

## ”Theatre should be free, like air or love”. Joan Littlewood and the imperative of collective creation

Răzvan MUREȘAN •

**Abstract:** This paper aims to investigate the theatrical practices that define the work of one of the most influential voices in 20th century theatre. The practices and methods developed by Joan Littlewood over four decades of work outline a highly personal, inventive and dynamic aesthetic in which the emphasis is on creating cohesion within the team. The team is seen as a ”composite mind”, an ensemble that through rigorous physical and vocal training, complex theme documentation and improvisation, comes to function organically and is able to explore more freely and intensely. The use of a wide variety of means and formulas - music hall, *commedia dell'arte*, clowning, mime, but also elaborate lighting, cinematic projections, sound effects - and the involvement of the audience in the scenic approach are also defining elements of the theatre promoted by Joan Littlewood.

**Keywords:** collaborative theatre, actor training, improvisation, British theatre, Joan Littlewood

Joan Littlewood played a major role in the revival of British stage after 1945, creating not only of a new way of making theatre, but also of a new philosophy about this art. A renaissance personality, director, actor, choreographer, pedagogue, political activist, leader and mentor, Joan Littlewood left an impressive legacy, even if for a long time her activity remained in semi-obscurity and encountered the rigidity of structures that were not very open to innovation and experimentation. In fact, she placed herself anti-establishment from the very beginning and continued to challenge and defy the rules until the end of her career.

At 16, Joan gets a scholarship at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), one of the oldest and most sought-after drama schools in the UK, but her experience here will be short and disappointing. What she finds here are classes focused almost exclusively on classical theatre, manner comedy and verse. She settles in Manchester, where she joins the communist-oriented theatre movements and establishes, together with Ewan MacColl, the companies Theatre of Action (in 1934) and Theatre Union (1936). The stated aim of these initiatives was to make an engaged art that addresses working-class communities and brings to the fore the social and political issues of the

---

• Theatre director; university lecturer at the Faculty of Theatre and Film of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

time. "The Theatre must face up to the problems of its time: it cannot ignore the poverty and human suffering which increases every day. It cannot, with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time. Means Test suicides, wars, fascism and the million sordid accidents reported in the daily press. If the theatre of to-day would reach the heights achieved four thousand years ago in Greece and four hundred years ago in Elizabethan England it must face up to such problems. [...] The Theatre Union says that in facing up to the problems of our time and by intensifying our efforts to get at the essence of reality, we are also attempting to solve our own theatrical problems both technical and ideological."<sup>1</sup> The aesthetic dimension will, however, prevail over the ideological one, as MacColl and Littlewood abandon the street shows in favour of increasingly elaborated performances, in which the freedom to experiment and, equally, the careful preparation and the intense training go first. This leads to their exclusion from the local organization of the Communist Party, being accused of individualism and placing art above politics <sup>2</sup>.

The experience of street theatre in this period, through the use of direct addressing, the interaction with the audience, the clear and accessible message, the dynamic staging of short scenes and the use of songs, will leave its mark on the later productions. She comes into contact with the writings of the great European practitioners, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Piscator, Appia, Eisenstein or Rudolf Laban, she becomes familiar with inter-war art, expressionism and constructivism, but also with Renaissance theatre or *commedia dell'arte*. She is equally attracted to street culture, forms of popular entertainment, music hall, cinema and new technologies. All this eclectic mix of sources will coagulate into an original theatrical vocabulary, flexible and dynamic, which places the actor's body and movement at its centre. Despite the limited resources, her explorations related to space, image, lighting, sound, songs and choreography go further with each performance, proving an inexhaustible imagination. Being in a stated opposition to "bourgeois" and naturalistic theatre, Littlewood rejects the conventions in which they were blocked, using scenographic elements composed of scaffolding, ramps, stairs, as well as elaborate compositions of lights and shadows, instead of realistic, heavy sets.

This original and, at the same time, radical aesthetic for that time is visible from the very first performances. *John Bullion* (1934) is "a constructivist ballet with words"<sup>3</sup> and a manifesto against the great industrialists and businessmen for whom war is a source of enrichment. The production puts together stylized movements, songs, photo projections, an electric screen on which information is presented in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ewan MacColl *apud* Holdsworth, Nadine, *Joan Littlewood*, e-book, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Innes, Christopher, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 74.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

manner of a television newsreel, recorded sounds, mannequins with gas masks. In *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1937), based on Jaroslav Hašek's famous novel and on *Lysistrata* (1937) by Aristofan, there are used sequential structures, dance interludes, elements of burlesque comedy taken from the silent film, cinematographic projections on the background.

