lee, Minister for the Arts, as a template for a new wave of state patronage, equivalent to her proposed ‘University of the Air’. Ultimately, however, it was not realised: Kenny’s principal built work within the theatre comprised two more conventional (if nonetheless adaptable) venues.

Although subsidy prompted a wave of theatre-building-as-institution, so too did the institution seem, in the Mobile Theatre, to be transcending architecture, with government taking an apparently and perhaps unexpectedly radical stance. This paper concludes that architecture was ultimately a means to an end for Jennie Lee. At the same time, the Mobile Theatre was not simply evidence of Lee’s iconoclasm but also responded to the economic difficulties that increasingly conspired against the 1960s vogue for planning. The paper also notes that we should look beyond theatre as a simple agent of control or even vehicle for the formation of ‘cultural capital’; rather, the production and reception of theatre was shaped by multiple agents, including audiences.

In 1963, the architect Peter Moro wrote that British theatre was “undergoing a revolution. Playwrights are exploring new subjects which are presented by producers in unusual ways; old plays are given new interpretations; actors, backed by the new techniques in lighting, use new techniques ...”¹ During this period, Britain also experienced a theatre-building boom. Between the early 1960s and 1980, the Association of British Theatre Technicians commented on 232 schemes.² Many of these theatres received grants towards their capital and revenue costs from central and local government, and the British Actors’ Equity Association declared that the Arts were now “a public service”.³ What did this mean for its buildings? This paper considers first the new structures of theatre, then discusses a civic approach to their design, and finally explores a more radical attempt to re-think the institution.⁴

Structures of theatre

When the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry opened in 1958, it attracted attention not only as the first all-new professional theatre in Britain for two decades, but also as the country’s first new civic theatre.⁵ Before the Second World War, theatre had been largely a commercial activity, but subsequently it increasingly received public subsidy. Central government funding was channelled through the Arts Council of Great Britain, founded in 1946, while local authority subsidy was enabled by the Local Government Act of 1948, which permitted authorities to spend the product of a sixpenny rate (a local tax) on the Arts. During the 1950s, the political Left, in particular, informed partly by the thinking of the likes of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, advocated support for supposedly meaningful forms of recreation in order to steer the apparently newly affluent society away from commercialism and, potentially, the influence of America.⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that the Arts Council’s budget was significantly increased after Labour’s 1964 election victory, under the direction of the newly appointed Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee,⁷ allowing it in 1965 to formalise its support for capital projects through a new programme of grants entitled ‘Housing the Arts’. These developments, which found parallels in other European states, took place within the context of the new Welfare State.⁸



Fig. 1 Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1958, Coventry City Architect’s Department. Colin Westwood/RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

We should be careful not to misunderstand the nature of state intervention. Theatre programming usually remained the responsibility of the Artistic Director, theatre Board membership was typically mixed, and the Arts Council operated at “arm’s length” from government. Only rarely was the Council itself a manager, while the capital projects which received Housing the Arts money were instigated locally, from existing Repertory Companies improving their accommodation to city authorities acting themselves as client, sometimes with little consideration of how a building would be used.⁹ Meanwhile, local-authority grants were modest, especially during the 1950s.¹⁰ Finally, capital projects found support from charities, businesses and individuals, with Housing the Arts grants never exceeding 33 per cent of a project’s total cost, while even subsidised theatres drew a significant part of their income from the box office.¹¹

Nonetheless, subsidy transformed the practice and structures of theatre. The Arts Council prioritised non-profit repertory theatres with resident companies of actors, the number of which rose from 29 in 1952 to 52 in 1970 at the expense of the hitherto-dominant commercial theatre.¹² The 1950s also witnessed a growing number of civic theatres, funded by local authorities. Ultimately, subsidy supplied a safety net that to some extent reduced commercial pressures, not only in terms of programming but also theatre design. Subsidised theatres could be smaller than commercial touring venues, and offered a stable context in which particular agendas might be developed, not least new approaches to the actor/audience relationship, novel stage forms, and, especially from the late 1960s (following the abolition of theatre censorship), more radical forms of artistic practice.

