

Re-presenting the City

**A Dramatist's Contextualisation Of His Works On Liverpool
Post - 1990**

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**A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Liverpool John Moores University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2015

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A Personal Foreword



Byford Street, Liverpool L7, taken in 1972, where I was born, though had left here by 1966.

Born in 1964, the son of a plasterer and leaving for Leeds University in 1982, my formative years in Liverpool and deep early impressions of the city were shaped by the 1970s /80s. One of the few positive benefits of attending an under-funded, inner-city comprehensive school in Liverpool was perhaps the number of subjects and interests we attempted to cover and a resultant affinity for eclecticism.¹ From sports to school plays to a terrible school orchestra, I had a go at everything and at times the loose structure meant that when I was caught out of

¹ I attended Holt Comprehensive between 1975-82. The school was badly damaged when I was there after being partially burned down by disgruntled fellow-pupils. There were regular fights with nearby schools which required police attendance. Out of seven classes of thirty to forty in my year, I estimate about six of us made it to completing a university degree or around 2%. It did however have some committed long-standing teachers hanging on in there like Peter O'Connor and Joan Talbot who taught me English and first encouraged me to write and to go to university.

class, reading and writing poetry or playing football in the gym nobody bothered too much. Teachers tended to adopt the attitude that I was probably better off teaching myself and helped my feral learning where they could or wrote me off as someone who would learn by mistake. But a trip to an early screening of Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film 'Apocalypse Now' (United Artists), at Liverpool city centre's only progressive and soon to be symbolically defunct, Futurist cinema, in 1980 confirmed that Liverpool was an environment in sharp decline.

[first lines]

Willard: [voiceover] Saigon... shit; I'm still only in Saigon... Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle... Every minute I stay in this room, I get weaker, and every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger. Each time I looked around the walls moved in a little tighter. (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979)

I left the cinema to witness part of the city was on fire, like a haunting echo from the film much of Toxteth was soon to follow. The way out through university and academia in, first, Leeds then Cardiff was clear – get a decent education and get a job and most of all, get away. I left, literally under a cloud.



Aftermath of Toxteth riots 1981.

As I found out, a major element of going to university is to find out how middle-class you are or, in my case, are not. Turning up at Leeds University to read English in 1982 therefore meant learning new languages and not just that of the right thing to say at dinner parties. Here was an English department, like many others in the country, governed by a somewhat opaque liberal humanist philosophy still trying to define literature by some romantic notion of man's essential nature and impossible to analytically pin down.² Having managed to largely ignore any influence of Marxist or Freudian analysis or seemingly any underlying structuralist theory or ideological framework attributable to any clear school or schools of thought, the course was now in crisis. The 1980s were closing in with a persistent set of deconstructionist, poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses, driven by the likes of Derrida, Barthes and Lacan and heading straight towards its medievalist roots like a phalanx of semiological linguistic missiles. Trying to find a voice in this atmosphere of confused red brick rhetoric was frustrating but also had its advantages. Firstly, for me it meant constantly trying out different languages, ways of speaking and writing to make sense of it all and my undergraduate essays would be written in sometimes wildly contrasting voices and styles (a habit with which I still persist as the reader will gather from this document). Secondly, it meant I was drawn away from an English department I was baffled by and took all the theatre and drama courses I could, in the then, small off-shoot Drama department of English running an MA and research programmes under Professor Martin Banham and Dr Mike Patterson.³

² One of my fellow students would regularly justify his literary comments by referring to the bible he constantly carried around with him and no-one else seemed to think this was woolly, spurious or odd.

³ In my second year I was planning to go back to plastering for my father. I took my first class in drama and Martin Banham asked me if I would come back later to audition for one of the directors on the MA Programme who was putting on Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944). I auditioned with another young man who immediately started to mimic my voice for one of the parts. I got six parts, stayed at Leeds University and more or less lived in the drama department for the next two years. The other lad got the main role of Simon Chachava and became a life-

It was eventually whilst studying as a postgraduate at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff University (1986-87) that fellow students introduced me to the works of Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton and a school of cultural materialism that placed literary and artistic production in a socio-economic and political context that I could, in some way, relate to.⁴ In turn this led me to reading and re-reading the theoretical works of Brecht, Piscator, Boal and McGrath and then my first attempts to get to grips with post-structuralism and post-modernist theory.⁵ Theatrically I then tried to resolve the issues of how to accessibly present ideas of morality, society and relationships with my final piece at Cardiff, a first full-length production of my own work 'Watching the Detectives' (The Sherman Theatre, 1987). I was experimenting with genre, or the internal rules of storytelling that could be used as an argo for difficult or politicised material and in particular how the crime thriller had become such a major part of our cultural consciousness.⁶ The production was an eclectic ensemble piece, telling different stories all connected by a crime theme, some scripted, some devised and semi-scripted and at one point an improvised murder story with suggestions from the audience. The

long friend, the impressionist, actor and comedian, Alistair McGowan. He also directed me in a student production of John McGrath's (1980) *Swings and Roundabouts* in 1984.

⁴ I still recommend these highly accessible introductions to students: Simon, R (1980) *Gramsci's Political Thought* - Lawrence and Wishart; Williams, R (1981) *Culture* - Fontana; Dollimore, J & Sinfield, A (eds) (1985) *Political Shakespeare - New essays in cultural materialism* - MUPress; Eagleton, T (1983) *Introduction To Literary Theory* - Blackwell which is a good start for an understanding of the post-structuralists as is Stephen Heath's collection and translation of Barthes, R (1977) *IMAGE MUSIC TEXT* - Fontana.

⁵ An introduction to Piscator, is the widely respected, Willet, J (1978) *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre*. London: Methuen.

⁶ I had particularly been reading Warpole, K (1983) *Dockers and Detectives* Pluto and Mandel, E (1984) *Delightful Murder - a social history of the crime story* - University of Minnesota, Jack London novels and was almost certainly heavily influenced by the Dennis Potter's (1986) BBC TV Drama Serial, *The Singing Detective*.

result, was my first attempt to explore social and politicised themes using a fragmentary post-modernist theatrical aesthetic.⁷

For all my efforts to communicate on a meaningful but popular, accessible level, like others before me, I then found on going home to visit Liverpool in 1987, I was now speaking a different language to that of my friends and family and my emic understanding of my own culture and background had changed irrevocably and so had I.⁸ The fact that other working-class dramatists had not only been through this alienation through education but were exploring and producing this experience at around the same with works like Willy Russell's 'Educating Rita' (1980) and John Godber's Salt of the Earth (1988) did not help me. Liverpool had become a depressed, semi-derelict and ignorant place for an artist whose self-portrait as a young man now considered himself educated beyond his own class and background. Now living in London, it was part of a past to be suppressed and assimilated and an identity that had become an embarrassment or something to be slightly ashamed of and one that was also disappearing along with a rapidly fading accent. It was thankfully then, in some ways perhaps, that pretty terrible events soon slapped that particular arrogance of ignorance out of my consciousness.

In September of 1988 my father died suddenly abroad on holiday, leaving my mother stranded abroad at the age of fifty-eight. There is coming home and there is coming home to the funeral of a father a family believes has been taken before his time. The kind of coming home that pulls the identity rug from beneath you and now demands that you examine not only what your home and city has become and now is, but who you are yourself and how you came

⁷ Albeit a naïve one, when a local review described me as 'the stylish, young, new Robert Wilson' - *South Wales Echo* (May 15th 1987) I had to go and look up the celebrated, experimental, American theatre-director.

