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Prizes for Modernity in the Provinces: The Arts Council's 1950-1951 Regional Playwriting Competition

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As part of its contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain, the Arts Council ran what can be seen in retrospect to be an important playwriting competition. Disregarding the London stage entirely, it invited regional theatres throughout the UK to put forward nominations for new plays within their repertoire for 1950-1951. Each of the five winning plays would receive, what was then, the substantial sum of £100. Originality and innovation featured highly amongst the selection criteria, with 40 per cent of the judges' marks being awarded for "interest of subject matter and inventiveness of treatment". This article will assess some of the surprising outcomes of the competition and argue that it served as an important nexus point in British theatrical historiography between two key moments in post-war Britain: the first being the inauguration of the Festival of Britain in 1951, the other being the debut of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in May 1956. The article will also argue that the Arts Council's play competition was significant for two other reasons. By circumventing the London stage, it provides a useful tool by which to reassess the state of new writing in regional theatre at the beginning of the 1950s and to question how far received views of parochialism and conservatism held true. The paper will also put forward a case for the competition significantly anticipating the work of George Devine at the English Stage Company, which during its early years established a reputation for itself by heavily exploiting the repertoire of new plays originally commissioned by regional theatres.

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In existing histories of the 1951 Festival of Britain, the Arts Council have been cast as opportunistic interlopers and empire builders—albeit benevolent ones—who saw the chance to control arts provision for a high profile national event as a means of enshrining a place for itself at the centre of post-war British culture¹. Whether this is true or not, in regards to one aspect of theatre in particular, the Festival of Britain provided the

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¹ Robert Hewison for instance sees 1951 as marking "a coming of age" for the Arts Council, where arts policy could be realized on a national scale (Hewison, 1988, p. 65).

Arts Council with a more altruistic opportunity: namely to build upon existing policies since 1945 for improving the standards of production and quality of new drama throughout Britain's network of regional theatres. The case study that forms the basis of this article, namely its 1950-1951 playwriting competition marks a significant event: not just as part of the Arts Council's on-going policy for improving the provision of repertory theatre, but as a useful historical marker to test received histories of British theatre during the 1950s—namely that regional and metropolitan centres alike produced a turgid and unvarying diet of genteel drama that ignored formal experimentation or engaged directly with life in the immediate post-war years.

The Playwriting Competition

In some respects, the Arts Council's decision to hold a playwriting competition to mark the Festival of Britain was not unusual, with several organizations, such as the *Amateur Stage* marking the event in the same way. However, the Arts Council's competition, with its emphasis on the plays being professionally produced or about to be produced through the repertory system made it a very different sort of contest. Whereas competitions such as the one for *Amateur Stage* were run as commercial enterprises (with the aspiring playwright being required to pay the not inconsiderable fee of seven shillings and sixpence for a chance to win the first prize of £10 and second prize of £5), the Arts Council's competition was free to enter. The five prizes offered of £100 for each play produced in repertory between 1 April 1950 and 31 March 1951, while considerably higher, also went directly to the producing theatre rather than the playwright². The reason for this was that the prize would be a guarantee against loss in order to encourage repertory and touring companies to produce new work without the disincentive of incurring financial loss³.

Although the competition was publicized in conjunction with the approaching Festival of Britain, the criteria for eligible plays being produced between 1 April 1950 and 31 March 1951 meant that the competition had finished before the Festival was inaugurated in May. In fact, minutes of the Arts Council's Drama Panel reveal that planning for the competition had begun in 1949, and that far from originally being designed as an event to mark festival year, the competition was originally designed as one of a number of initiatives with the chief aim strengthening theatre outside of London. Chief amongst these was the decision to provide subsidy only to those repertory companies performing fortnightly rather than weekly rep in a bid to improve standards of acting and production.