The heightened tensions in Europe at the end of the 1930s, the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), unemployment and the economic crisis become working materials for Joan Littlewood in her quest to create a popular theatre and a civic platform. Meanwhile, the creative process and aesthetics of the shows attract new elements amalgamated with nonchalance and nonconformism. The story of the revolt against a feudal tyrant from *Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega becomes a direct allusion to Franco's dictatorial regime, while *Last Edition* reconsiders the model of the *living newspaper* theatrical documentary and creates a fragmented radiography of the 1940 moment, "a blatant critique of the politics of compromise evident in the run up to War and a call for the working class to unite across Europe and fight the forces of capitalism"<sup>4</sup>.

Incorporating news and political statements from the press of the time, folk music, declamations, dance moments, *Last Edition* is "a rich amalgam of styles including dance-drama, agit-prop satire, folk, burlesque, pageantry and mass declamation in an overall effect . . . not unlike a fast-moving variety show."<sup>5</sup> In relation to the formalism of the period shows, the manner of placing the audience on three sides is also innovative, so that the spectators can see scenes that are "played simultaneously or in carefully orchestrated counter-point"<sup>6</sup>. The controversial topic proposed by *Last Edition* generates friction with the institution of censorship, the intervention of the police during a performance, the arrest of the two leaders, MacColl and Littlewood, and then the ban on further performances. The theatre group continued training, focusing mainly on movement and vocal training, until 1942, when, due to bombing, the activity was interrupted.

After the war, in 1945, Littlewood, MacColl and some of the former collaborators reunite under the name of Theatre Workshop. The new name signals a growing interest in a theatre seen as a process in which research, training and collaboration are essential elements. The company remains faithful to the left-wing politics, with a stated mission to use art as a form of communication with those social segments or communities that are ignored by "high culture", but also to explore the ruling topics of the time - austerity, poverty, the decline of the British Empire, the nuclear threat, the cold war. For Joan Littlewood this moment marked the beginning

---

<sup>4</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Kershaw, Baz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op.cit.*, p. 10-11.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

of an ambitious project, which initially aimed to create a constant core of actors, a group united by the interest in experimenting with a wide variety of spectacular formulas, so then to turn the company into a centre for education, research, training and dissemination of ideas.

Lack of funding and a permanent home led the company to tour endlessly in the north of England and Scotland between 1945 and 1952 and to play in non-conventional venues, abandoned buildings, industrial halls, schools, for an audience consisting mainly of workers. The conditions are often extreme and at certain times the group is forced to stop working and its members to find different commitments. It is, however, an intense, fertile period based on close collaboration within the group and on rigor in creation and training. It is also a time when the company gains notoriety, participating year after year in the Edinburgh Festival, touring Sweden, Norway, West Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The first production of Theatre Workshop brings together two very different writings: *The Flying Doctor* by Molière and *Johnny Noble*, a „ballad opera”<sup>7</sup> written by MacColl, homogenised by ”an ambitious use of light and recorded sound of artillery, aeroplanes, ships’ engines, factory noise and the street”<sup>8</sup>, but also by the use of stylised dance, elements of *commedia dell’arte*, caricature and grotesque comedy. Inventiveness can also be found at the stage-technique level: the company members built a rotating stage and a special sound reproduction device.

*Uranium 235*, a performance from 1946, explores the implications and the widespread fear generated by the discovery of atomic energy and its use as a weapon. The topic, which at first sight may seem difficult and demanding is transposed through ingenious theatrical solutions, but at the same time it is effective in capturing and keeping the interest of the spectators. For example, a waltz interspersed with verses explains the scientific discoveries of Pierre and Marie Curie, before Death takes them off the stage, and then Albert Einstein, together with his acolytes, Nils Bohr and Max Planck, burlesque comedy characters, reconstruct the process of nuclear fission through an „atomic ballet”<sup>9</sup>. This is another example of a stage experiment with elements reminiscent of the agit-prop theatre period of the 30s (the interaction with the audience, the use of microphones, actors placed among the spectators) and also, elaborate choreography, songs, masks. The episodic structure and the alert rhythm suggest a ”borrowing” from cinematographic language (moreover, Joan Littlewood declared that she wanted ”to create a flexible theatre-art, as swift moving and plastic as the cinema”<sup>10</sup>). The performance is ”a vibrant mix of music, dance, debate and

---

<sup>7</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op.cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>10</sup> Goorney, Howard, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, London, Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2008, p. 42.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

instruction”<sup>11</sup> which questions the role of science in the history of humanity: a factor of civilization and progress, respectively an instrument of evil, crimes and war. This double perspective is materialised on the stage in an expressionist key, through the confrontation between the main characters, the Scientist, on one side, respectively the Puppet Master and his secretary, Death, on the other side, who dispute their right to own and use Energy.