⁸ I remember that around this time my family would tell jokes that I would not get or even understand as jokes. In a Liverpool family like mine, this is was a sin right up there with not liking football or pints of beer.

to be it. A few months later, in April 1989 at Hillsborough, ninety-six Liverpool FC fans are killed and just a few weeks after that Liverpool lose the football league to Arsenal with, all but, the last kick of the match. It is a final straw. I am standing on the Kop while all around me friends and fans, young and old, have sunk on to the terraces, heads in hands, openly weeping. It seems like the whole city is crying, broken and now vilified beyond belief by the Hillsborough lies. The decision to return to the comfortable life I now had in London suddenly becomes a profound one. Take flight for the prosperous south or stay and fight for a city I had all but disowned?

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

(The Waste Land – T.S. Eliot, 1922)

By September of 1989, I am in rehearsals at the Everyman Theatre working with the international touring theatre company Kaboodle. Having gained a position as a trainee director set up by the Everyman and its community and training wing The Hope Street Project, I have six months to work out the implications of being back in Liverpool and how I am going to respond.

The Liverpool I thought I knew had now changed beyond recognition and was alienating to me. That the familiar had become strange and the strange familiar, was brought home to me in a prosaic incident soon after I'd first arrived back. Not long after taking the Everyman post I am standing on the ground floor of Lewis's department store. I am recently back in town and disorientated, so reach for the comfort of the past and the familiar. On many a Saturday growing up in the city I would accompany my family on the weekly shopping trip to Lewis's Food Hall, not just a wealth of produce counters and displays from best meats to broken biscuits but also a place to bump into friends, colleagues, extended family all performing the same ritual. But on

this day I cannot find it. I phone my mother to ask where it has moved to, 'You've been away longer than you think son', she sadly replies, 'Look in the far corner'. A pitiful stall of a few bits and pieces is all that is left of the great Lewis's Food Hall. How did it come to this? What happened here? There is emic knowledge, the kind acquired by nurture growing up in a city like Liverpool and there is the etic analytical knowledge, acquired through research and interrogation. If I was to begin to understand the deeper forces at work here it was in the rich combination of these emic and etic approaches and understandings that I would come to develop into my practice and channel into the dramatic works to start to arrive at some sort of answers, and even, hopefully, shine some transformative light on our heart of darkness to help find a way to move on. Coppola's 'Apocalypse Now' had come back to haunt me:

Willard: Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one.

(Francis Ford-Coppola, 1979)



Willard is about to confront Kurtz for the final time. Coppola,FF - *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Finally a last word on place and identity. I was lucky enough to grow up in a particular type of Liverpool household which combined my father's inherent Irish Catholic sense of working-class scholarship with my mother's Protestant work ethic. With three older sisters and an older brother it was a demanding family of seven that was always argumentative, opinionated, witty and fun. There was a steaming hot pot of tea going day and night around which you would meet by chance or gather for a gab and a jangle. At meal times the dinner table was sacrosanct, we would all eat together, the TV was banned during this time, any music was usually classical (because we could listen to our own pop music in our own time) and when the discussion broke out about whatever the topic of the day was, you were expected to hold your own in voicing your thoughts. Though both my parents left school at fourteen to earn their keep my father had both a keen mathematical mind and an appreciation of opera and reading the Greek classics and my mother is still the most gifted natural storyteller I know. They both had an unswerving belief in the power of education to transform and become better and constantly encouraged reading, study, participation in sports, visits to the theatre, cinema and concerts and a whole range of social interaction within and without the family in a house that was open to all our friends, relatives and neighbours. Anything of any real value I have learned or achieved, academically, through my involvement in drama or otherwise is due to this type of upbringing and to them.



Early theatre making with my brother and sister. Pretending we are away camping with a home-made tent made out of old blankets, two garden forks and a broom stick - but the house we grew up in Wavertree, Liverpool in the 1960-70s is never too far away. An early attempt to change the landscape or perhaps escape from it? I'm, perhaps prophetically, awkwardly on the left.

Introduction to the Publications – The Plays

The main body of this submission is five, full-length theatre scripts. Each project examines and theatrically presents key influences of the major social and cultural forces that have both impacted on and shaped Liverpool:

Fall From Grace

- About the Liverpool-Irish, Irish immigration and the city's relationship with Ireland.
- Written and produced 1990-94.
- Toured nationally and internationally.

Co-produced with Bill Kenwright and The Liverpool Playhouse 1994. Subject of several BBC Radio Merseyside special programmes. Commissioned by the Arts Council and Liverpool City Council.

Ballad of the Sea

- About Liverpool's Twentieth Century seafarers.
- Written and produced 1993-95.
- Beginning at The Unity Theatre Liverpool 1993, performed in The Maritime Museum 1994, full production at The Everyman Theatre 1997.
- Commissioned by the Arts Council and Liverpool City Council.

Walltalks

- About the diversity of ethnicity with communities from all over the world flowing into the city.
- Written and produced 2004-07.

- Beginning as part of the Liverpool Biennial 2004 at The Jump Ship Rat Gallery and full site-specific production at the Stanley Dock Tobacco Warehouse 2007.
- Commissioned by the Liverpool Culture Company in the lead up to Liverpool as European Capital of Culture 2008 and the Arts Council of England.

With supporting *World in One City* CD-ROM outlining some of the research methods/sources, commissioned by Liverpool City Council.

The Shankly Show

- About the relationship with football and Liverpool Football Club's iconic manager, 2008-10.
- Opened at The Olympia Theatre, Liverpool 2008 transferred to the Royal Court Liverpool later that year and to the Echo Arena – BT Convention Centre 2010.
- Worldwide DVD release of live recording 2010.
- Featured on BBC1, ITV1, STV and Sky Sports TV, Radio 4's Today programme and one of the most popular media covered events of Liverpool's 2008 Year of Culture.
- Commissioned by The Liverpool Culture Company for Liverpool 08 and The Arts Council of England.

Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles

- About popular music and the Beatles iconic manager 2012.
- Opened at The Epstein Theatre Liverpool 2012, transferred to the Leicester Square Theatre London summer 2014 with plans to be produced in New York and Toronto.
- Commissioned by Liverpool City Council, The Arts Council of England, Homotopia.

All have been professionally produced, some have toured and been performed nationally and internationally, but all have been generated in Liverpool and are about some aspect of the culture and identity of the city and its people. The works span twenty-five-years and began when I returned to my native city from studying and working in other parts of the country in 1989. This has also been a period in which Liverpool emerged from being one of the fastest declining cities in Europe with well documented financial, political and social problems⁹ into an apparent paragon of inner city regenerative success, as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's on-line news publication, *Public Finance* describes:

For a city that became a byword for turmoil during the 1980s, Liverpool's physical and political transformation from municipal basket-case to regional commercial centre appears remarkable.

Thirty years ago, ministers considered sending in commissioners to run a city brought to its knees by a combination of hard-Left revolution in the town hall and ideological monetarists in government.

Now senior ministers – supported by Tory grandee Lord Heseltine, who was 'Minister for Merseyside' in the 1980s – sing the praises of a pragmatic council. Instead of name-calling, they are on first-name terms with the city's newly elected mayor, Joe Anderson. (Hetherington 2012:1)

This work is an exploration of my own history as a writer and theatre practitioner and a discussion of how my work has been provoked by, responded to and interwoven with the history of the city as it has undergone this transformation. It is about my personal interpretation as a theatre writer and my analysis of the changing social, cultural and political

⁹ Liverpool John Moores University's Richard Meegan's study from the Institute for Urban Affairs is a good concise guide to the key issues and events, Meegan R. (2007) – Liverpool: From Gateway to Empire to European Renaissance City? [online] [www.ljmu.ac.uk/Liverpool From Gateway to Empire](http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/Liverpool_From_Gateway_to_Empire)

fortunes of Liverpool and my contributions to it. The work can also be interpreted as a cultural materialist reading and response to the city and what it may represent, through the medium of popular, dramatic political theatre.