In all five prizes of one hundred pounds were offered to regional theatres presenting new plays. The chosen criteria for judging make interesting material. Whereas the *Amateur Stage's* panel of judges included well-known names including the actor Robert Newton fresh from appearing as Long John Silver in Disney's film *Treasure Island* (1950) and the drama critic J. C. Trewin, six out of the seven submissions in England were assessed by the Arts Council's Drama Director John Moody and his Associate Drama Director Gerald Landstone, while the two entries for Scotland were assessed by the Deputy Director and the drama critic and

² Yvonne Mitchell, writer of the winning entry *Here Choose I* (subsequently retitled *The Same Sky*), in her autobiography *Actress* comments somewhat tartly: "It won the Arts Council's prize, which was £100 for the playhouse; but the Arts Council hadn't thought of remunerating the author. In fact, they never told me about the prize. I read about it in *The Observer* one Sunday" (Mitchell, 1957, p. 59).

³ Debates about the prize money being released after the production had finished gave way to an acknowledgment of the problems that repertory companies experienced in promoting new work without the guarantee of subsidy. Minutes of the 19th Meeting of the Drama Panel, 21 September 1949, ACGB archive of Great Britain, EL6/157).

former BBC producer Joseph McLeod. Plays were marked out of one hundred on a set of assigned categories. These included, “dialogue” (20), “construction” (15), “interest of subject matter and inventiveness of treatment” (40), and “staging, including mounting, production and acting” (25) (ACGB EL6/157).

What is particularly worthy of noting is the value attributed to each category, for it underscores many of the inherent contradictions within the endeavour from its inception. The most significant category was “interest of subject matter and inventiveness of treatment”. This sets up two countervailing impulses that tussle for dominance throughout the competition—namely the call for experiment against the conservatism of the 1950s West End London theatre. In a letter written in October 1950 to his Scottish counterpart about the competition John Moody commented,

we are anxious not only to encourage unknown playwrights but unknown playwrights who have got something a little out of the ordinary to say and a reasonably adventurous way rather than a conventional way of saying it. (Moody, 1950)

While hardly a clarion call to dismantle the artistic barricades, Moody’s letter at least demonstrates a willingness to encourage experiment.

Yet, other criteria in awarding marks sent out contradictory messages that sought to temper radical expression. For instance, the 15 per cent rewarded for “construction” suggests that the constraints of the “well made play” still adhered, as did the 2 per cent given to staging “including mounting and production”. These categories seemed to be designed with the intention of curbing anything *too* experimental appearing on regional stages. A good example of these two impulses vying against each other was Charles Landstone’s production report on one of the entries, Kenneth Rose’s *Possession*, at the Kidderminster Playhouse. While Landstone enjoys the first half of the play: it “tells a story, its people... are very real... there is wit and humour in the dialogue [and] there is suspense in the plot”, the second half is a disappointment: “the plot runs away from actuality, the situations become unreal... and every now and then the characters behave quite unlike normal people” (Landstone, 1950).

It is not difficult to surmise that Landstone’s response was directed by the prevailing styles of commercial theatre, and while one of the rules of the competition openly sought out regional dramatists where “preference will be given in judging to plays whose authors have not yet made their mark on the West End stage⁴”, it clearly anticipated that this was to be the dramatists chosen destination. The problem is a clear one: despite the Arts Council’s worthy intentions at strengthening playwriting culture in the regions, such schemes risked simply becoming a conduit to feed the West End with a succession of Cornish Cowards and East Riding Rattigans.

With such contradictory forces embedded firmly within the competition, it is perhaps not unsurprising that the Arts Council was disappointed with the outcome. As Charles Landstone’s summative report concluded, “The adjudicators decided that the entries were not good enough to justify the award of four prizes” (Landstone, April 17, 1951). Although the competition had the constraint of only being open to plays already in repertory the number of entries was poor. In England, only seven submissions were received (with two of these coming from the same theatre), two of which (*Mansfield Park* and *The Three Musketeers*) were literary adaptations; one entry came from Scotland and nothing at all from Wales.

