

The launch of Hoxton Hall as a Community Arts Centre

Precursor- the origins and early 1970s

In the early 1970s Hoxton Hall was staffed by May Scott, who had worked there for almost 30 years from 1944-1974, and one other paid support worker. There were some other session workers and volunteers. The salaries were paid by the Quaker trust that owned the building plus grants from the Inner London Education Authority and Hackney Council.

On her arrival, May Scott was struck by the strong sense of community she found and decided to run a programme of activities which, while maintaining some practical elements, would concentrate on enabling people of all ages to socialise together and develop their artistic talents. As a Quaker she encouraged discussion and worked on developing a consciousness towards peace and internationalism.

At that time the main activities were a five mornings a week Playclub; an after school kids club; a twice a week evening Youth Club; a pottery club; a weekday Pensioners Lunch Club run by Social Services; a Pensioners choir and a Pensioners Club on Friday afternoons. Also Holiday Children's Playschemes with volunteer helpers from all over Europe and North Africa had been run for a number of years. There was also a range of artistic practical and practical activities for adults.

May also realised that the theatre had a great potential and she began to hire it out. The theatre was hired out to a variety of groups on an ad hoc basis. A regular user was Terry Palmer, an actor and director, who mounted productions of Shakespeare plays drawing on his pool of professional actors who performed unpaid. There were also regular Old Time Music Halls; many of the Artistes had experience of the era of Varsity Shows.

The building was in poor shape. The internal ceiling of the theatre has come down in the War and had never been replaced, and its roof leaked. The side balconies around the stage had been cut through and the original ironwork lost. Throughout the building there was poor heating; ancient wiring and many rooms were used for storage and so unusable.

Nevern Square

In 1970 a small group of people, a number of whom had trained together at the London Institute of Education and acted together while there, plus other friends, formed an amateur theatre group named Nevern Square Theatre. To begin with, Tony Coombs was the Director. That first year the group performed *Woyzeck* by Georg Buchner at The Cockpit Theatre. Needing somewhere to rehearse, Terry Goodfellow, who was working at the then Shoreditch Secondary School, approached May Scott who ran Hoxton Hall. She agreed to let them use the Palmer Room (then called the Playroom after the children's playschool that took place there every morning), in return for performing their plays as part of the theatre programme, and there the group rehearsed their play.

The following year, Nevern Square performed Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, again rehearsing at Hoxton Hall and performing at The Cockpit Theatre.

Following this, in 1972 the group decided to experiment with creating theatre through improvisation and they created a play based on the biblical story of Jephthah and performed it at the Cockpit Theatre, Oval House Theatre and at the Edinburgh Fringe.

By now, Nevern Square was committed to exploring the unique theatre space of Hoxton Hall, and performing to uniquely vocal local audiences. In 1973 Nevern Square arranged to produce a play for Hoxton Hall theatre and the group adapted *Child of the Jago*, a book about Shoreditch slums in the late 19th c. by Arthur Morrison in the 19th c. The production included local young people who dynamically acted the 'rats' of the Jago. The play was entered for the inaugural (and short lived!) Greater London Arts Association Best Amateur Play in London competition. The night the judges came to see the production was extremely wet and, as in those days Hoxton Hall's roof was in poor condition, the dire Victorian living conditions of the play were given added realism by rain continuously dripping on

to buckets on the stage. Perhaps out of pity, Nevern Square's production jointly won first prize, and the adjudicator, Roy Kift, had this to say: 'I left the show filled with the energy and vitality of the cast and the characters they portrayed; and more important, with a heightened awareness of the social fabric of the area which only a few hours previously had been little more to me than a collection of rundown, shabby streets.'

The group then started to explore Victorian theatre genres performing two melodramas and a pantomime with its accompanying harlequinade. They also continued to research local historical material. They performed *Well Done Warburton*, a devised play that drew on accounts of the private madhouses that were sited in Hackney in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Then two strands of performance were imaginatively interwoven in 'A Tuppenny Tragedy' (1975). Nevern Square dramatised a Hackney newspaper report of an 1875 murder case; this was intercut and echoed by scenes from various theatrical genres, from music hall to the Gothic interlude of 'Mrs Hatton's Horrors', as described by Dickens following a performance at the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton.

The New Project - Hoxton hall Community Theatre and Education

The idea

In early 1974 May Scott decided to retire and she approached Terry Goodfellow to ask if he would consider becoming Director of the centre. Terry wondered if taking on the role might combine with creating a full-time community theatre at Hoxton Hall and discussed the idea with others of the Nevern Square Group. There was enthusiastic support for the idea.