Conceptual Roots and Practitioner Theory

My colleague the playwright Willy Russell offered to chat to me about developing the play after seeing an early version of *Fall From Grace* in the early 1990s. At the meeting in his office, I was describing some, consciousness-raising moment I had in mind when I would lift the houselights on the audience at a key moment to suddenly alienate them and make them aware of their own politicised being or something like that?. Willy looked at me and said, in hindsight with some patience, 'I would absolutely hate that as an audience member and it would just make me feel uncomfortable. You've got to remember Andrew, that for a lot of people in this city, life is hard enough'. Willy was alerting me to finding the difficult balance between an audience's absorbed enjoyment of a theatrical experience while maintaining a capacity for intellectually active, politicised engagement. Amelia Howe Kritzer spells out the problems of what she calls 'pleasurable escape':

Despite theatre's political potential, relatively few plays of any era exhibit overtly political aims. Those that do must overcome both artistic and social challenges to find and reach audiences. First among these challenges is the audience's desire for a pleasurable escape from the world around them. Escape in some form is inherent in the art of theatre, as actors take on the identity of characters and create an artificial world on stage, while audience members invest mental and emotional attention in these characters and their world. Pleasurable escape, however, implies distance from problems or situations that call for concrete action.

(Howe Kritzer 2008: 3)

So there is a careful balancing act to be negotiated between informative, issue-based and potentially contentious thematic concerns and engaging, entertaining and acceptable forms a theatre audience can be simultaneously provoked and delighted by. Going to the theatre

should not be like going to the dentist, something that is often uncomfortable, sometimes painful, but that is a necessity for your own good. You should be able to enjoy as well.¹⁰

In the plays of mine discussed here the challenge was to take these complex, difficult and often weighty historical themes and events and to make them theatrically popular and accessible to the communities of and those invested in the city, in a way that echoed Prentki and Selman's definition of the form in *Popular Theatre in Political Culture* (2000):

Popular theatre is theatre process and performance, which is used as part of a process of change. It sets out to be a part of a movement towards a greater empowerment on the part of participants. It tries to be part of social and political change as well as individual change. It tries to enable those who are marginalised in some way to examine collectively their issues...
(Prentki/Selman 2000:9)¹¹

Though their definition is based in a community and applied context, the broad theme that inclusivity and a sense of shared ownership of the stories being told, is a key element strived for in the works. *Fall From Grace* regularly engaged a community ensemble in its various production incarnations to create a communal atmosphere in a strategic move to challenge the dominant oppressive patterns of theatrical delivery Boal exposes and analyses in his seminal work on participatory and socially engaged drama practice, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979):

“Theatre” was the people singing freely in the open air; the theatrical experience

¹⁰ I had children from my family performed in the ensemble during the run of *Fall From Grace* at the Liverpool Playhouse (1994). One of my nieces, too young to be involved, got very upset when we were all going off to the show. When I asked her what she thought the Playhouse was she replied: ‘Isn’t it full of big swings and slides and all sorts of things to play on with everyone having fun’. Intellectually, emotionally and engagingly, isn’t that is exactly what theatre should be?

¹¹ A fuller description and definition of Popular Theatre with particular reference to its applied and community contexts is discussed in the opening chapter Defining Popular Theatre in Prentki/Selman (2000) *Popular Theatre in Political Culture*. 8-30.

was created by and for the people, and could thus be called dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. Then came the aristocracy and established divisions: some persons will go to the stage and the only they will be able to act; the rest will remain seated, receptive, passive – these will be the spectators, the masses, the people. (Boal 1979:ix)

I was, however careful to avoid *Fall From Grace* being labelled as a piece of community theatre as this potentially marginalised its potential production in mainstream theatres as well as touring and traditional performance venues.¹² The strategy was to infiltrate on all fronts and the play appeared in tiny community halls and major playhouse theatres during its run. The inclusive principles of community based drama should run through all theatre practice, especially one serving a local agenda, even when direct involvement on stage is not possible.



The audience sits at tables 'onstage' with us in this early 1990's production of *Fall From Grace*.

Subsequent work did not always allow this kind of direct community involvement, usually because of the practical and financial pressure, which large casts demand in terms of both

¹² I approached a well-known Liverpool actor to be involved in a *Fall From Grace* production, Liverpool Playhouse (1994) who disappointingly asked me, 'Is that the play with all the amateurs in?'

logistical management and funding. But in all the work there is always a strong desire to implicate the audience as part of the proceedings - in the direct testimonies of seafarers in *Ballad of the Sea*, through the use of promenade in *Walltalks* and as part of a theatrical football crowd in *The Shankly Show*. The opening speech and subsequent direct addresses of the This Boy character in *Epstein* are an unashamed evocative direct appeal to the Liverpool and Beatles faithful:

| | |
|----------|---|
| This Boy | What times were these? What kind of man changes the way a world wears clothes, moves, speaks, screams and listens to music like its life depends on it? That's what I want to know. I'm a Scouser and to us being into the Merseysound or a Beatles fan is not something we get to choose. Cos whether we like the music or not, it's part of us. We drink it, smell it, taste it, breathe it - from before we're born. |
| | (Epstein:2) |

Like the signalling of the seafarers story as a sea ballad these are self-conscious references to the urban folk tale whose genesis is in the free flow of words in pubs and clubs and from around family dinner tables in an effort to re-locate them back to an audience for whom theatre had become the alienated abstraction McGrath dissects in his mediations of popular, working-class, theatrical culture, *A Good Night Out* (1980). McGrath's point by point list of 'differences between the demands and tastes of bourgeois and working class audience' (1980: 53) forms a useful discussion manifesto and the basis of an artistic policy and production decisions that run throughout my work¹³. Particularly in his final points on the importance of understanding the importance of localism, McGrath reflects my concern with

¹³ Pages 54-58 of *A Good Night Out* (McGrath 1980) provide the practical keys to the theory of McGrath's work with his list of the key elements of a popular theatrical poetics. See also: Holdsworth, N (ed) (2002) *John McGrath Naked Thoughts That Roam About* – Nick Hern; Bradby, D/Capon, S (eds) (2005) *John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television, Freedom's Pioneer* – University of Exeter; Patterson, M (2003) *Strategies of Political Theatre, Post War British Playwrights* – Cambridge University Press

both examining material of local importance to Liverpool and as a practitioner in building my own relationship with the city. A notion that developing a specific relationship with a city or place and the ability to reflect and commentate on it with some authority is important. The devil is in the detail of a local life that is theatrically refracted back to itself, the extrapolations of which can perhaps reveal much more about the drama of being human than universalised ideas striving towards global profundity. This latter kind of liberal humanistic thinking, that great art should identify central truths of man's essential nature, underpins the bourgeois theatre that McGrath usefully exposes and gave me a cultural platform to start to create my own work.

On McGrath's Popular Theatre

Although, McGrath was more of a grammar school boy from the Wirral side of the Mersey, he no doubt felt a similar kind of alienation turning up amongst the privileged, academic classes in Oxford to read English as I would at Leeds University some years later.¹⁴ Fellow student, the now theatre critic and author Michael Billington describes that McGrath 'Seemed infinitely better-read and more theatrically knowledgeable' than he and was, 'dazzled by his charm, skill and ability to ransack the time honoured devices of music-hall, silent movies and popular theatre' (Holdsworth 2005: ix). With this eclectic knowledge, commercial success in television, film and theatre and 'energised and politicised by the climate of national and international, socio-political protest during the late 1960s'

¹⁴ See Nadine Holdsworth's introduction in, Holdsworth, N (ed) (2002) *John McGrath Naked Thoughts That Roam About* –Nick Hern.