*The Other Animals* (1948), ”a Faustian tragedy”<sup>12</sup>, based on a writing by Ewan MacColl, proves again a complex theatrical vision, on a more abstract and philosophical direction than in the previous performances. Made from the perspective of a political prisoner who is in complete isolation for three years and goes through successive episodes of lucidity and delirium, the performance attracts attention with its subtly dosed alternation of poetry, dreamlike sequences, choral moments and polyphonic musical scores. The originality of the artistic approach is finally noticed by theatre critics: ”the company should be seen not only ‘because they give new ideas of theatre’s potentialities but because they were unique in this country’”<sup>13</sup>.

The early 1950s find the company in a very difficult situation. The lack of financial support, the rehearsals taking place in terrible conditions and the exhausting tours, are the determining factors in the decision to find a permanent home<sup>14</sup>. In January 1953, Joan Littlewood and her collaborators began work at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, a Victorian London building in an advanced state of disrepair. The moment also meant parting ways with Ewan MacColl, founding member and playwright of the company, who refused to make the change, considering that the dependence on critics and income would undermine the ideological foundation of the company.

The first emergency was to save the Theatre Royal building, included in a larger project of reconfiguring the area which involved massive demolitions. The actors effectively stood in front of the bulldozers until the authorities agreed to change the plans and keep the theatre building.<sup>15</sup> In this building, practically a ruin, in cold and wet, they lived, rehearsed and built sets. ”Actors, stage-hands, writers, directors and musicians shared and shared alike, splitting up packets of cigarettes when times

---

<sup>11</sup> Dorney, Kate, Gray, Frances, *Played in Britain. Modern Theatre in 100 Plays*, e-book, London, Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wcml.org.uk/maccoll/maccoll/theatre/scripts-and-productions>, Peggy Seeger, *Ewan MacColl, dramaturge - a thumbnail theatre chronology*.

<sup>13</sup> *The Other Animals*, Manchester Guardian, 6.07.1948, *apud* Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, op.cit., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> For *The Travellers* (1952), the last performance before moving to London, rehearsals took place in a barn, the company members slept in tents and earned money for production, transport and food by working in nearby farms.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.scene4.com/archivesqv6/jan-2007/html/andreakapsaski0107.html>, Andrea Kapsaki, *Theatre should be free, like air or love. Conversation with Joan Littlewood*.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

were bad and dodging the council inspectors who insisted that the Theatre Workshop was evading by-laws.”<sup>16</sup>

The repertoire of the first seasons was mainly focused on classical plays: Molière, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Marlowe, Bertolt Brecht (*Mother Courage* - UK opening night with Joan Littlewood in the double role of director and leading actor). The shows are far from being unnoticed, in a time when classical playwrights are on the playbills of many theatres, standing out through the modern, often controversial approach, through vitality and giving up pomp and heavy-handed delivery. Unlike the big productions that sought to ensure their success by casting stars in leading roles, Littlewood relies on group energies, on action rather than recitation, on discreet sets and complex lighting. If in 1953, Theatre Workshop was an almost unknown company in London, in just two years its visibility increased rapidly, not only in Great Britain, but also abroad, the company being invited with two shows at the Theatre Festival in Paris, together with the Opera from Peking, Berliner Ensemble and Abbey Theatre from Dublin. ”It is ironic that one of the most experimental and politically motivated companies in the period – and one which was to become associated with the theatre of working-class social reality - should have come to prominence through its productions of the classics”.<sup>17</sup>

On the 8th of May 1956, the opening night at the Royal Court Theatre, *Look Back in Anger*, revolutionised British theatre and opened the path for the "angry young men", but just two weeks later another show confirmed that it was the time for changes. *The Quare Fellow* by Brendan Behan launches a radical new voice in dramaturgy and at the same time opens a new chapter in Theatre Workshop history. The play depicts life in an Irish prison 24 hours before the execution of a convict. He is always talked about but never seen on stage. He is a kind of Godot and the play is about waiting which becomes increasingly tense as the hour of execution approaches. The stories and the dramas of people in this closed space, both prisoners and guards, the dark humor, the nostalgic or funny songs, outline a dense micro-universe, with characters, situations and relationships on the boundary between tragic and comic. The original theme, the authenticity and the naturalness of the stage solutions, made *The Quare Fellow* becoming a success both from the point of view of the audience and of the theatre critics. During rehearsals, Joan Littlewood rearranged Behan's writing and made full use of her ability to use a wide range of theatrical elements beyond the conventional stylistic unity. The creative process was mainly based on improvisations in order to reproduce the atmosphere of the prison environment as truthfully as possible. The rehearsals began with themes related to the daily life of the convicts, without the actors knowing the text of the play and the roles they were about