Whereas the competition was originally looking to award five prizes of £100 each, in the end only two

⁴ ‘Scheme for Awards to Repertory Companies for the Production of new Plays’. Undated. ACGB archive, EL6/157.

plays were selected—Yvonne Mitchell’s *Here Choose I* (Nottingham Playhouse) and George H. Grimaldi’s *Close Combat* (Guilford Repertory Company). Also, in what seemed an inexplicable decision, a “consolation prize” of £50 was offered to Constance Cox’s *Mansfield Park* that broke the rules of the competition on two counts—not only was it an adaptation, but Cox already had well established West End credentials. Yet the recognition of *Mansfield Park* as a piece of theatre being worthy of a prize is significant, for it sent out a clear message to the regional theatres—namely that while the Arts Council sought innovative new drama, it still needed to adhere to West End standards of acting, production and conventions of the “well made play”. These can be seen in Charles Landstone’s rationale for awarding *Mansfield Park* a consolation prize: dialogue is praised for being “easy and stylish”, and the play itself an example of “a very good bit of craftsmanship” (Landstone, March 2, 1951). Not only this, but in regards to the Arts Council’s aim for repertory theatres to improve general standards of production, Cox’s adaptation is singled out as “the best in the competition”⁵.

The competition also exposed how far the Arts Council had to go in raising standards. A case in point was the production of C. W Davies’s *The Prince of Darkness is a Gentleman*, “about a W. E. A lecturer who has a weakness for self-dramatization”, and written, Landstone archly observed “by a W. E. A lecturer”. The producing company, the Adelphi Guild Theatre (who also produced the other entry, Leonard Irwin’s *The Bubble*) were a touring company, “serving the theatreless towns in the north Midland region”⁶. While Charles Landstone acknowledged that the company were “such well-meaning, rather nice young people” who had been “enterprising in putting on new plays and unlike most repertoires do not lose their audience by offering the unknown”, concluded that “this whole affair was rather tragic” where “neither the acting nor the play writing really emerges from the semi-amateur” (Landstone, 1951, March 2). The production scored a poor 45 out of 100.

Landstone’s report on *The Prince of Darkness Is a Gentleman* also provides clues as to what constituted modernity for the Arts Council. The opening scene with the protagonist perched on a moorland cromlech overlooking an industrial town receives praise for conveying “a certain symbolism, descriptive of the cleansing power the wind possesses outside the evil of the earth”. However, in the scene that follows “we get down to earth [at the offices of the W. E. A where] the problems are petty, earth bound, parochial, contemporarily political, and not large enough to affect the humanities” (Landstone, 1951, March 2).

This advocacy for a type of drama that falls somewhere between Byronic mysticism and *Wuthering Heights* together with a corresponding dismissal of social or political issues is illuminating. This preference for the metaphorical over social realism accords with the Arts Council’s own tastes for what Robert Hewison calls “a flurry of interest” in verse drama during the late 1940s and early 1950s, where plays such as Christopher Fry’s *The Lady’s not for Burning* (1948) and T. S Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* (1949), were seen by some as bridging the divide between modernism and the commercial interests of the West End. The Arts Council certainly seemed to subscribe to this view, where one of the few new plays produced under its Festival of Britain association was Christopher Fry’s religious verse drama *The Sleep of Prisoners*. Robert Hewison believes this advocacy “reflected particularly Mandarin prejudices” (Hewison, 1988, p.79), with the Arts Council’s agenda for the Festival of the Britain ultimately serving the interests of a “well meaning elite” (Hewison, 1988, p. 66). Landstone’s dislike of *The Prince of Darkness Is a Gentleman*, moving from brooding

⁵ Landstone even commented that the dialogue in Cox’s adaptation is able to hold an audience’s attention “probably to a greater extent than it would be in first reading the novel”. Report on the play competition 1950-1951 (Landstone, 1950-1951).

⁶ Theatre programme for Adelphi Guild Theatre, *The Prince of Darkness is a Gentleman*. ACGB archive EL6/157.

romanticism to the everyday struggles and frustrations of early post-war Britain illustrates Hewison's point.