(Holdsworth: xv) he returned to Merseyside and to the Everyman Theatre in the early 1970s. Here he met Alan Dossor, the young director from Hull, who had studied at Bristol University and was also influenced by Joan Littlewood's ideas on making entertaining, provocative and informative theatre for working-class audiences. McGrath sums up the kind of popular local theatre they wanted to create for Liverpool in his appreciation of what Littlewood's company, Theatre Workshop had done in East London:

What was happening on the stage, in the pub down Angel Lane, in the street outside the door, all seemed to be a piece in the same universe. This group of people were telling a story – they were mediating contemporary reality, but in a way that the Royal Court or the West End or the repertory theatres had not dreamt of: they were telling it the way the working class saw it, and in a way that the working class could enjoy, and, what is more, *did* enjoy. (McGrath: 46)

Applying this energetic and adventurous approach with Everyman directors Dossor and then Chris Bond, McGrath found the theatrical union of artistic challenge and local concern he was looking for:

Alan, as director, found new ways to present Shakespeare and other new writers, and Brecht, that kept faith with that audience's expectations. Last year, with Chris Bond in charge, the company 'got together' a show called *Love and Kisses from Kirkby* about that massive housing estate and its history – and the theatre was packed from start to finish. (McGrath:53)

It seemed to me that if this theatrical energy could be re-awakened to tackle the recessive problems of Liverpool in the 1980s and 90s (discussed in some detail in the next chapter) here could be a powerful voice. Though popular theatre of this type had relatively little analytical or theoretical writing about it at this time McGrath's assertion that nine

Even the most conversational naturalistically based play, *Epstein*, is dominated by bold theatrically decisive moments. Here Brian is recounting his make or break telephone conversation attempting to get The Beatles a US record deal with a major recording label chief-executive:

| | |
|----------|---|
| Brian | Will you please at least listen to their records and call me back? (<i>To This Boy</i>) And so he thinks a moment, and replies? |
| This Boy | I don't know, - 'You're some salesman Mr Epstein, I'll give it a go?' |
| Brian | And then all you can do is wait. |

A radiogram lights up glowing on stage. Brian carefully places the arm and the needle drops. I Wanna Hold Your Hand - blasts out all over the world.

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| This Boy | Brian you're a fucking genius. | (Epstein: 38) |
|----------|--------------------------------|---------------|

On McGrath's next point, humour plays a part to some extent in all the works, albeit on a broad and often darkly comedic tonal palate.

- Second, comedy. Working-class audiences like laughs; middle-class audiences tend to think that laughter makes the play less serious. (McGrath: 54)

The comedy is broad in scenes like the bar and birth of Eileen in *Fall From Grace*, but when the all-singing and dancing, twinkly-eyed, Irishman Pat Deasy moves from being the pub-entertainer and all-round wag, to wife-beating drunk it is a comedy that is also betrayed. The sailors' exploits in an Amsterdam brothel are undercut by the illness and death of the scarred prostitute Anna in *Ballad of the Sea*. Lord Blunt's dark, wolfish humour in *Walltalks*, moves to the more obvious one-liner gags in *The Shankly Show* and repartee between Brian and This

Boy in *Epstein – the Man Who Made the Beatles*, but all use comedy to expose a nasty and cynical side to their professional worlds:

Shankly

So when we came up against Don Revie's Leeds United in the 65 FA Cup final, here was a chance to play another talented, motivated and brilliantly organised set of lads... I asked Matt what he had said to his boys when they faced them in their bloodbath of a semi-final, 'Johnny Giles... dirty wee bastard. Jack Charlton... dirty big bastard... wee Billy Bremner... good Scottish boy!'

And Matt was a man like myself who never bloody swore! (Shankly:18)

- Third, *music*. Working-class audiences like music in shows, live and lively, popular, tuneful and well-played. (McGrath:55)

I began working with musician and composer Matthew Wood working on the Liverpool Unity Theatre Christmas show, *Sinbad The Sailor* (Unity 1990). We both had an interest in music, both as theatrical, dramatic scoring to provide texture, dynamism and engagement for live drama and as a tune-driven and song-based method of dramatic delivery with a popular appeal. In *Fall From Grace* we wanted the music progression and journey to be an integral part of the narrative strategy and what starts off as big, chorus, sing-along folk with songs like 'You Lift Me Up One Morning' (FFG: 6) and 'The Drinking Song' (FFG:9) become much harder, plaintiff and politicised social commentary in 'Twelve Years in Belfast' (FFG:78) and 'For Ireland' (FFG:83)

FOR IRELAND

1. I don't know
I don't know
What it is takes these strangers so long
Why they just don't pack their bags and go back home
Why they just don't pack their bags and go back home.

2. I don't know
Why they can't see
That we've always been a people of our own
Through their blindness and oppression they can't see
Our rights as men and women to be free

I agree with McGrath's assertion, 'But music is enjoyable for itself, for emotional release, and for the neatness of expression of a good lyric, or a tune' (McGrath:55) but would also like to think that my work with music developed a much more considered and integrated textual contribution to the dramatic dynamics and theatrical storytelling of the plays. In later work I commissioned composer Martin Snape to provide the stirring, anthemic underscoring for *The Shankly Show* to set and enhance the mood and tone throughout. Ironically *Epstein – the Man Who Made The Beatles* probably has the least musical content of all the works and featured some under-scoring and only one live song sung by This Boy, 'Baby It's You' by kind permission of Burt Bacharach. Above all music is deployed throughout the works to impact on McGrath's next point on his list:

- Fourth *emotion*. In my experience a working-class audience is more open to emotion on stage than a middle-class audience who get embarrassed by it.
(McGrath:56)

Surprisingly McGrath writes very little on this subject of emotion and is guarded in his appreciation, perhaps even a little embarrassed when he admits he quite enjoys 'a dose of it

myself, at the right moment.’ (McGrath: 56). For me it is the point of theatre and the core of the live full force of the visceral theatrical experience that makes its communication powerful, compelling and essentially memorable. This modern mistrust of theatrical, emotional engagement stems from a potential misreading of Brecht’s *verfremdung* theory of estrangement, alienation or distancing effect.¹⁶ A method of theatre delivery and engagement that is concerned with dramatically raising an audience’s empowered, active and revolutionary consciousness. This is opposed to, what can be read, as a sentimental Aristotelian mode, which engenders a vicarious, emotional identification with the drama and an oppressive, catharsis-seeking dependency for its audience. A position thoroughly exposed and skewered by Boal in his essay ‘Aristotle’s Coercive System of Tragedy’.¹⁷ Brecht and Boal both rightly warn of the dangers of emotional or sentiment led dramas that may seduce, excite and absorb our senses, but may also mollify our reason, informed choice and judgement to be able to identify ideas or issues at stake and take empowered action in our own lives accordingly. But does this mean that Brecht’s plays are designed to completely alienate an audience’s emotional investment in drama in favour of a more rigorous reasoning? No matter how much *Mother Courage’s* venal trade and attitude is un-sentimentalised, can her tired, delusional trudging of battlefield’s, devastation of her family and the loss of her sons not be essentially desperate and emotive?¹⁸ Brecht’s aim was not to divorce theatre from the emotional experience, but to have an audience fully aware of what it was getting emotional about, in order to make informed

See ‘On Chinese Theatre, *Verfremdung* and *Gestus*’ in Willett, J trans. ed. (1964) *Brecht On Theatre* (149-160)

¹⁷ ‘Aristotle’s Coercive System of Tragedy’ in Boal, A (1979) *Theatre Of The Oppressed* (1-50)

¹⁸ Brecht, B (1941) *Mother Courage And Her Children* - The play was originally produced at the Schauspielhaus Zurich.

opinions and rational choices about the issues it was being presented with. The will and impetus to actually act on these choices, surely comes from the emotional charge the drama also delivers. That is the point of theatre. I try to inject the fuel of this emotional engagement in all my work the use of highly charged theatrical dramatic situations are deployed throughout leading to emotive crisis points: Mary's birth of her daughter Eileen and Pat Deasy's fall from a factory chimney in *Fall From Grace*; the loss of John's prostitute lover and the wave that engulfs the sailors in *Ballad of the Sea*; Latasha's rape, internment and family butchered in *Walltalks*; Shankly's rallying calls and shock retirement in *The Shankly Show* or This Boy's description of the visceral excitement of seeing The Beatles for the first time in the Cavern and Brian's breakdown in *Epstein - The Man Who Made The Beatles*.