---

<sup>16</sup> Elsom, John, *Post-War British Theatre*, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2014, p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> Lacey, Stephen, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956-1965*, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1995, p. 69-70.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

to play. "The day to day routines were improvised, cleaning out cells, the quick smoke, the furtive conversation, trading tobacco and the boredom and meanness of prison life were explored. The improvisations had, of course, been selected by Joan with the script in mind, and when it was finally introduced, the situation and the relationships had been explored. The bulk of the work had been done and the groundwork laid for any cutting and shaping that was necessary."<sup>18</sup>

For the next five years, Joan Littlewood will focus primarily on new dramaturgy, on young playwrights who bring to the stage the lives of those on the periphery of society. The themes were new and exciting, appealing for the new audience that included the middle class and working classes, and West End managers were immediately interested keen to capitalise on their success.

*You Won't Always be on Top* (1957) by Henry Chapman was tributary to naturalism, showing in detail a day in the life of some builders. A brick wall was built from scratch in each performance, but what Joan Littlewood was most interested in was that the actors' performance and the dialogue remained constantly vivid, fresh, using improvisations for this, both in rehearsals and later in performances. The text was never definitive, and this aspect – the representation of unauthorized material – led to inevitable sanctions from the censorship. The incident also had a beneficial aspect for the company, due to the massive publicity in the press and became an important chapter in the intense campaign to abolish censorship in theatre.

Another landmark production for the late '50 is *A Taste of Honey* (1958). The playwright, Shelagh Delaney, was only 19 and, and as it was written in the programme brochure of the show, "coming from a Lancashire city which is devastated not by war but by industry and by years of prewar unemployment, she is the antithesis of London's 'angry young men'. She knows what she is angry about."<sup>19</sup>

The play is about Jo, a 17-year-old teenager who lives with her mother, Helen, in a ten flat in the north of England. Her mother leaves her and she falls in love with a young black man. She even considers marrying him, but when she becomes pregnant, the father-to-be disappears. She meets a gay student, Geoffrey, who takes on the role of surrogate father, but when Helen returns home the situation changes. As Jo is about to give birth, Helen convinces Geoffrey to leave.

The epuration and restaging were again done through themes of improvisation, so the final version of the text is the result of a close collaboration between Delaney, Littlewood and the acting team. The original landmark of Joan Littlewood can be seen in the extra comic she adds to the show, through the use of direct addressing as in the music-hall and through the special atmosphere created by the presence of a jazz trio on stage. The play was debated by critics, praises on the one side – "a significant

---

<sup>18</sup> Goorney, H., *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup><http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/25/shelagh-delaney-angry-young-woman-a-taste-of-honey>, Rachel Cooke, 2014, *Shelagh Delaney: the return of Britain's angry young woman*.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

turning point in the representation of female, working-class or gay characters”<sup>20</sup> – while other voices accused her of vulgarity or of using a fashionable recipe: ”If there is anything worse than an Angry Young Man it’s an Angry Young Woman”<sup>21</sup>. Despite the controversy, the public success assured Delaney's play a Broadway production in 1960 and a film adaptation a year later.<sup>22</sup>

In the next production, *The Hostage* (1958), Joan Littlewood shows once again her passion for *music-hall*, but also for new theatrical experiments. The play takes place in the background of the conflicts in Northern Ireland and is based on a true story. A young English soldier is taken hostage in exchange for an IRA<sup>23</sup> member, who is to be hanged and in order not to be discovered, the soldier is locked up in a house of prostitution in Dublin, a place populated by the strangest characters – prostitutes, transvestites, IRA sympathizers and members, religious fanatics, secret agents. Starting from an incomplete and chaotic text provided by Brendan Behan, Joan Littlewood proposes a daring and unpredictable performance that alternates direct speech with action and songs, assumed play with out of character, serious tones with comic ones. To fill in the gaps in the original play, Littlewood used improvisations on the text and musical inserts of different kinds, seeking a formula uninhibited by convention, in which the audience was invited to participate.<sup>24</sup> So that, *The Hostage* becomes ”a masterpiece . . . It crowds in tragedy and comedy, bitterness and love, caricature and portrayal, triviality and eloquence, patriotism and cynicism, symbolism and music-hall songs all on top of one another, apparently higgledy-piggledy, and yet wonderfully combining into a spiritual unity”<sup>25</sup>. It is at the same time a political cabaret with specific targets: nationalism, the British colonial system, the Catholic Church, racial and sexual intolerance.