Modern monuments

The idea of theatre as a “public service” suggested new conceptions of its buildings, akin to municipal libraries or swimming pools,¹³ which could thus embody civic pride.¹⁴ In Nottingham, for example, the directors of the Playhouse suggested to the city council in the late 1950s that a new theatre would aid the city’s “greater reputation”,¹⁵ while in Sheffield it was claimed in 1971 that the replacement of the old theatre would enhance “Sheffield’s image as an emerging city with an international reputation”.¹⁶ Such discussions had tangible results. In Nottingham in 1957, for example, the design brief for the new Playhouse stated



Fig. 2 Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1971, Graham Winteringham. Photograph by Alistair Fair, 2013.

that a theatre supported by the city authorities demanded a new architectural approach;¹⁷ by implication, theatre could be a significant piece of specifically public architecture.¹⁸ Indeed, the Arts Council in 1955 criticised the tendency to conceive theatres as a “municipal box of bricks” within a civic complex.¹⁹ Such complexes were constructed, however. For example, Birmingham’s new Repertory Theatre (1971) occupied one side of a new square next to council offices and close to the Central Library and Art Gallery; an alternative site nearer to established (commercial) entertainment venues was rejected.²⁰ More extreme was Theatr Clwyd in Mold, North Wales (1976), a monolith located within an introverted civic estate alongside council offices and the Crown Court on the edge of the town.

Furthermore, the distinction between the overtly Modern architecture of these theatres and their pre-war counterparts could be understood not simply as the inevitable product of fashion, but in two key ways: first, as evidence of a new context, and second, as emblematic of the new publicly supported theatre.²¹ *The Stage*, for example, wrote in 1965 of the “new image of the living theatre” created by these “glass and steel playhouses”, intended for all.²² We might productively read these buildings in terms of a “modern monumentality” which promised a new public architecture by, for example, assigning the users of these theatres a role in completing the building through their presence and movement.²³ Nonetheless, despite contemporary appearances, this “new image” drew on established ideas. An influential precedent had been set in 1951 by the Royal Festival Hall, of which Miles Glendinning has written that “in its near symmetrical massiveness and stand-alone situation, and in its very building type, it formed part of an essentially nineteenth-century tradition of the grand public building”.²⁴ Similarly, David Heathcote has remarked, in a discussion of London’s Barbican Centre, that the “language of Brutalism” supplied a suitably weighty vocabulary for the 1960s public building.²⁵



Fig. 3 National Theatre, London, 1976. Foyers of the Lyttelton Theatre, c. 1976, Denys Lasdun. Lasdun Archive/RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

Perhaps the best example of this approach was the National Theatre in London (1976), grandly conceived in Parliament as a kind of ornament to the nation.²⁶ While Denys Lasdun's concrete strata suggested permeability, reached out to the city, and seemed to invite – even need – occupation,²⁷ the result was massive and expensive. It was perhaps the National that the director Michael Elliott had in mind when in 1973 he appealed on BBC Radio for a more provisional approach. He asked, “shouldn't we try to attain a certain lightness and sense of improvisation, and sometimes build in materials that do not require a bomb to move them? In short, shouldn't we stop building for posterity?”²⁸ Elliott's ideas informed Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre of 1976, a steel and glass insertion within a preserved Victorian commercial hall. However, during the 1960s a similarly provisional approach was developed by the prominent designer Sean Kenny in the form of the Welsh Mobile Theatre, a way to bring theatre to sparsely populated rural Wales.

The Welsh Mobile Theatre

The proposed Welsh Mobile Theatre was revealed to the press in January 1967.²⁹ To be used by the Welsh Theatre Company, which had been founded in 1962,³⁰ it was described as a shell of folded aluminium panels which could be dismantled and transported by lorry. As well as dressing rooms and a restaurant, potentially served by vending machines, the structure would house an auditorium for 300-350 people whose stage could be used in three different formats: proscenium arch, thrust, and in-the-round.³¹ The dimensions of the shell were based on the size of the lorries to be used (40 feet by 8 feet 6 inches) and the height of the lowest bridge on the touring route (14 feet). It was anticipated that a network of sites would be created at which the theatre could be erected. As the inclusion of services within this structure was felt to pose difficulties, each site was to have a central duct supplying electricity and ventilation. The estimated cost was £120,000.