In *Ballad of the Sea* (1997) Liverpool Everyman, John's lover Anna is dying in his arms.

For me these are the major life and death events that make theatre memorable. But they are all also heavily mediated and theatrically framed to both invite an audience into the story and

yet maintain a view and perspective on it. In all of the plays there is a strongly foregrounded narrative presence and we are constantly being reminded that we are being told a story, often directly by a narrator figure who appears in all the works and who acts both as an emotional guide and barometer and the arbiter of perspective and choice.¹⁹ The narrator figure is cast as a constant voice in the navigation of the material through time, location and narrative information and often as a reference point for the collage and collision of styles deployed throughout the works. McGrath refers to a similar use of this technique through:

- Fifth, *variety*. Most of the traditional forms of working-class entertainment that have grown up seem to possess this element. (McGrath:56)

Here McGrath is talking about the variety of popular forms as displayed in Music Hall or the

Variety Show:

They seem to be able to switch from a singer to a comedian, to a juggler, to a band, to a chorus number, to a conjuror, to a sing-along, to bingo, to wrestling, to striptease, and then back again to a singer, and a comedian and a grand 'Altogether' finale, with great ease. (McGrath: 56)

This is opposed to naturalistic drama in which:

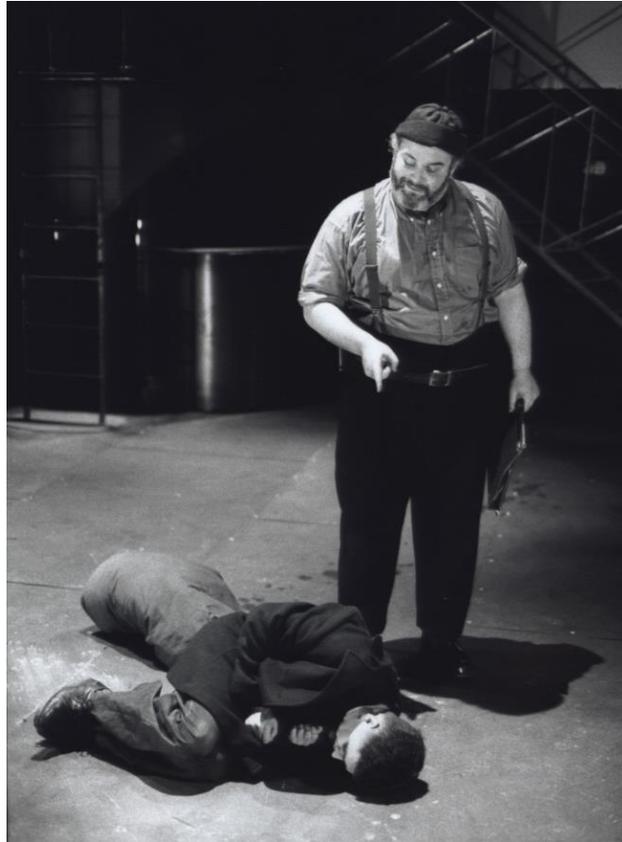
The actors communicate the plot by total immersion in the character they are playing, and move around on a set or sets made to look as much like the real thing as possible. (McGrath:56)

Like McGrath my work translates this kind of variety to a diverse popular theatricality that

¹⁹ See particularly This Boy's opening speech in *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles (2)* for this courting, rousing and provoking of the audience.

employs, speech, action, music, dance, song and often exploding into a rough, dynamic, physical theatre and is designed to challenge the passive receptivity of an audience conditioned to primarily engage in the silent decoding of naturalistic characters and their psychological motivations.





The action/fight sequences in (above top) *Fall From Grace* (1994) at the Liverpool Playhouse (above middle) *Ballad of the Sea* (1997) at the Liverpool Everyman and (directly above) *Epstein - The Man Who Made The Beatles* (2014) at the Leicester Square Theatre London.

Both the theatrical and spoken languages are given reign for experiment and juxtaposition.²⁰ In *Fall From Grace* Mary's speech ranges from lyrical narrator to spitting alley-cat, as does Brian, in *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles*. *Ballad of the Sea* constantly plays with the metre and form of a muscular linguistic poetics and dialogue, as does Shankly in *The Shankly Show*. The most fragmentary and diverse play, *Walltalks*, is both a site-specific and an immersive multi-dramatised, multi-media event. The audience is guided through action, dance, projections, soundscapes and out of the way, at one point, of the speeding entrance of a car. It is also a linguistic investigation playing off naturalistic, historicised and ethnic dialogues, lyricised monologue and song with street-speak, accent and dub-poetry. These principles of lexically richly endowed characters operating in a potential multiplicity of spoken and total theatrical languages underpin all of the plays. Each of these elements aims to be readable and accessible in themselves to prevent the esoteric indulgence of wilfully elitist or elusive discourse, yet challenge the sophisticated readership of the popular audience with this multi-layered approach. Paul Castagno gives a very clear introduction to the new language based playwriting aspects of this approach in his (2011) *New Playwriting Strategies Language and Media in the 21st Century*:

A core characteristic of new playwriting is its emphasis on *multivocal* character and the *polyvocal* text. The principle of multivocality refers to a single character's speech strategies throughout the play's script. *Polyvocality* expands this scope to include the orchestration and juxtaposition of all voices present in the play.

(Castagno, P.C. 2011: 29)

²⁰ A particular example of this is Pat's fragmentary nightmare as he falls from the chimney in *Fall From Grace* (FFG: 66-70). An idea I got from a Grotowskian repetition exercise I developed with fellow students for an improvised theatre workshop performance while at the Sherman Theatre Cardiff University in 1987. For this and the later reference to Total Theatre Grotowski, J. (1975) *Towards A Poor Theatre* – Methuen.

The culmination of all these elements is to have what McGrath refers to as:

- *Six, effect.* Working class audiences demand more moment-by-moment effect from their entertainers. If an act is not good enough, they let it be known, and if it's boring they chat amongst themselves until it gets less boring, or they leave, or they throw things. They like clear, worked for results: laughs, respectful silence, rapt attention to song, tears, thunderous applause. (McGrath: 57)

Like the young woman who shouted out from the audience 'Leave him alone, he didn't understand he didn't have a chance', when Michael is killed at the end of *Fall From Grace* at a production at the Unity Theatre in the early 1990's, or the crowd rising to their feet to sing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' at every single performance of *The Shankly Show*, or the Epstein family member and fans who burst into tears at the end of *Epstein – the Man Who Made The Beatles*, the aim of my theatre is to have a strong and visceral effect on an audience. An effect made powerful when it is drawing on the kind of experience that its audience knows. In *Fall From Grace* it is the family relationships and the births, marriages, deaths and rows that go with them. In *Ballad of the Sea* the search for and loss of work, a lifestyle and a connection with a port and the sea are familiar concerns to anyone with knowledge of coastal towns or cities, especially Liverpool. In *Walltalks* the fear and attraction of otherness and genealogical, ontological interests are driving themes. The last two plays perhaps draw most heavily on their connection with the popular culture, in *The Shankly Show* with the deep seated collective ritual and worship that is football support and the music, songs and story of *The Beatles*, in *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles*.