Despite its success in recent years, Theatre Workshop was constantly facing the threat of bankruptcy. Benefiting from minimal funding from the Arts Council, the company became dependent on transferring shows to West End theatres, but this formula does not solve the problem, it only ameliorated it for a short time. The transfer system had profoundly changed the way the company operated: ”the awareness of the need for movement and voice training and the very distinctive quality of the earlier productions was lost”<sup>26</sup>. It was not the lack of audience or the recognition from theatre

---

<sup>20</sup> Shellard, Dominic, *British Theatre Since the War*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> Daily Mail *apud* Dorney K., Gray F., *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> The film was directed by Tony Richardson and became a classic of British cinema. *A Taste of Honey* won 4 Bafta awards, including Best Picture and Best Screenplay.

<sup>23</sup> Irish Republican Army, military organization formed in 1917 to fight for Irish independence from Great Britain.

<sup>24</sup> Also, Behan, who was in the audience, had more or less fixed interventions during the show.

<sup>25</sup> Hobson, H., *Triumph at Stratford East*, The Sunday Times, 19.10.1958, *apud*. Holdsworth, N., *op.cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Goorney, H., *op. cit.*, p. 162.



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

critics, but, paradoxically, the success that undermined the cohesion and homogeneity of the group. An important part of the valuable actors, educated and trained for many years within the company, had disappeared to more financially attractive areas, either commercial theatres, television or film. The pressure of a continuously renewed repertoire had a direct impact on a progressive reduction in preparation and exploration time. "You cannot train an actor overnight, let alone a company. Success was going to kill us"<sup>27</sup>, Joan Littlewood said in 1961.

After an absence of two years, Littlewood returns to make *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, iconic event of the 60s and the apogee of the Theatre Workshop company. The idea for the show came from the director of the Theatre Royal, Gerry Raffles, who had listened to a program on BBC radio in which information and statistics about the First World War were ironically commented on with the help of songs from the period<sup>28</sup>. Only the songs were kept, some from propaganda, others from the repertoire of entertainment shows, full of humor, nostalgic or childish, then the team went through an extensive process of investigating the documentary materials (specialized books, press articles, memoirs, letters, interviews, photographs), from which resulted a series of themes explored meticulously through of improvisations.

From the very beginning Littlewood avoided any naturalistic approach, choosing an eclectic formula based on elements of the music-hall show. The master of ceremonies and the audience interaction, brightly coloured lighting, comedy scenes and musical interludes all came from this spectacular area. Instead of military uniforms, the actors are given Pierrot's white costume, the famous character from the *commedia dell'arte*: "In theatrical terms, the pierrot costumes become stark Brechtian alienating devices that constantly remind the audience that they are watching actors playing pierrots playing soldiers or representing real-life military personnel."<sup>29</sup>. Pierrot, often seen as an alter-ego of the artist or of the outsider, can also be interpreted here as an alter-ego of the Theatre Workshop actor and, at the same time, a direct reference to a form of entertainment which had disappeared, but which was very popular in Great Britain fifty years ago.

The show begins in this joyful atmosphere created by clown actors, music and lighting. A master of ceremonies opens the performance which seems to be a variety show and removes the fourth wall barrier from the very beginning: "We've got songs for you, a few battles and some jokes"<sup>30</sup>, he talks with the audience and engages them into the dialogue, then he makes sure the actors are ready to begin "the ever-popular

---

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/sep/23/guardianobituaries.arts>, John Ezard, Michael Billington, *Joan Littlewood*.

<sup>28</sup> *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, original version edited and introduced by Joan Littlewood, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op.cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *op. cit.* p.12.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

War Game".<sup>31</sup> There follow episodes which are generally essentialized, in which the stage performance enters into a precisely orchestrated and often antithetical dialogue with the other elements: the sound collage (songs and sounds) and the documentary component. The last one gives the audience the raw, non-theatrical image of the war, through posters and photos from the archive projected on a large screen that descends in the background, respectively through information and statistics provided by a news panel<sup>32</sup> above the stage. The show becomes a composite construction that relies on radical changes of rhythm and tone, on comic or ironic counterpoint, on the permanent tension that arises from the juxtaposition of very diverse aesthetics: dance theatre, realistic game, documentary, parody, *commedia dell'arte*, circus, music hall. Far from being a simple practicing of some scenic means, the show emphasizes the absurdity of war, proposing an alternative to the "official" version of the history books. This anti-war manifesto, in which, for the first time, conflict is seen from the perspective of the ordinary soldier, abandons false patriotism, denouncing the hypocrisy of "just wars" and the manipulation mechanisms of a society in which the individual at the base of the social pyramid is often merely a tool for political, economic or military purposes. The focus shifts from heroism to resistance and survival, from victorious military strategies to amateurism and incompetence.

