

INTERVIEW WITH MURRAY MELVIN

Murray Melvin played Cool in LONDON ASSURANCE at the Royal Exchange Theatre, in November 2004. He has extensive film and theatre credits. He trained at Theatre Workshop with Joan Littlewood, for whom he created many roles including in OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR and as the original Geoffrey in a TASTE OF HONEY. While at the Royal Exchange he spoke to us about his experiences with the Theatre workshop.

Having worked extensively with Joan Littlewood at Theatre workshop, could you describe the influence you think her work has had on modern British theatre?

When I go to the theatre these days I see Joan's influence all the time. I joined her company in 1957 as a dogs-body, as an A.S.M come everything. The thing that I noticed immediately was that in her theatre there were no footlights - there was very little lighting in those days. There was white light mainly from the wings. Because of this there was no make up. Not for the men. Women usually had a light street make up. The concentration on side lighting meant the contours of your face were kept so you didn't have to build on a face. In Joan's terms it also meant that you had nothing to hide behind!

She was the first to bring the real working class voice into the theatre. Until then when you heard a working class voice on stage or on film they were always as a figure of fun, the maid going 'lawks ma'am', they were always comic characters. Joan brought the real working class experience onto stage and gave them their dignity no matter what character they were playing. Today that is considered the norm but the influence was Joan.

Her influences came from Europe, starting in Russia with Stanislavski. His teachings were our bible. Eisenstein was another teacher. All her productions were very filmic for example the cross cutting of scenes. Joan loved to have two, three or four scenes going on at once. "We can cope with two or three conversations at a party" she would, "so why not on the stage?" "Never under estimate the ability of your audience" was her credo. Today, we are used to screens showing multiple scenes.

Then, moving on, she loved the commedia dell'arte, Piscator, with his docu-drama, Brecht, he Agit Prop street theatre, the Theatre National Populaire (TNP) from Paris... All this was a part of our daily lives in the company. At the start England did not undersatnd her, hence her struggle to create her theatre. It was all strange, and I daresay 'Foreign'!

Today, I see a bare stage where suddenly a shaft of light in which a piece of scenery and some props appear and a wry smile comes to me. She did it all those years before and now they are catching up with her. So the influences are there all the time.

How would you say opportunity for new writers has changed and has Joan Littlewood's work had a role in that?

Out of her treatment of the working class voice, came working class writers and actors. The policy of the Theatre Workshop was to do the best of European theatre and contemporary writing. So, the new writers found an outlet for their work. As well as famously premiering Shelagh Delaney's A TASTE OF HONEY, she produced premieres like Brendan Behan's anti-hanging play THE SQUARE FELLOW and his anti-war play THE HOSTAGE.

Today, the Theatre Royal Stratford East is a complete New Writing House, and many theatres, like The Royal Exchange, have a writer in residence, and a studio theatre where new writing is

given a chance. In the sixties when you had the renaissance in the theatre that was because you had the renaissance in new writing. In those days, on television you had a play of the month, a play of the week, a play of the day practically and so those new writers were able to test themselves and learn their craft. That chance on new work is not taken so often these days. Money rules, which means success is all -important.

So, the studio spaces up and down the country have taken on an importance to encourage new work. That new work has to be encouraged and supported. As Joan said, “without it we become a museum”.

What would say has been the significance of A TASTE OF HONEY?

The effects of A TASTE OF HONEY were enormous. As the young boy, Geoffrey, I played a gay person not as a figure of fun – which was the norm for gay characters in 1957, but as a character with dignity -Joan’s working credo. Although so much time has past, and much has changed (we did not even have then the word ‘gay’ then - at least not with the connotation it has today) the significance of that portrayal is ongoing. I still get letters from young people, which I find a great privilege, telling me how seeing the film has helped them with their own sexuality. And you couldn’t give me a better award. I do not need any other than that. Thank-you Joan. And then there was the Mother with the boyfriend, an unmarried girl pregnant by a black boy. Wow, dear old Joan got it all out there - she was breaking the ground in the fifties!

And what about OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR?

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR, which was my last production with Joan, was seminal. I hear the reports from Iraq today, the blunders, the bumbling, the mismanagement the non-planning before the war started, and I think, “well, it’s today’s OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR”. And probably in fifty years time you’ll be able to do ‘Oh What a Lovely Iraq’, with all the information. We were able to do the play then because in those days the secrecy act was fifty years. The fifty years were up and that’s why were able to get at not just the official history and the glorification of the first world war, but also at the backgrounds - the soldiers point of view. Now the secrets rule is just thirty years, so perhaps some young writer in thirty years time will do that sort of docu-drama, which it was, of the Iraq war and hopefully be able to send it up in the same way. Joan, with that one production created a whole new world for theatre.

She revolutionised the way we thought about theatre. That sort of documentary drama, I see it all the time now. I see those bare stages with five people coming on and being crowds, and it takes me straight back. That production is now studied across the world. From dogs-body in 1957, I am now the archivist of the Theatre Royal Stratford East and I get requests from all over the world about OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR.

It has changed people’s perceptions, their ideas and their methods of putting things on stage. I find it very heartening and very warming, that little did we know in those days, on very little money that we were going to have this shattering effect on world drama.

Thank-you Joan.