A Liverpool audience craves itself re-presented to itself but not in a way it quite expected and that is the job of a local theatre first and foremost. McGrath reinforces the point with two perspectives on the importance of a local embedded rooting:

- Eight, *localism*... But the best response among working class audiences comes from characters and events with a local feel. (McGrath:58)



Fans attend *The Shankly Show* at the Olympia theatre near Liverpool FC's ground Anfield dressed in their colours (2008).

And so much the better in McGrath's opinion, if, as I have always tried to do wherever possible, you can employ local performers and crew who can both bring their knowledge and enthusiasm to the material and their own connection to their audience or those who can bring that kind of sensibility and engagement to the performance. A prime example of the latter being Sandy West who brought his kindred Glaswegian, Celtic identity, love of football and passion for the city to his playing of the Scot who invested his life in Liverpool, Shankly:

- Nine, *localism*, not only of the material, but also a sense of identity with the performer... Even if coming from outside the locality, there is a sense not of knowing his or her soul, but a sense that he or she cares enough about being in that place with that audience and actually knows something about them.

(McGrath: 58)

It is this commitment to the local, to the city of Liverpool, its concerns and how these reflected wider national and international interests and ideas that I would chiefly come to share with McGrath. But McGrath's popular theatre strategies came out of a movement that started in the 1950s with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop company and its politicised discourses and cultural democracy flourished prominently in the 1960s-70s, though this was not to last:

The socio-political context of the mid-1980s brought devastating consequences for the alternative theatre movement... Cultural plurality was replaced by faith in 'centres of excellence' and Thatcherite ethics of monetarism and the free market began to take hold across Britain's arts organisations, effectively invalidating projects like 7:84.

(Holdsworth: xviii-xix)

Though McGrath militated against this process by moving his attentions to Scotland and an environment more receptive to the company's collectivist principles and left-wing agenda this too began to become more difficult:

As the decade progressed, McGrath came under increasing pressure to adhere to bureaucratic conformity in the running and organisation of 7:84 Scotland.

(Holdsworth: xix)

By the end of the 1980s when I set about tackling Liverpool's localism, if established practitioners like McGrath were struggling, I would have to adopt a whole series of social and cultural readings, theatrical styles and strategies to get this work made in a cultural terrain discussed in the next sections and starkly framed again by Howe Kritzer:

By the early 1990s, the energy of opposition had dissipated, and political theatre, no less than political parties of the left, had failed to articulate ideas that expressed the aspirations of the majority of the public.

(Howe Kritzer: 6)



Sandy West as Shankly on-stage with another great performer who understood what football and Shankly himself meant to Liverpool, Sir Tom Finney, *The Shankly Show* (2008) opening gala performance at the Olympia Theatre Liverpool.

Coherence and Context of the Body of Work

The first three works, *Fall From Grace*, *Ballad of the Sea* and *Walltalks* examine the social and historical impacts of issues such as sectarian violence, unemployment, ethnicity and racial disharmony on the city of Liverpool. There is a desire in these first works to portray Liverpool as a city unafraid to face up to its own problematic past by acknowledging the difficulties and challenges, as well as the potential richness of these experiences. Despite, in some cases, how dark and unpalatable this may be, acceptance was a first step to recovery and to undertaking the task of rebuilding and regenerating a future for a city facing the ravages of unemployment, economic depression and the social unrest of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

The final two plays, *The Shankly Show* (2008-9) and *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles* (2012), share an interest in dominant identifiers of ‘Liverpool-ness’ but the tone and form in these later post-millennium works have moved on. They concentrate on individuals from a golden era of renown for the city in the 1960’s, both of whom have contributed to the city’s more positive image and to both national and world culture through football and popular musical prowess. My agenda as a dramatist has shifted along with the economic and social regenerative progress to self-consciously presenting iconic success stories, which, though the pain and difficulties of those involved is still very much present, are designed to both appeal to a civic sense of pride and optimism and to fly in the face of detractors who would continue to purvey negative images and stereotypes of Liverpool. It is an image

dominated by a reputation of extremes – as Kenyon and Rookwood observe in their article ‘The World in One Postcode’ (2010).

In part, this ‘cultural knowledge’ is informed by the polarised stereotypes and caricatures of *Scousers* that have been constructed by elements of the British media. On the one hand *Scousers* have been described as humorous, friendly and generous with a strong sense of civic unity and collective solidarity (Belchem, 2006). On the other hand, unemployment, deprivation, gangs, riots, drugs and crime are also characteristic of *Scouse* depictions (Murden, 2006; Boland, 2008). Consequently, this poor media representation has contributed toward some inhabitants of the city wanting to differentiate themselves from this poorly-regarded *Scouse* identity (Boland, 2008; Grant and Gray, 2007).

(Kenyon/Rookwood 2010:1)

There is also a distinct determination in these last two works to move away from plays written about Liverpool simply for its own audience and towards a wider world representation dealing with subjects like popular music and football for which Liverpool has an established national and international reputation. This is a legacy that city ‘stakeholders’ are now keen to promote and exploit, a positive that its tourist industry is keen to accentuate:

From world class **attractions, shopping** and **sport** to legendary **music** and **nightlife**, the city region is bursting with the widest choice of things to do.
(*visitliverpool.com* - Things to do)

But the ultimate aims of all these plays were focused on understanding how major influences had informed and shaped the city and to re-write perceptions or at least provoke a re-thinking of how Liverpool is perceived both from outside and within.

Pooley’s chapter in Belchem’s *Liverpool 800* (Belchem 2006: 171-255) analysing the population of Liverpool shows that in the early twentieth century there were 855,688 people living in and around the city, mostly near the centre. With itinerants, transients and unlisted

migrants of a thriving port, this is could be over 900,000. By the 1980s, Liverpool had become one of the fastest declining cities in Europe and by 2001, with a population that had shrunk to 439,473 (Belchem 2006: 248). From the second port of empire to European poverty action Objective One status, in fifty years.

There has been a great deal of talk recently about the decline of Merseyside - but very little action. Liverpool, the heart of the region, has been ravaged. From a thriving, merchant city, with more millionaires than any other provincial city, it has become an "unwanted mausoleum". People are leaving Liverpool at an alarming rate - 12,000 a year. Many see no hope for the future. (Merseyside Socialist Research Group 1980: 7)

This stark accelerated decline and attendant forcing house of change it brought about made Liverpool exceptional and an extreme reflection of later twentieth century capitalist city life. As London boomed, Liverpool was bust, with some Tory policy bent on allowing that to happen²¹. That rupture of history had given rise to some extraordinary events, experiences, people and their stories; but at this moment in time Liverpool was not just a city on the edge, but one in real and present danger of falling off the edge into an imploding economic chasm of insurmountable social deprivation and ultimate dereliction.

Between 1979 and 1984 almost half of its manufacturing jobs were lost...
Liverpool became known as the Bermuda Triangle of British capitalism.
In the mid-1980s, the city had lost control of its economic destiny.
(Parkinson 1985:12)

²¹ Margaret Thatcher was urged to cut Liverpool adrift and leave it to rot in the aftermath of the 1981 Toxteth riots. The Tory PM was advised by then Chancellor Geoffrey Howe to abandon the city to a fate of "managed decline". He wrote to her warning of the need "not to over commit scarce resources to Liverpool". Parry, T (Dec, 2011) *Daily Mirror* [online] <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/abandon-liverpool--secret-papers-98955>

If we allowed the profound decline of a major city like Liverpool to happen, to give it up as a sacrificial casualty of battle in a bigger socio-economic, political war, what did that say about the modern European nation of the UK? With its stark riot-torn headlines and a reputation for everything that had gone wrong with post-war Britain, the isolated city-state had become a divorced and disenfranchised frontline for the deepest ideological clash of financial profitability versus investment in communities and caring for people, the ultimate emblem of the Thatcherite age. Professor Michael Parkinson skilfully dissects the situation in his account of the socio-economics of the city, *Liverpool On The Brink*, but his conclusion is stark,

The source of conflict was the clash between two ideological responses to urban decline – one municipal socialist, the other free market conservative.
(Parkinson 1985:178)



Liverpool in the 1980s and Spitting Image began broadcasting on ITV in 1984 and by the third series it had audiences topping 12 million Photo: AP - April 10th *Daily Telegraph* (2010)

The bleak acknowledgement of the traumatic disorientation and despair of 1980s Liverpool, ironically fuelled dramatic responses and was brilliantly observed and explored in works like Bleasdale's television drama, *Boys From The Blackstuff* (1980).

