

The history of the Library Theatre Company Manchester – full text.

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Annie Horniman, theatre patron and manager, and one of the seminal influences in the Irish and English theatres at the beginning of the twentieth century, was born into a wealthy Victorian tea merchant family in 1860. Slade School of Art-educated, Miss Horniman had no connections with the theatre, but from her travels abroad came to realise the importance of subsidised repertory theatres. She therefore made funds available in 1894 for a repertory season at the Avenue (later the Playhouse), London, which included Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, and W B Yeats' *The Land of Heart's Desire*; her friendship with Yeats led to her building the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904.

In 1908 she bought and refurbished the Gaiety Theatre, on the corner of Peter Street and Mount Street, in Manchester, where she maintained an excellent repertory company, putting on more than 200 plays, at least half of which were new plays, many by the so-called Manchester School. Many of the productions were directed by Lewis Casson, who married a member of the company, Sybil Thorndike. The theatre was disbanded in 1921, following financial problems, and Miss Horniman died in 1937, living long enough, however, to see the fruits of her labour – the spread of the repertory theatre movement...

Her pioneering work in support of the repertory tradition in Manchester was kept alive when Central Library brought into existence a new theatre.

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### **The Library Theatre**

Although the immediate history of the Library Theatre may be said to begin in the years after the Second World War, when the lecture theatre in the basement beneath Manchester Central Library was converted into a theatre, its deeper origins lie in earlier debates as to the necessity and legitimacy of spending ratepayers' money on a municipal theatre. When the Central Library opened in 1934 a large lecture hall had been provided, with other facilities, to ensure that it would serve as an important centre of cultural activities for the people of Manchester.

The unique size and location of the lecture theatre, seating 300, made it an ideal small venue for future performances. During the Second World War the theatre was used as a studio by the BBC and was restricted to engagements such as lunchtime commentaries from the Ministry of Information.

After the war, the Manchester Corporation Act of 1946 empowered the Libraries Committee to fully utilise the theatre for "lectures, exhibitions, concerts, displays, and the performance of stage plays for or in connection with the advancement of art, education, drama, science, music or literature".

For theatregoers, who were finding serious drama elusive in a city centre increasingly dominated by the cinema and variety theatres, this was seen as the first step towards the establishment of a professional civic theatre. The City of Manchester Plan had already recognised the importance of such a cultural facility, and after considerable discussion it was decided that the theatre would be let at a nominal charge to a non-profit-making repertory company.

The theatre was opened under the director Andre van Gyseghem, who managed the Manchester Intimate Theatre Group. The first performance, *The Seagull*, took place on 11 February 1947. From then until 1952 various companies worked at the theatre, and Manchester people were able to see many actors who would later become big names – Laurence Harvey, Tony Britton, Harry H Corbett – and productions by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, with Ewan MacColl, Warren Jenkins, Howard Goorney and David Scase.

Not everyone welcomed the appearance of a new theatre in the city centre however, and among the objectors were the Theatrical Managers' Association, who were concerned about the impact on existing theatres. Walter Payne, Chairman of the Theatres National Committee, emphasised the present vulnerability of local theatres by observing that "fog in Manchester might be sufficient to put a theatre on the wrong side, financially". The theatre's opponents feared that it would be offering unfair competition because of its subsidies and "privileged status" as part of Manchester Corporation, and they argued that productions should be restricted to amateur societies. Various companies subsequently occupied the Library Theatre in association with the Arts Council, but mounting losses eventually led to a withdrawal of support.

In August 1952, the Libraries Committee took direct control of the theatre through their officer, the City Librarian, and artistic director Peter Lambert, and it is this bold step which marked the birth of the Library Theatre Company.

The first performance by the Library Theatre Resident Company under the auspices of the Libraries Committee was Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in November of that year.

"Our aims are modest and simple –

to avoid any hint of burlesque in treating the period and yet to play in a slight atmosphere of 'the higher lunacy' wherein the absurd logic of the serious farce can be reasonably sustained" Stuart Latham, producer, quoted in the programme.

This first season lasted for only 26 weeks, but it was to introduce many young artists who later became famous in films and television. Much of the theatre's early success was due to the drive and vision of David Scase, who became stage director in 1954. For many years up to the early Sixties it attracted near-capacity audiences and was able to declare a book-keeping profit. Even so, the theatre still found it necessary to justify its role in the cultural life of the city ...

David Colley, the City Librarian, "Should we then let live theatre die in the provinces ... Should we confine our local entertainments to the brisk trade in vulgarity of twice-nightly revues, farces and nude shows to fill for tired businessmen and women the gaps which inevitably occur on radio and TV? I think not. Manchester men and women will ensure that this one theatre will live and eventually blossom into the civic theatre which a few people for a long time have dreamed of".

In the first twenty-five years of its existence, the theatre had two long spells under the artistic direction of David Scase. He had been Joan Littlewood's stage manager, and his vigorous productions of a wide range of work built the company a national reputation. Productions often played to capacity audiences, and had longer runs than was the case at most repertory theatres.

In 1966 he was succeeded by the charismatic Tony Colegate, whose tragically early death in 1969 robbed the theatre of an outstanding talent. Scase returned as director, responsible now for both the Library Theatre and the new venue, the Forum Theatre at Wythenshawe.

Initially the plan was to open productions in one venue and then transfer them to the other. However a combination of the incompatibility of the stages and a realization that what was appreciated at the one theatre did not necessarily go down so well with audiences at the other led to the creation of different programmes for each venue.

David Scase, who retired in 1983, was succeeded by Howard Lloyd-Lewis. Lloyd-Lewis, supported by Roger Haines and Paul Kerryson, staged a series of European premieres of American musicals at the Forum, which earned the Company national acclaim. Productions of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* and *Pacific Overtures* were described by the Observer as 'landmarks of theatre'. When he died, much mourned, in 1986, it was the second time in the Company's history that an early death had robbed the theatre of a remarkable spirit.

The late eighties and early nineties were a challenging time for the Company. Central government restrictions on local authority finance were inevitably reflected in reducing funding for the theatre, and led to the programme at the Forum gradually being reduced to a Christmas show. The site eventually redeveloped as part of the redeveloped Wythenshawe Forum Centre.

At the Library Theatre, however, the work has prospered. Under Chris Honer, the Company has redefined its artistic policy as producing the best of contemporary drama and modern classics. Notable work in the last few years has included a series of excellent productions of Neil Simon's work (several of them UK premieres) by Roger Haines, and four Brecht productions by Honer which achieved huge box office success and critical acclaim. The Company has also developed its reputation for producing excellent, intelligent family entertainment with a series of superb plays for children at Christmas including sell-out productions of *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *Great Expectations*.

Recent years have seen a number of innovative policy initiatives. There have been developing relationships with national touring companies, such as *Out of Joint* and *Lip Service*, whose work complements the Company's. The LTC now promotes emerging Manchester companies like *Black Arts Development Project* and *Homegrown*. There is a growing commitment to presenting international work which climaxed in a highly successful visits by companies from Australasia and Canada in the *Cultureshock* festival. And the current year's education programme, with its workshops, playdays, and play-reading scheme, is the most comprehensive yet. Being a live art, theatre is constantly changing, just as the context in which it happens changes. For the first twenty-odd years of its existence, the Library Theatre was often the only serious producer of drama in Manchester. Now it is one of several venues in a city which has seen a remarkable growth of capacity (and audiences) in the last twenty-five years. As it looks forward to the next fifty, the Company is confident that it will continue to bring to the citizens of Manchester and the North West the best contemporary plays, and the relevant modern classics, that have something to say about the world we live in.