Fig. 4 Sean Kenny, model of the Welsh Mobile Theatre, c. 1967. Jennie Lee (third from right) and others view the model. *The Times*, January 19, 1967. Reproduced with the permission of News Syndication.

The scheme had been devised by Sean Kenny.³² Kenny, born in 1932, studied Architecture in Dublin between 1946 and 1950 and then with Frank Lloyd Wright.³³ He subsequently had a diverse career encompassing the creation of theatre sets (notably for *Oliver!* in 1960), exhibition design and nightclub interiors. At Expo 67, Montreal, he contributed the Gyrotron, a ride whose cabins passed through 'space' and a 'volcano' before being 'swallowed' by a giant monster whose stomach reverberated to the sound of pop music; he also designed the introductory section of Basil Spence's British Pavilion, using light, sound and smoke to present a historical panorama.³⁴

In 1964, Kenny criticised the fixity of the established theatre, and particularly the usual proscenium-arch arrangement: "If you wanted a Picasso, and you said, 'Look, Picasso, here is a frame, paint me a picture,' he would throw you out. He would be right."³⁵ In 1961 he collaborated with the director Peter Hall on a scheme for the alteration of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, in which the proscenium-arch stage was to be replaced with an open platform.³⁶ The proposal remained unbuilt, but in 1963 he designed an auditorium for the Dunes Hotel at Las Vegas in which the stage comprised an assembly of disc-shaped platforms to be swung into position and rearranged using hydraulic arms.³⁷ This abstract flexibility recalled many of his theatre settings.³⁸ At times, stage and architectural design were connected in his work. For the National Theatre Company in London he not only altered the Old Vic, the theatre that served as its home between 1963 and 1976, but also designed an acclaimed production of *Hamlet* in 1963. Given these interests, Kenny's involvement in the Welsh project was logical.³⁹ In 1968, he described it in terms which anticipated Michael Elliott: "I am still developing this scheme and trying to make everything in it as expendable as possible. Maybe one day the ideal theatre will be made of paper, so we can burn it down after each performance."⁴⁰ Theatre, he said in 1966, was an activity, not an architectural structure.⁴¹

Kenny thought that the Welsh theatre would offer "an entirely new image" of performance space,⁴² certainly less permanent and perhaps also less civic. His approach to theatre was emblematic of his enthusiasm more generally for a progressive architecture that made efficient use of technology. For example, it was reported that his ideal house "would be made up of moving parts to create change".⁴³ His interests thus evoked the futurism of Archigram and the writing of Reyner Banham, while his specific advocacy of reconfigurable performance space fits within an architectural lineage represented most famously by Walter Gropius' Totaltheater proposal of 1927. There are parallels with Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt, a scheme of 1965 in which university education would be taken around the English Midlands on railway lines, and with the Fun Palace developed from 1962 by Price for the theatre director Joan Littlewood as a participatory riposte to traditional theatre. Perhaps significantly, Kenny had worked with Littlewood in the late 1950s.⁴⁴ Yet Kenny's position was complex. On the one hand, it was reported that Kenny "revolts against the china ducks ... and lack of taste in so many people's homes",⁴⁵ while, when discussing his staging for *The Flying Dutchman* at Covent Garden, which featured a series of abstract moving platforms, he noted that he had initially been minded to refuse the commission, believing the opera's

subject too “romantic”.⁴⁶ At the same time, Kenny maintained that theatre needed a special architecture. Eschewing mass culture – not unlike Hoggart *et al* – he argued that “if you’re able to drop into the theatre like a drug store, it’ll be too readily available.” Instead, “there must be a certain amount of struggle involved, a certain sense of pilgrimage.”⁴⁷