Yosser - Father, I'm desperate.
 Father Dan - Call me Dan.
 Yosser - I'm desperate Dan.

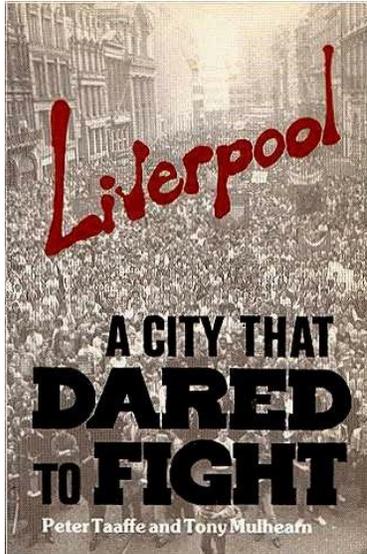
(BBC TV Drama: 1980)

By 1989, this dark, cynical and sometimes savage humour born out of a grim acknowledgment of hard times had become synonymous with Liverpool's 'Scouse' persona along with an embittered, embattled and belligerent attitude inherited from the widely discredited Derek Hatton and the 'Militant' years²² and the tabloid vilification following the Hillsborough disaster earlier that year.

It seemed to me that if we could understand the unique characteristics of the city and get to grips with these extremes of the social, economic and cultural experiences of the city's life, that we could begin to understand, acknowledge and accept what had happened to the city we had known in order to reinvent and regenerate the re-mythologised city of the future. "Only the allegory of the Empire, perhaps, remains" says Baudrillard (1994: 3) in *Simulacra and Simulations* in 1981. Time to attempt to put Liverpool back in touch with the questions it needs to ask itself after the glow of Empire is long gone, say I (and others) in 1991. If the thinking was Liverpool would gently wither on the vine, some of us were determined that we were not going to go quietly or at all.²³

²² Michael Parkinson's, (1985) *Liverpool on the Brink* gives a detailed, blow by blow account of the whole period of the 'Militant' years.

²³ It was at this time I met a number of key colleagues involved in the city and in its arts and cultural activities who were determined to keep alive and promote Liverpool like; theatre makers and teachers Paula Simms, Ros Merkin, Claire McColgan, David Llewellyn, Peter Ward, Jane Hogarth, Graeme Philips, Jeff Young, as well as becoming aware of a long-standing strong spirit of social resistance fuelled by socialists like Peter Taaffe and Tony Mulhearn authors of (1988) *Liverpool – A City That Dared To Fight – Fortress* (see image above) and artists like Dave Jaques and Mike Jones painter of (1986) *Natural Light* (see image above).



Peter Taaffe and Tony Mulhern's book (see footnote) and Mike Jones artwork in the rotunda dome of the Merseyside Trade Union Community and Unemployed Resource Centre (MTUCURC). The mural was painted (in socialist realist style) by the late in 1986 to commemorate the 'Peoples March for Jobs'.

For this to be effective this needed to be in a popular form that could both reach and be accessible to a wide cross-section of people and one in which difficult, key questions and issues could be asked, examined and shared; or in my case, located firmly in a popular theatre method and practice as discussed in the previous section with particular reference to McGrath, together with a meaningful community engagement in the work,

practised by those who sense there is an urgent need for change in society and conditions in which many live. It seeks radical change. It questions the social and political structure... (Prentki/Selman 2000:9)

Theatrically Glen Walford, the Liverpool Everyman director, had done her best to keep spirits up throughout the 1980s with her brand of adventurously artistic programming. Productions like the post-punk *Threepenny Opera*, *Tosca* and *Wack and the Beanstalk* were also kept in touch, to some extent, with a popular working class voice inherited from the likes of Chris Bond and Alan Dossor's *Under New Management* and *Love and Kisses From Kirkby*, by the

local concerns of Willy Russell's *Shirley Valentine* and a Liverpool female-skewed adaptation of *Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths. Walford's reign at the theatre will be best remembered for the range of audacious adaptations like Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and re-workings of classics like *Hamlet* with its casting of black actors in key roles. But plays dealing directly with Liverpool's social, economic or tribal issues had slipped off the programming agenda with the justification from Glen Walford that,

If you live in a tower block you know how miserable it is – you don't want to see shows about it. *Glen Walford, Arts Alive, October 1984.* (Merkin 2004:183).

Then John Doyle arrived as Director just as I was appointed Trainee Associate Director at the Everyman in 1989, his appointment, given his track record as Cheltenham Everyman's Director was surprising to some:

The choice of Doyle has fuelled speculation over the artistic policy of the Liverpool Everyman which has established itself as a pioneering venue for controversial work. The Everyman in Cheltenham has made its name as a producer of successful but more mainstream work, but Doyle has hinted he would not be seeking major changes. "The history of the Liverpool Everyman is that of a progressive theatre which performs exciting new work and it will mean an obvious change of emphasis and style which will be a challenge but I have made no policy statement yet", he said.

The Stage 9/12/88

(Merkin 2004:214)

His various choices soon came under fire, from some audience members as the theatre began to run into financial difficulties:

Far from attracting every man there is nothing in the programme to suggest to the majority of the population of Merseyside that the Everyman has something to offer them. The presentation of the programme is snobbish... It is written in a highbrow elitist manner. Each piece is justified by pointing out that it is based on some Greek classic introduced by an obscure quote from somebody with an unpronounceable name... The current programme suggests that the Everyman is for everyone, providing they are from the "right background".

R.L. Liverpool, letters, *Echo* 9/10/89

(Merkin 2004:219)

Both the main producing Liverpool theatres, the Everyman and the Playhouse, were going through difficult periods with reduced subsidised funding and a febrile debate about whether their programming should reflect a wider classic artistic agenda or more local popular concerns directly related to its audience.²⁴ With houses dwindling, an internecine battle erupted in The Everyman between the theatre and its own highly successful community, outreach and training wing, the Hope Street Project, for whom I was now delivering various classes.²⁵ I found myself running weekly performance skills, drama workshops to bigger groups than were attending some of the main shows. The difficulty with this kind of training, especially when it has been successful is where to direct enthused people to afterwards, at a time when amateur and youth theatre provision was scarce and being cut.