Using a cinematographic montage, the show easily traverses time and space, offering a complex and disturbing history lesson, through a succession of disparate episodes. Firstly, spectators watch a circus parade where each clown represents one of the great powers – France, Germany, Great Britain, Austria, Russia. It is the summer of 1914, and despite appearances, the atmosphere is one of suspicion, with each nation watching the movements of its rivals and seeking to hide its true intentions behind pacifist declarations. A gunshot and the news panel showing "Sarajevo" mark the moment that triggers the war. English, French and Belgian generals try to establish a common plan, but language barriers generate comic confusion. An injured soldier is not transported by ambulance because it is reserved for officers, instead he is comforted by a nurse: "don't worry, we'll have you back in the firing line within a week".<sup>33</sup>

Parody and caricature are the preferred and effective tools to demonstrate the cynicism of this war game populated by unscrupulous military leaders and opportunists. In the "scene of the profiteers" are shown the economic and political ramifications of the conflict through arms manufacturers in England, France, Germany and America, who discuss during a hunting party about business and profitable transport routes, about the shortcomings caused by the trade blockade and

---

<sup>31</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>32</sup> On this device, information flows from right to left, in the principle of the news strip used in television.

<sup>33</sup> *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *op. cit.* p 32.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

about a possible truce that would massively affect the gains. For them "the war is a political and economic necessity", "it advances scientific discovery", "war is the life blood of a nation"<sup>34</sup>. Meanwhile, the news panel informs that "21,000 americans became millionaires during the war"<sup>35</sup>, and then on the screen are projected images of soldiers wearing eye bandages as a result of gas attacks.

The relentless satire is directed especially at the British commanders, represented by the figure of Marshal Haig, an inept and vain character responsible for several disastrous decisions. He orders the military to attack enemy lines without protecting themselves in trenches or shell pits, because this grandiose attitude will generate confusion among the Germans and will guarantee them the victory. The result: "Verdun... Total loss one and a half million men"<sup>36</sup>. Despite the statistics showing the dimension of the carnage, he is still convinced that the British Empire will win because it can afford greater losses, having a population larger than that of Germany. Considering himself the predestined instrument of providence, he invokes the divine support to succeed in achieving victory through a major offensive before the arrival of the Americans.

In contrast, the realistic register and the black humor dominate the scenes showing the life of soldiers on the front lines, camaraderie, fear or boredom in the trenches. At Christmas, English and German soldiers share gifts and drinks, sing and laugh together, forgetting that they are in adverse sides, until the tone changes sharply with the information appearing on the news panel: "all quiet on the Western Front... Allies lose 850,000 men in 1914."<sup>37</sup> An officer congratulates his subordinates for resisting the bombings, including the battle gas they threw at the enemy, but which, due to the change in the direction of the wind, turned against them. A few Irish soldiers are sent to attack and accidentally end up under the fire of English allies, but the imminence of death does not prevent them from making jokes about the absurd situation they find themselves in. In the final scene a group of French soldiers, exhausted from the war of attrition in the trenches, move towards the enemy positions imitating the sounds of "lambs to the slaughter"<sup>38</sup>. The last message appears: "The war to end wars... killed ten million... wounded twenty-one million... missing seven million"<sup>39</sup>, the actors sing *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and the silent faces of the real soldiers appear on the screen.

Unlike any other production and hard to categorise – musical, documentary, tragicomedy – the show has earned a special chapter in British theatre history.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45-46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Innovative in both content and form, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is considered "the first multimedia theatrical event"<sup>40</sup>, "a Trojan horse through which anti-naturalistic, political theatre gained a significant foothold in Britain."<sup>41</sup>, "epic and intimate, elegantly stylized and grimly realistic; comic and tragic-comic"<sup>42</sup>. This is not just a show about the first World War, but a condemnation of all wars, including the one that in the '60 seemed imminent. It was only a short time after the Cuban missile crisis and the tensions between the two superpowers, the U.S.A and the Soviet Union, were at alarming levels. In 1964, the Vietnam War had just begun when *Oh, What a Lovely War!* hit Broadway, and the more than a hundred performances played here have a strong echo among the pacifist movements in New York. The show would be invited in 1963 to the Paris Festival, where it won the award for best performance, together with *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook. The production established a new way of creating theatre, based on the participation of the entire team, both in writing the script and in its development through improvisations, becoming in the following years a practice often used by many companies. One of the most important British critics, Kenneth Tynan wrote in 1963: "when the annals of our theatre in the middle years of the twentieth century come to be written, one name will lead all the rest: that of Joan Littlewood. Others write plays, direct them or act in them: Miss Littlewood alone makes theatre"<sup>43</sup>.