Also complicating matters are the origins of the project. The Arts Council had in 1959 specifically highlighted the need for new performance venues in Wales and Scotland.⁴⁸ The increased budgets it enjoyed after 1964 allowed the issue to be addressed, with a number of schemes being proposed, including by 1968 a new theatre at Bangor.⁴⁹ The Mobile Theatre was conceived in this expansionist moment, with the initial Feasibility Study being funded by the Arts Council’s Welsh Committee.⁵⁰ One idea was that the Mobile would accommodate the Welsh Theatre Company until a future Welsh National Theatre was ready. The Company’s Director of Productions suggested that it would not prosper if it continued to perform in substandard village halls.⁵¹ However, it is clear that Arts Council officials had a broader view. Gwyn Jones, Chairman of the Welsh Committee, suggested that the Mobile would have a long-term role in taking “the living theatre into many areas of Wales which cannot provide it for themselves.”⁵² In this respect, the Arts Council saw itself “at the moment actively promoting what we think may be the most important theatrical innovation of our day”.

The proposed Mobile Theatre, therefore, was not some countercultural initiative in the mould of the Fun Palace, but rather embodied the Arts Council’s interest in bringing professional theatre to a wide audience, in a way that reflected the dispersed population and difficult geography of much of rural Wales. Furthermore, the idea was embraced by Jennie Lee herself as a model for wider emulation. In January 1967, it was reported that Kenny’s proposals had so impressed her that she had asked for the model to be left with her in London.⁵³ She commented: “I have always been eager to see the development of mobiles because I know of no other way in which we can reach through to the villages and smaller towns.”⁵⁴ In an interview, Lee declared expansively that the “age of the pyramid” was over and suggested that the mobile was the theatre of the future, an idea already aired in her White Paper on the Arts of 1965.⁵⁵

Lee intended, in her words, to make Britain “a gayer and more cultivated country”.⁵⁶ In 1965, she stated that “We have only accomplished half a social revolution ... Too many people are culturally semi-literate, through no fault of their own ... The opportunity to enjoy art has mostly been restricted to people with money and leisure. I believe it is one of the duties of a Socialist government to change that.”⁵⁷ Her view of “art”, or at least the kind of art that deserved support, paralleled that of the Arts Council. In 1967, she reiterated her belief that her “aim was to make the best in all the Arts available to a wider and younger public” with “no reduction in standards.”⁵⁸ Some felt excluded from the Arts, Lee went on, because of their home or educational background, and as a result became “aggressive or uncertain”. Thus the *Telegraph* considered the Mobile Theatre as the “missing link in her conception of ‘democracy in depth’”,⁵⁹ implying its wider transformative potential and embodying the extent to which it was bound up in wider debates about the place of culture in countering the potentially negative impulses of affluence.

Ultimately, however, the Welsh Mobile Theatre remained unrealised, being abandoned during 1968 as costs rose;⁶⁰ in addition, reports suggest opposition from those who preferred a more conventional Welsh National Theatre.⁶¹ Experimental theatre was nonetheless increasingly supported by the Arts Council,⁶² but by the time that it launched an investigation into the potential of mobile theatre, in 1974, Kenny was dead. His principal architectural legacy to theatre comprises two venues. First, the New London Theatre (1973), which featured a flexible auditorium.⁶³ Such flexibility at this scale was novel in Britain, being usually confined to small studios; here it was considered likely to maximise the usage of one of the few professional theatres in post-war Britain built and run without any subsidy. Second was the Gardner Arts Centre at the University of Sussex (1969), where Kenny, as theatre consultant to Basil Spence, conceived what he termed a flexible “room” for performance.⁶⁴ Just as Spence and Kenny had been brought together at Expo 67 by a third party (the British Council),⁶⁵ Kenny’s involvement was seemingly at the behest of the Gardner’s director, Walter Eysselinck,⁶⁶ whose wish for architectural lightness and transparency clashed with the solidity favoured by Spence.⁶⁷ The plan recalls a drawing by Kenny of the Dunes scheme, hinting at the nature of the collaboration with Spence.⁶⁸ Clothed in Spence’s monumental brick volumes, the result might seem quite unlike the Mobile Theatre, but in intention it was similarly transformative, the aim being to “repair” those students whose upbringing had lacked the Arts.⁶⁹ It was essentially the Mobile Theatre inverted: the student audience was now the transient element, rather than the performance structure.