The impact of the Second World War, albeit in different ways preoccupied both of the two winning plays. In her autobiography *Actress*, Yvonne Mitchell had low expectations of getting her play, with its wartime setting, produced in a post-war climate (Mitchell, 1957, p. 56). *Here Choose I* tells the story of a doomed love affair set in London's East End between a gentile soldier and a Jewish girl. It borrows heavily from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where the religious and racial differences between the two families over the young couple's marriage are put aside when the girl's husband is killed abroad.

In contrast, George Grimaldi's *Close Combat* is the type of drama more familiar to us now as a "war trauma" play. Set in a psychiatric hospital, its central protagonist Steve Burton cannot adjust to life as a civilian following his time as a commando. He has failed to discern between the homicidal urge that is inculcated as part of military training and life as a civilian. Steve kills an elderly hospital porter, but during a number of flashback scenes conducted by his Austrian psychiatrist Steve's urge to kill is cured and the closing scene sees him reunited his fiancée, shortly before his own death.

While events in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a number of plays in recent years, including Gregory Burke's *Blackwatch* (2004) and Simon Stephens *Motortown* (2006), that concern the plight of traumatized individuals, E. R Wood in his introduction to John Whiting's play *Saint's Day* (1951) noted that, "in 1951 audiences were accustomed to plays which took little account of the immense changes in values and beliefs that the war years had brought" (Wood, 1963, p. 6). Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* that premiered two years after *Close Combat*, and which enjoyed both commercial success at the time and critical reassessment in recent years, through its depiction of the RAF officer Freddie Payne, also tells of the experiences of servicemen who have been unable to adjust to civilian life.

In the programme notes to *Close Combat*, the theatre's two artistic directors Peter Hinton and Patrick Henderson emphasized the extensive research undertaken and included a long list of psychiatric and military personnel who were consulted by the playwright. *Close Combat*, in its call for a scientific approach in "helping those mental derangements which produce the criminal mind [and] not punishing" was unusual in offering audiences something more than simply a diverting evening at the theatre. The programme notes even mildly goad its patrons into reconsidering their own relationship to theatre going, in that while not necessarily agreeing with the playwright's view, by "showing clearly an aspect of the question which has hitherto been only dimly imagined, this abstract and brief chronicle is doing a job that is fundamentally the job of the theatre⁷". It is this campaigning spirit that in hindsight makes *Close Combat* the most interesting play of the competition. The Arts Council's partial recognition of this quality by awarding it second prize also indicates that it was at least serious in promoting serious new work throughout Britain's network of regional theatres.

Yet it was to be Yvonne Mitchell's *Here Choose I* and its rather more unproblematic treatment of the war years that truly displayed the Arts Council's West End sensibility most fully. Although described by Gerald Landstone in his report on the competition as "not a masterpiece" (Landstone, 1950-1951), and despite only playing for two weeks in repertoire at Nottingham Playhouse Mitchell's play, (subsequently retitled *The Same Sky*), was revived in London at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith (with a pre-run at Brighton and Cambridge) with Thora Hird and Frederick Valk in the cast. After a successful six-week run, the play transferred to the

⁷ Winton and Henderson. Programme notes for *Close Combat*. Undated. ACGB archive EL6/157.

Duke of York's Theatre in the West End (where it was re-lit by a youthful Peter Brook). The play also underwent subsequent adaptation for wireless and television versions and continued to be revived in both professional and amateur productions throughout the 1950s.

Conclusion

The Arts Council's playwriting competition was seen at the time as a failure. Charles Landstone's report concludes "The entries were all disappointing in so much that none of them showed any sign of development of a new style or any sort of departure from the conventional form of writing". However, what should be taken away from the competition, is that despite Landstone's assessment, the Arts Council seemed undaunted in their efforts to initiate changes in practice.

