

Excerpt from seminar by Lou Stein entitled EUROPEAN THEATRE IN ENGLAND: THE FOUNDING OF THE GATE THEATRE, NOTTING HILL. University of London, 7 June 2005.

The opportunity for me to become an Artistic Director with a chance to get my ideas across came when I was introduced to the Prince Albert Pub, in Notting Hill. It took a few productions for me and the group of actors I had found to find our feet, but the first production, “At-Swim-Two-Birds” by Flann O’Brien was successful enough to encourage further productions. A number of critics reviewed the production favourably (notably Maeve Binchey in the Irish Times) and there was vibrant local support for the endeavour (John Cleese made the first donation to the Gate- a cheque for £10). I followed up “At Swim-Two-Birds” with a highly stylised, expressionist production of Ionesco’s “The Lesson”, where a newly created expressionist characters, who narrates Ionesco’s stage directions, stands by and objectively watches the brutal drama unfold. This instinct to re-think how these plays might be presented was to set the style for many of the Gate’s future productions under my direction.

Although the audience and critical attention which these first few productions gained was an important factor in the formal organisation of The Gate Theatre Company, it wasn’t until the fourth production at The Gate Theatre, my own adaptation of “Down and Out in Paris and London”, Orwell’s first novel which chronicles his experiences in amongst the poor of Paris in the 30’s, and then his parallel experiences in London, that the Gate Theatre formally organised itself as a Charitable company and the central policy of international drama, particularly introducing neglected classics from the European repertoire, was formalised. Although **“Down and Out in Paris and London”** was by an English writer, it’s social concerns, narrative style, and themes could be said to be European. **The play opened on the 7 August 1979**, four months after the inaugural production, At-Swim-Two-Birds, had opened on the 10 April 1979.

The production was important to the history of The Gate for a number of reasons. It was the first production under the now formally organised Gate Theatre Company. The production itself was also the first real major critical success at The Gate, with most major critics reviewing it positively. During the previous three productions, reviewing was sporadic, and The Gate was largely dependent on Time Out reviewers, local reviewers, and the odd national newspaper popping in. But the attention which “Down and Out in Paris” received truly put the Gate on the theatrical map. (Only the first part of the novel was performed at this point. The second part, set in London, was not produced by The Gate until it appeared, together with the Paris section at The Gate at the Latchmere and the Edinburgh Festival in 1984, where it was an award winner). At the Gate, Notting Hill, the original production was so

successful that it returned for another sell-out four weeks, re-opening on the 9 October-3 November 1979.

This moment in The Gate's history was important for another key reason. It was at this time that The Gate's now famous logo was created. In conjunction with The Gate's distinctive posters and leaflet during this period, the distinctive Gate brand was established. The logo has been so successful that it still remains The Gate's logo to this day. It's simple but strong visual statement assured audiences that they were going to see rare international drama of the highest quality.

It was at this time that I fully arrived at my vision for a venue which would excel in producing rare European classics which have not been seen often, or at all, in England. I would add to this the performance of rarely produced American classics which I directed with a non-naturalistic, expressionist style more familiar in Europe than in Britain or America. The status of The Gate as a non-Arts Council regularly funded client was a bonus. With the "turning a blind eye" agreement of the Actors Union, British Equity, the size of cast was immaterial since all the actors were engaged on a direct profit-share basis. This enabled me to programme plays which regularly had ten, fifteen, sometimes more, actors. These plays, with the late seventies, early eighties atmosphere of severe Arts Council cuts led by the prevailing Conservative government, were out of reach for most of the regularly funded companies. This combination of a huge cast in a tiny space became part of the character of The Gate. The record during that period was 16 actors (plus an on-stage life size talking parrot) playing over 30 parts in Bulgakov's "The Crimson Island". This fusion of large casts, in inventively designed productions, playing to capacity houses (usually about 100 precariously balanced on plastic seats and cushioned wooden tiers), resulted in an electric atmosphere which further helped draw attention to The Gate's unique international policy, with an emphasis on European classics.

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