

# Report

## ***Joan Littlewood's Centenary, October 2014 : A Thing***

Stella Duffy, 26 January 2013

session : Joan Littlewood's 100th birthday is October 2014.

A thing.

Not a revival (there'll be plenty of those) and not a biopic either, but a thing that utilises the passion, the politics, the drive, the enthusiasm, the *theatre* of Theatre Workshop, as a celebration, an investigation. And whatever else it might become.

Called by : Stella Duffy

Who Came : about 16 people on and off.

What happened :

We talked about what we know, Stella read a couple of pieces from others' work about Littlewood and Theatre Workshop, about the politics and the joy of the shows. There were sighs of "oh yes" at the Morris Linden programme note from 1952 saying how theatre was all star-system and closed shop and the West End was in the hands of a 'few impresarios' ...

We talked about the possibility of playing with no given objective, about not being making a show, heading to a show, about workshop being the 'goal', the process being the point.

We talked about poverty and spaces and squatting spaces and Occupy and how Theatre Workshop took spaces over.

We talked about how Theatre workshop struggled and didn't always have successes.

About Theatre Delicatessen and Dream/Think/Speak

The John Berger exhibition being TRUE TO THE SPIRIT OF.

and then, The Fun Palace.

About making a Fun Palace. Having a Fun palace. Being a Fun Palace. Somewhere we live and make and play and people (public) can come in and see and join in and listen and watch and engage or view as suits them.

A Theatre Workshop Fun palace for two weeks in October 2014.

In which a group of people would take a space where we could eat/sleep/work/live, and also use the technology that Theatre Workshop believed was valuable (and today is twitter, skype, live feeds etc), and do stuff like :

- Laban every morning
- Theatre Workshop techniques and exercises
- not having a goal 'show' in mind but experiencing the thing
- do readings of the 'flops' or the shows that didn't work as well, rather than the hits
- and public could come as enthusiasts, would-be-enthusiasts and reluctant. all welcome.
- study politics, invite people to give lectures, share memories, share ideas (like Murray Melvin, Jean Boht, Dudley Sutton - and loads of others, of course)
- play 'Joan for a Day' - so that someone gets to be Joan every day, in whatever way they interpret that
- and maybe that would turn into a show and maybe it wouldn't, but the communal living, the political engagement, the doing of it would be the point.
- a question of would it be a show from Mark from Theatre Royal Winchester, where the theatre will also be 100 in 2014, and maybe we could do something there. Joan walked to Manchester, maybe we could walk to Winchester (and taking it to such a very different city would be exactly the point).
- the other places/people to talk to : Stratford East, Sage, Glasgow (a People's Palace

at the Commonwealth Games??!), Olympic Park/Stratford, Manchester, Jude Kelly re RFH

(there are loads of others, of course. If you're a venue reading this thinking "but Theatre Workshop were here" please say! because maybe this suggests LOTS of Fun Palaces across the country, rather than one? If several venues wanted to do it? or we found several venues?)

- other people to talk to : many many of you with memories, experiences, work with/around Theatre Workshop, please demand to be heard!

- Money : yes we could try for it, but they did it without, if we had a venue we could do that too, AND money would be great. And they (often) did it all without. But hell yes, if there's money to pay for this, let's have it! (Alan Cox quoted JL : "Take the money from the very devil.")

another JL quote : "You've got to look after the nuts, the nuts can't look after themselves."

And folk music. Does Billy Bragg want to come and play?

so, I (Stella) have an email list of those present. I'll make a group (maybe here, does the ning make groups?), and anyone not there can email me via this site and I'll add you. Same if you're a venue and you think this is right for you (maybe you'll also be 100 in 2014?!)

I'm not running it, I'm not the boss, I'm not going off to write or devise the show that is this. But we definitely can make whatever this is together. And I'm happy to be the convenor, for now.

The session finished after 45 mins, as it was over, and we want to make it happen, so we will.

edited to add :

The quotes I read at the D&D session (from Nadine Holdsworth's Joan Littlewood, Routledge, 2006):

The prospect of a theatre capable of contributing to the widespread calls for social change excited Littlewood and she did not find these represented at RADA.

Despondent, she left early in 1933 and, after a brief spell in Paris, decided to walk to Manchester.

"I loved the northern city at first sight. No Horse Guards, no South Kensington accents, no sir and madam stuff. The wind from the Pennines which swept through the Manchester streets had blown them away ... This was the Classic Soil of Communism."

(Littlewood, 1994)

In the programme accompanying their sponsorship of Uranium 235 at St Andrew's Hall in Glasgow 24-25th March 1952, the Chair of the group (Friends of Theatre Workshop), Morris Linden explained the impact of the company :

The state of British theatre to-day is unquestionably very low. Standards over the years have gradually become debased. The West End theatre is largely a closed shop; theatres everywhere, with few exceptions, are in the hands of small groups of impresarios. While we have many good actors, producers generally seem to lack originality. Because the box-office must come first, the emphasis in productions has been on spectacle and on the star system, and rarely on originality of thought, or of experiment.

**Tags:**

Theatre Workshop, Littlewood, centenary, Joan Littlewood, Stratford, 2014