Left-wing views and non-conformist discourse made Joan Littlewood undesirable for the funding of the Arts Council and the survival of the company was based on the transfer of performances to commercial theatres in the West End. For example, in 1963, three of her performances were found in the season of these theatres, making her, somewhat ironically, one of the most successful directors of the period. Refusing to become an appendix of commercial theatre, Joan Littlewood has only made sporadic appearances since the mid-60s, and the few shows she made did not arouse the enthusiasm of the past. In 1975 she gave up theatre directing and settled in Paris.

\*

An excellent practitioner, Joan Littlewood wrote few theoretical texts, avoiding drawing from her vast stage experience a method of her own. "Responding to requests to document her ideas, Littlewood declared she was far too busy making theatre to find the time to write about it."<sup>44</sup>. She refused to promote her own views in a way that could deny the importance of collaboration, always claiming that all those

---

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/mar/11/oh-what-a-lovely-war-review>, Alfred Hickling, 2010, *Oh, What a Lovely War*.

<sup>41</sup> Kershaw, B. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 399.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Marowitz *apud* Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op.cit.*, p.82.

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/31/kenneth-tynan-on-oh-what-a-lovely-war>, *Kenneth Tynan on Joan Littlewood and Oh! What a Lovely War*.

<sup>44</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood, op.cit.*, p. 43.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

involved in the creative process - director, actors, scenographer, technicians - had an equal contribution. She was the partisan of a living theatre, an organism that is born through a collective experiment, an exchange in which not only performers, but also the public participate. She rejected the idea of a definitive formula, because each show was for her a new adventure, complex and at the same time ephemeral, which often involved specific approaches.

Joan Littlewood was the opponent of the hierarchical system in British theatre, in which the director was the supreme authority. The actor is an equal partner in the process of creation, he can and must be involved in the research and be able to constantly adapt to changes. "I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor or even of the writer. It is through collaboration that this knockabout art of theatre survives and kicks."<sup>45</sup>, she said. The group is a "composite mind"<sup>46</sup> where ideas, information and creativity are shared, and when it becomes stable it facilitates the development of stage skills, the discovery of a common vocabulary and a homogeneous theatrical vision. Mutual trust is the key element on which permanent company and collective creation are based.

By the middle of the 20th century, the training of the British actor was practically accomplished after he finished his studies at a theatre school. The short time for a production, generally 30-40 days and the competition in the domain also encouraged role specialisation, limitation and mannerism. For Joan Littlewood, "acting is an art of infinite difficulty which demands constant training and humility"<sup>47</sup>. It requires a strict training program in order to form versatile, responsive and intuitive actors, credible at rehearsals and performances, but also to increase the cohesion of the group and to achieve "the pitch of perfection expected from a ballet company or a great orchestra"<sup>48</sup>. (It should be noticed that most of the company members were amateur actors.) While British acting was closely related to the text, she used the game and improvisation to stimulate initiative, curiosity and imagination. This practice, commonly used today, was a rarity in the post-war period, which is why Littlewood is considered the initiator and the main exponent of the use of improvisation in the creative process.

"One of Littlewood's remarkable attributes as a director was her ability to maintain the centrality of exploration, experimentation and improvisation until the last possible moment in the rehearsal process [...] Any signs of complacency, cosiness, milking an easy laugh or 'bloody acting' were derided in an acerbic turn of phrase and

---

<sup>45</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, in Mitter, Shomit (ed.), Shevtsova, Maria (ed.), *Cincizeci de regizori-cheie ai secolului 20*, traducere de Cristina Modreanu, București, Editura Unitext, 2010, p. 101.

<sup>46</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, *op.cit.*, p. 49

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

denounced in coruscating notes pinned to dressing room walls.”<sup>49</sup> The show was a continuous process for Littlewood, it had to renew itself and to be perfectly synchronized at each performance.

Each new production began with a period of thorough research, at a level that was nowhere to be found in British theatre. The company became a workshop where readings, discussions, meetings with specialists from various fields were held, music was listened to, scenographic and lighting solutions were sought, theatrical theories and practices were shared. Littlewood was a ”benevolent dictator”<sup>50</sup>, amphirion and animator of the group, the one who provided themes for reflection, reading lists and documentary materials - albums of art or architecture, literature and poetry, photographs, magazines, press articles. Once this first stage had been completed, the group began to experiment with the text, seeking to remain faithful to its substance rather than its form.

When working on the text, Littlewood started from the Stanislavskian method, but without applying it with rigor. She filtered it in a personal manner, extracting only certain principles: detailed analysis of the characters (identifying motivations and goals, the inner universe), activating the creative imagination, exploring the subconscious, simplicity and scenic truth, observing everyday life in finding actions. She made a reputation for cutting, rearranging and essentializing the written material, using improvisation to find a more direct communication with the audience, often using colloquial language, jargon or physical action.