Theatre architecture, institutions and change

How, in conclusion, do these examples allow us to refine our understanding of institutional architecture? At first glance, Kenny’s greater luck with fixed buildings seems significant. Certainly architecture both public and private had a fundamental role in re-forming post-war Britain, from the house-building campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s to the new schools, universities and town centres of the period. The early 1960s, in particular, have been characterised by Glen O’Hara as a period in which concerted planning efforts loomed large, not least where infrastructural schemes were concerned.⁷⁰ An interest in the transformative and symbolic potential of architecture crossed political lines. It was the Conservatives who during the 1950s called for 300,000 new houses annually, and who commissioned Leslie Martin to redesign the government centre at Whitehall, a scheme which subsequently also embodied the “white heat” of Labour’s scientific revolution, though it remained unbuilt.⁷¹ In the theatre context, Housing the Arts was a plan for building, if an abstract and responsive one, and a means by which projects might be catalysed.

At the same time, the example of the Mobile Theatre and that of theatre more generally cautions against a narrow view of public architecture in writing the history of the institution in 1960s Britain. While new, transient approaches to theatre architecture are often associated with the likes of Price and Littlewood in the 1960s, or theatremakers such as Peter Brook and Michael Elliott in the 1970s, the Mobile – like Lee’s other significant project, the Open University (OU) – suggests that the state itself could be radical. In a way, we can sense it pushing against the post-war model in which its funding was married to a view of public

architecture which, though novel in planning and appearance, was at heart fundamentally conservative in its solidity and permanence. To some extent, the search for such new forms reflected the increasingly difficult economic circumstances that undid many other ambitious public schemes from the middle of the decade,⁷² and which, indeed, eventually forced the abandonment of the Welsh scheme. However, the shift also reflected Lee's interest in the 'ends' rather than the 'means'; she saw Housing the Arts not as an attempt to create new architecture for its own sake but rather as a way to build new audiences through better and more comfortable provision.⁷³ The Mobile Theatre embodied this intention in a particularly pure, even rhetorical form which evoked a sense of "white heat", if not perhaps as literally as the OU, much of whose teaching was delivered by radio and television.

Yet we might ask: radical as the Mobile was in form and as much as it suggests an innovative approach on the part of the state, in intention was it so different from the likes of Lasdun's National Theatre? Both recall Tony Bennett's view of the nineteenth-century museum, in which culture was co-opted 'for the purposes of governing', with the museum promoting a certain taste and instilling particular behaviours.⁷⁴ Certainly it is possible to understand post-war British theatre – whether monumental or mobile – as a means by which certain groups could cement their 'cultural authority' and the population could be steered in a certain direction, their 'cultural capital' (to evoke Pierre Bourdieu) being enhanced.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, despite Lee's interventions, the idea of a unidirectional force is problematic in the final analysis, countered by the responsive if admittedly targeted nature of Arts Council funding, the independence of practitioners, and the mixed nature of funding. Ultimately, models of power depend on the extent to which they are absorbed, and in this respect the voluntary nature of theatregoing, like museum attendance (something perhaps overlooked by Bennett), is important. Audiences did increase, particularly among the young, but there is evidence that their social make-up was less altered,⁷⁶ and the same might be said of their tastes. Perhaps the last word should go to one disgruntled patron of the Colchester Repertory Theatre. On being told that their complaint hinged on a question of "idiom", they replied: "what you call idiom, I call filth".⁷⁷ Kenny's Mobile Theatre might in its pantotechnions have resembled the circus coming to town, but would it have been as popular? Maybe the advocates of the transformation of Britain through the Arts had their work cut out.

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