

A Playwright at Prompt Corner

Jay Jeff Jones, author of the series of plays *The Lizard King*, considers Life After The Revolution

For the past two years, television documentaries, press articles, books and exhibitions have been exploring and celebrating the socio-cultural upheaval of what's expediently labelled "The Sixties". With a wealth of 50th anniversaries of key moments of rebellion and misrule to choose from and mostly being viewed in a mood of bubbly nostalgia, attention has focused on music, fashion, graphic design, psychedelic experimentation and sexual permissiveness. Today, the latter two may appear somewhat quaint.

Much less attention has been paid to how the same revolutionary spirit enlivened and transformed British theatre: the literally dramatic changes that resulted from the daring and disorderly fusion of avant-garde art, guerilla street politics, underground poetics and youthful audacity. The common experience was romantic hardship and a euphoric contempt for the *status quo*. Compared to the vitality of London theatre today, a constantly evolving fringe and performance innovations, alternative theatre in the early Sixties was barely visible. When Kenneth Tynan pithily commended the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop for "engaging and challenging one's social and political beliefs", there was little else challenging what the theatre was, or what it could be.

I should confess; I spent most of 2016 as the co-curator of one of these "anniversary" exhibitions: *Off Beat: Jeff Nuttall and the International Underground*, which was held at John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. Not only was Nuttall (1933-2004) a leading figure in the Sixties' counter-culture; he expressed his original imagination across a wide range of disciplines, with theatre highly featured alongside painting, sculpture, poetry, polemic, teaching and jazz cornet. Shortly after John Calder facilitated the first British happening at the Edinburgh Festival in 1962, Nuttall began to create his own in London, often in the basement of Better Books, and followed through by co-founding the People Show. (The People Show, bless it, is still in business and last year celebrated a half century of enthralling, baffling and provoking audiences.)

The revolutionary theatrical inspiration from that arrived in London from the USA, and included touring productions by La Mama, and the Living Theatre. On the Living Theatre's second visit in 1969 they performed *Paradise Now* at The Roundhouse. The LT's radical intentions were at the heart of its most legendary shows and few other companies carried commitment so fiercely in word and action – a tribal collective: vagabond, culturally eclectic, committed to peaceful hedonism and often one step ahead of the authorities.

London's new theatrical spirit also benefitted from the arrival of individual American expatriates, with little in common except nationality and a desire to make relevant, new and exciting work. Charles Marowitz, Dan Crawford, Ed B (E D Berman), Nancy Meckler, Bernard Pomerance, Sam Shepard and Jim Haynes made notable impressions, with Haynes, the founder of the London Arts Lab, remaining closest to underground culture ideals and mischief.

Haynes was also one of the founders of Edinburgh's original Traverse Theatre, a converted apartment in a redundant brothel, where the first play of Heathcote Williams was performed. Like Nuttall, Williams was multi-talented and constant in his espousal of utopian anarchy. He was as uncompromising as he was compassionate; an intellectual force that alternated poetry and playwriting with direct action for causes that included the homeless, battered women and the environment. To widely expressed dismay, he recently died, on 01 July 2017.

That first play, *The Local Stigmatic*, was initially written for radio, at the encouragement of Harold Pinter. Pinter arranged for it to be staged by dropping one of his one-acts from a double bill at the Traverse. Williams' second play, *AC/DC*, on its low-key première at the Theatre Upstairs, created the kind of impact beyond the theatre's walls that no longer seems possible. In it, he scoured his subjects: the parasitical manipulation by media, celebrity culture's "psychic capitalism" and the fashionable radicalism of psychological gurus. In one review it was described as "the first play of the 21st century". Later he worked with Ken Campbell on *Remember the Truth Dentist* (also at the Theatre Upstairs) and Max Stafford-Clark, when an adaptation of *The Speakers*, his study of Hyde Park Corner orators, was the opening production of the Joint Stock Theatre Group.

He did write further plays, most recently *Killing Kit*, concerning the death of Christopher Marlowe, and his poems will continue to be widely performed and recorded. Another early short play, *The Immortalist* is regularly performed by Jack Moylett and Alison Mullin and will next be seen at the London Irish Centre on September 29.

Nicholas Wright, the director of the original production of *AC/DC*, wrote that Williams "...showed no ambition to do anything so silly as conquer the theatre and stayed as cheerful and classy as ever, the man you most want to bump into walking around a corner." Well, as it turned out, the final years of his life saw an extraordinary productivity: a constant flow of verse, lush with anger, humour and originality that reached so many audiences newer and younger than an old rebel should expect. Despite a debilitating lung disease, he would often write through the night and, according to one of his many visitors, the epitomical underground journalist Jan Herman, had long since worn away the letters off the keys of his keyboard.

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Halina Reijn as Hanna and Jude Law as Gino in the Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Ivo van Hove* and Jan Peter Gerrits adaptation of *Obsession*, the Luchino Visconti film, at the Barbican (**Jan Versweyveld**).

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