At a time when British theatre was overwhelmingly dominated by naturalism, Joan Littlewood was among the few creators who opposed the current. She sought new, eclectic directions, often avoiding the limitations of the classical stage, formalism, rigidity, and in general everything related to the theatrical canon of the period. ”In England unfortunately during the first half of this century the theatre was firmly in the hands of the philistines, and in spite of Shaw the majority of plays mounted were of such banality that it is difficult to imagine where they found an audience, even in the barren reaches of the ‘upper’ classes, so-called. Even the great English classics were produced and acted as if they had been conceived by Edwardian old ladies seated at their embroidery”<sup>51</sup>.

Her aversion was directed especially towards those theatres that promoted easy entertainment, financially secure productions, but totally detached from the social, political and cultural context. ”The atmosphere of the West End theatre is humanly and aesthetically unsatisfying. The curiously affected speech and the lack of anything resembling normal activity in the movements and gestures.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, in Mitter, S. (ed.), Shevtsova, M. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>50</sup> Elsom, J., *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>51</sup> Holdsworth, N., *Joan Littlewood*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 47

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Her name is related to the popularization of the new theories of Piscator, Brecht and Meyerhold (almost unknown at the time in the UK), but also to the revival, to bringing in the present the forms of popular theatre - *commedia dell' arte*, music-hall. Joan Littlewood removes the barriers between popular and art theatre, being consistent with the principle that the show should be an interrogative approach, stimulating, but also entertaining. Often performing in industrial centres, in front of an uneducated audience, she sought not only to democratize the theatrical act, to offer it to a social class that was not found in the target audience of the other companies, but also to establish active, constant links with these communities.

The modern, often radical approach of the classics, the interest in the new dramaturgy and topical themes, (re)writing the dramatic text by using improvisation and participatory methods, training and focusing the artistic act on body expressiveness, inserting documentary materials into the show are just a part of the legacy Joan Littlewood left to the theatre, from which in the coming decades numerous companies, actors and directors will inspire. Peter Brook, for example, places her alongside Artaud when he talks about the personalities that influenced him and describes her as being "the most galvanising director in mid-20th century Britain."<sup>53</sup> The non-conformism of the creations, the stage seen as a place of research and experiments, claims itself from a credo that she stated in one of her last interviews: „theatre should be free, like air or love”<sup>54</sup>.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coveney, Michael, *London Theatres*, e-book, London, Frances Lincoln Publishers Ltd, 2020.  
Dorney, Kate, Gray, Frances, *Played in Britain. Modern Theatre in 100 Plays*, e-book, London, Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2013.  
Elsom, John, *Post-War British Theatre*, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2014.  
Gorney, Howard, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, London, Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2008.  
Holdsworth, Nadine, *Joan Littlewood*, e-book, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.  
Innes, Christopher, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.  
Kershaw, Baz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.  
Lacey, Stephen, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956-1965*, London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1995.

---

<sup>53</sup> Peter Brook *apud* Coveney, Michael, *London Theatres*, London, Frances Lincoln Publishers Ltd, 2020, p. 230.

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.scene4.com/archivesqv6/jan-2007/html/andreakapsaski0107.html>, Andrea Kapsaki, *Theatre should be free, like air or love. Conversation with Joan Littlewood*.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Mitter, Shomit (ed.), Shevtsova, Maria (ed.), *Cincizeci de regizori-cheie ai secolului 20*, traducere de Cristina Modreanu, București, Editura Unitext, 2010.

Shellard, Dominic, *British Theatre Since the War*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

xxx - *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, original version edited and introduced by Joan Littlewood, e-book, London, Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2014.

### Websites:

<http://www.scene4.com/archivesqv6/jan-2007/html/andreakapsaski0107.html>, Andrea Kapsaki, 2007, Theatre should be free, like air or love, conversation with Joan Littlewood, Scene4, accessed: 28.10.2022.

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/sep/23/guardianobituaries.arts>, John Ezard, Michael Billington, 2002, Joan Littlewood, The Guardian, accessed: 27.10.2022.

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/25/shelagh-delaney-angry-young-woman-a-taste-of-honey>, Rachel Cooke, 2014, Shelagh Delaney: the return of Britain's angry young woman, The Guardian, accessed: 29.10.2022.

<http://www.wcml.org.uk/maccoll/maccoll/theatre/scripts-and-productions>, Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl, dramaturge - a thumbnail theatre chronology, Working Class Movement Library, accessed: 28.10.2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/mar/11/oh-what-a-lovely-war-review>, Alfred Hickling, 2010, Oh, What a Lovely War, accessed: 28.10.2022..

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/31/kenneth-tynan-on-oh-what-a-lovely-war>, Kenneth Tynan on Joan Littlewood and Oh! What a Lovely War, 2014, The Guardian, accessed: 27.10.2022.