For instance, the Drama Panel minutes of April 1952 reveal that following a surplus of £4000 in grants formerly allocated to London's Old Vic and several other companies, a sub-committee was set up comprising of the actors Alec Clunes and Peter Ustinov, together with Hugh Hunt, the first artistic director of Bristol Old Vic, who reported on how best to allocate the money in promoting new work throughout Britain's regional theatre. For Ustinov, the state of new drama had been a long-standing matter of concern. Writing for *The Listener* back in 1947 Ustinov had observed, "there is little reason for the dramatist to be confident in these hard days" and that owing to a lack of new work British theatre was dominated by the "ghosts of the past" (Ustinov, January 30, 1947), which in turn became an obstacle for the living dramatist—in other words a self-defeating circle.

However, the series of measures proposed to Council in May 1952 actively set out to reform this state of affairs, with a proposal put forward that £3,000 in total be distributed across regional theatres (together with bodies such as Sunday producing societies) and club theatres in the form of guarantees against loss, (and individual subsidy available at the discretion of the Drama Director to adjust this sum) of £300 for plays whose merit had been agreed by the sub-committee. Eligible theatres would be those who had been producing at least one new play more in their annual programme than had been customary during the previous four years. Repertory companies already in receipt of Arts Council subsidy would still be eligible to apply, although plays in translation and adaptations would be excluded from the scheme. Half the remaining £500 would be held in reserve for companies in urgent need of a general grant, while the remainder would be given to support the work of an exceptionally promising dramatist for the duration of the financial year⁸.

While more scholarly work remains to be done in following through these series of policy initiatives, by the end of 1950s two scenarios emerge: one optimistic, the other pessimistic. Certainly, a number of plays that were more contemporary in their theme and approach were starting to become a more regular feature of repertory programming. Examples include Bernard Kop's *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* (1957), (produced somewhat against the spirit of the title by the Oxford Playhouse) and *Goodbye Cruel World* (1959) at Guildford, while Robert Bolt's first professionally produced plays *The Critic and the Heart* (1957) and *Flowering Cherry* (1957) both premiered at the Royal Court Liverpool. One might also cite the "discovery" of Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup With Barley* (1958) that began life at the Belgrade Coventry and its role in the early history of London's Royal Court, as another encouraging sign: in fact this particular example shows the opposite—namely that the repertoire in regional theatres had changed very little since 1951.

⁸ Drama Panel minutes 3rd April 1952 and 15th May 1952. ACGB/43/1.

The reason for this is that Wesker's *Chicken Soup With Barley* was the one significant play that came out of George Devine's rather patronizing idea that "the Court ought to do something about the provinces". The intention was to stage a season of new writing from regional theatres hosted at the Royal Court. Yet despite writing to every repertory company in the UK Devine reported that "the product of this was so lamentable we could hardly raise four weeks" (Roberts, 1999, p. 64). As Philip Roberts points out in his book *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, "the experiment was not repeated" (Roberts, 1999, p. 64).

The 1950-1951 playwriting competition, while it cannot definitively challenge existing accounts of British theatre in that decade, at least contributes to the detailed record kept by the Arts Council of the outpouring of theatrical activity that marked the Festival of Britain, and described in its annual report of that year rather unfortunately as "raw material for compiling a Doomsday Book of British artistic endeavour" (The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1951, p. 10). Yet, based on records of its playwriting competition there were signs of coalescence around the margins. The social agenda of *Close Combat* has already been mentioned, and Charles Landstone's report for Kenneth Rose's *Possession* includes an intriguing comment:

All the young people in the play are either bastards, or about to procreate bastards—the primeval passions of farm life are presented, without histrionics, as being more or less the every day behaviour of rural circles. (Landstone, September 9, 1950)

This sounds more like "pink eyed many-muscled, salivating monster" (Tynan, 2007, p.37) that encircles the periphery of Kenneth Tynan's Loamshire country house – the imaginary locale for all that he identifies as wrong in British theatre – and that waits ready to challenge the complacencies of 1950s audiences. Lest we forget, John Osborne's professional debut was not *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 but *The Devil Inside* which played for one week at the Theatre Royal Huddersfield, on Easter Monday—significantly just over a week before the official opening of the Festival of Britain on 3rd May 1951—and this too provides something of an indication that while the regions may not have been catalysts for May 1956, but they were certainly potential incubators.

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