Terry resigned his teaching post and began work at Hoxton Hall in 1974 along with the existing paid youth worker, Jan Evans. Terry asked Barclay Price, one of the Nevern Square members, and someone who had worked in banking and for the Arts Council as a Finance Officer, if he would consider trying to raise the required funding with Terry. For the first five months Barclay acted as fund-raiser and administrator in an unpaid capacity before funding for a part-time post was found from the Quaker Trust that owned Hoxton Hall.

Over the next months various charitable trusts, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and Hackney Council were approached for funding. The concept of the project was for a team of 8 workers who would create theatre through improvisation; use this technique to create theatre with local groups and operate a broad community programme from the centre, building on the activities that May Scott had already established..

The idea caught the interest of Peter Brinson, the Director of Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Peter Brinson had an interest in the power of the arts to create positive change in disadvantaged communities. This was a period when the community arts movement was beginning to develop and Hackney and other parts of London's East End were at the forefront of this movement. In Hackney at this time there were two other recently established alternative arts organisations - Free Form, a visual arts based community arts project, and Centreprise, a community bookshop and literature project.

Peter Brinson assisted in finding a partner funder and The Linbury Trust and Gulbenkian Foundation agreed funding for the project for two years. In September 1974 Hoxton Hall Community Theatre project started. From Nevern Square there were Terry Goodfellow, Barclay Price, Jon Rake, Margaret Shepherd and Elsie Pilbeam. Two new people were employed to complete the team – David Sulkin and David Urie. This made a team of 7 in the theatre project plus Jan Evans.

Additional funding came from the ILEA for youth activities and adult drama activity, Greater London Arts provided project funding for a visiting theatre programme and Hackney Council gave a small level of support.

The project

The working process was unusual. The seven in the theatre team spent – on average – three days of the week creating or performing their own plays. A very short creation period was set. Plays were created, finalise and rehearsed over a four week period.

In addition each of the team had additional responsibilities for other activities.

- Terry Goodfellow, as well as his responsibilities as Director, jointly staffed the Youth Club with Jan Evans.
- Barclay Price continued to act as administrator and fund raiser and, in addition, coordinated a regular programme of (mainly) Friday evening performances by visiting theatre companies, including music halls.
- Margaret Shepherd ran an Adult Drama Group and Women's discussion group.
- Elise Pilbeam and Jon Rake ran a Drama Club for people with learning difficulties.
- Jon Rake supported the Youth Club activity and ran Literacy workshops.
- David Urie looked after the technical aspects and building upkeep.
- David Sulkin looked after costumes and since he was the only member of the team who had completed an acting training, advised on aspects of performance.

The theatre group's first production was *Who Killed William Corder* a play which investigated the true story behind the popular Victorian melodrama about the murder of Maria Marten and The Red Barn in (1827) that formed the material for many ballads and Victorian other Victorian melodramas.

Other activity in the project's first few years included a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Britain first ever purpose built theatre, The Theatre, sited nearby in Shoreditch; a version of a Victorian pantomime and harlequinade; a number of plays for school children and workshops often in response to specific requests; and 2 joint productions with Rose Bruford College - Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (with a local 14 year old playing Juliet) and *Pericles*. Every Christmas there was a Christmas play, either devised or adapted from existing written material. The theatre also hosted performances by all the community drama groups and became a well known venue on the touring circuit for theatre companies that included Shared Experience, Joint Stock Theatre, 7:84, the National Theatre, Albany Empire and People Show. The building also saw the filming of a small section of the warren Beatty film, *Reds*, as well as other films and various television dramas.

The project's success won core funding from Arts Council, ILEA and Hackney Council at the end of the two year support from the Gulbenkian and Linbury trusts. In addition to the project, the team raised £500,000 (c£2,650,000 in today's monetary value) to completely renovate the building, and in particular the music hall theatre. A major (and unexpected) cost was the discovery that the beam running underneath the length of the music hall was only connected at one end – the architects were unable to work out how the building was still standing! As well as this structural work, the refurbishment created a new plaster ceiling (the rosettes had originally been destined for a palace in the Middle East, but the order was cancelled), including two 1970s Electroliers given on long loan from the V&A to replace the missing original light fittings; replaced the missing balcony sections with recast copies of the ironwork; introduced central heating and state of the art theatre wiring.