I also had the opportunity to work for several months at the end of 1990 as Staff Producer on Richard Jones' remounted production of Prokofiev's, *The Love For Three Oranges*, for English National Opera at The Coliseum in London's West End. With a cast and crew of over 300, this was a huge show and the chance to experience working with a chorus of nearly 100: 30 dancers, 25 children, 25 principles, acrobats and animals and just about every stage trick and effect possible. With scratch'n'sniff cards, farting demons, a performing crocodile (which I ended up playing as a stand-in on a couple of evenings) and a live parrot, at times it seemed more like a pantomime than an opera and was packed at every performance, often with families. Anything seemed theatrically possible and the show accessibly presented material

²⁴ See Chapters 29 -30 in Merkin, R (2004) *The Liverpool Everyman Theatre* (235-244), describing in detail how the theatre slid towards closure

²⁵ For a full and informed view of this 'theatre versus community battle' see Nick Owen's chapter – The Elusive Butterfly: An Integrated Theatre The Everyman Theatre, 1989-1993 in Merkin, R (1994) *Popular Theatres?* 40-48.

that was thematically rich, with its allegorical tale of a pining prince on a quest to save his ailing kingdom. It was my responsibility to make sure that it ran smoothly throughout the rehearsals and every performance. The ENO asked me if I would consider joining the company at the end of the run, but on one night watching the show in the audience I was sitting behind a family of four. I worked out that they must have paid over three hundred pounds for show tickets alone, and with central London prices for drinks and dinner, over five hundred pounds for their night out. These were not the people I had got into theatre for, or a culture I could even afford myself. It was a short decision to return to my concerns with and the localism of Liverpool, take the skills learned and run. Armed with the experience of running big cast shows I now had the beginnings of an agenda, linking together what I had learned and experienced in theatre to apply to the wider cultural-socio-economics of Liverpool and how this may be usefully played out. This was a chance to subvert the experience of the opulent spending power of large scale Opera and apply it to a community engagement with a local ensemble with a rationale that Prentki and Selman discuss:

As the economic forces which drive people towards anti-social individualism grow ever stronger, so the need for people to make communal expression of their humanity becomes ever more difficult to deny. As a species we resist at a certain point where our socio-biological imperatives are threatened. Some aspects of our being can only find collective expression and the mass media are not always a satisfactory means of achieving it. As sporting events continue to demonstrate, people need collective moments in which expressions of identity can be forged or reaffirmed. There are also more complex areas of collective expression which might be served by a popular theatre practice which is fully participatory and democratic. (Prentki/Selman2000: 58)

Having spent my formative years in a city which felt at times divorced and disenfranchised from the rest of the country and certainly from a Thatcherite government, it was the dispossessed, the ordinary, the urban, the working-class voices and their stories that I

was drawn to and these speak strongly in all my works²⁶. Having spent time away from the city and returning with a metropolitan and university education I was viewing Liverpool from the more objective perspective of someone who had now spent a considerable amount of time away from it. Sliding between the roles of socio-cultural observer/commentator and active tribal member is not always comfortable. The outsider, the immigrant, the wandering, restless, driven and obsessive soul moves through all the works. This voice is present, from first, in *Fall From Grace* with Mary Deasy coming to terms with an Irishness that holds more bad memories of the 'Auld Country' than good, 'I'm not going to Ireland Patrick' (FFG:36) to last, with Epstein's struggle with his Jewishness, sexuality, money and class:

Brian 'Baby you're a rich fag Jew', John sings to me. George with his nagging questions and Paul and his constant manoeuvring for power. What happened? We were all so close once. (Epstein: 50)

All the characters in the works question their own sense of displacement, alienation and dispossession. They share the essential question being asked of Liverpool and ultimately the 'state of the nation' and beyond – how did we end up like this?

Shankly Nessie says I'm looking tired. Fifty-nine now, be sixty with the new season. None of us getting any younger. Girls grown up and gone, grandchildren now. Grandy. Where did it all go? (Shankly: 27)

The plays are all very personal and local stories, these voices may have strong elements of those of the dispossessed, but they often came to me from direct sources; Pat and Mary are based on my own grandparents and Brian Epstein was brought up in the neighbourhood I grew

²⁶ See Parkinson, M (1985) *Liverpool on the Brink* and Merseyside Socialist Research Group (1980) *Merseyside In Crisis*.

up in. But their personal struggles are linked thematically to the bigger picture, the epic story of how individuals negotiate with events and conditions they find themselves dealing with and having to face up to. Religion, sexuality, the personal, the family, the community and wider societal responsibility, morality and politics, are all on the agenda, sometimes directly voiced, like Old Harry, an out of work seaman in *Ballad Of The Sea*:

| | |
|-------|--|
| Harry | What is a man supposed to do When his trade dies? Grieve Retire Maybe But what if his labours are more than Just a job A set of tasks to earn the corn? What if it is a way of living The ebb and flow of his consciousness? (Ballad: 42) |
|-------|--|

Ultimately, in all the plays, all the characters tell and are active participants in their stories in an attempt to make sense of their own lives and existence, as Latasha reflects at the end of

Walltalks:

| | |
|---------|---|
| Latasha | My grandfather told me that the great creator made the earth from mud and left it in the sun to bake dry. After a while he sent a child to see if it was cool enough to live on. But as soon as he touched the surface the child vanished, wriggling down into the scorching sand. Ever since then the creator has sent showers and rain to cool the surface and entice the child back, but without success. So the creator made human beings to scour the earth and find the child. We fail, and so we send our messengers - the dead - to heaven to ask what to do next. But they are so soothed by the coolness of the sky that they never come back. My grandfather says this is why we spend most of our time searching for water. (Walltalks: 32) |
|---------|---|

Or as Karl Marx more simply and eloquently puts it: 'Men and women make their own history, but not in conditions of their own choosing' (Marx 1968:96). These are stories of men and

women discussing their own history, what they have said and done, the events they have been part of and the decisions they have made in the situations they have found themselves. The narrator, or narrative voice, is therefore key throughout the works as a commentator as well as plot facilitator.

If this line of cultural materialist dialectic with the plays speaking to the city and being informed by its epoch, persists through these works, so too, does a strenuous attempt to avoid the plays being labelled or easily grouped under a particular ideological or theatrically stylistic banner. The foregrounding of storytelling invites a pluralist readability and interpretive choices and there are no easy answers or dogmatic doctrines to be comfortably found. As McGrath discusses a genuinely open, accessible and inclusive theatre practice is not about courting one type of audience at the expense or exclusion of another:

... there *are* indeed different kinds of audiences, with different theatrical values and expectations, and that we have to be careful before consigning one audience and its values to the critical dustbin. (McGrath 1981:3)

The desire to create 'politicised' narrative-based theatre works, rather than overtly 'political' plays, was therefore to invite a rhetoric of openness in their reading and discourse in order to encourage engagement with different types of audience. But there were also pragmatic reasons for this as well, which McGrath is keenly aware of in his later, much darker and downbeat assessment of the state of British political theatre, *The Bone Won't Break*:

... the Arts Council had cut its grants to 40 companies in 1980, including many on the left, but in the early 80s Alternative Theatre of all kinds was making the running in England...

In the five years since 1983, this sector has been effectively shut down in England. (McGrath 1990:30)

With assertively critical companies like Red Ladder, Belt and Braces and McGrath's own 7:84, using their Arts Council subsidy to create works criticising the government that was handing it out to them throughout the 70s and 80s, it was inevitable that the financial supply line would eventually be choked and cut. So by the 90s, now running scared of further government sanctions and cuts, the Arts Council and later the Arts Council of England have continued to distance themselves from radical, left wing or political theatre - to the extent that this strand of issue based drama playing directly to the concerns of specific communities has all but disappeared. I could only conclude that the message was clear: if you have serious issues or political concerns, particularly in a febrile and contentious city like Liverpool in the 90s, you will struggle to attract state or mainstream artistic backing or funding to make your work.

To get my plays written and made, therefore, I would firstly have to avoid or carefully handle the mainstream of dramatic production. All of these works have come out of funding from my own companies, co-productions with mainstream theatres, through independents or Liverpool City Council, though all were Arts Council supported in some way. Secondly, all of my works are underpinned by a simple policy, the more of an obvious politicised agenda the project has, the less I say about it. If you want to get serious work made that taps into the psyche and social, cultural and political fabric of your community – do not tell anyone that is what you are up to. The audience will work it out for themselves and if it is good enough and resonant enough – they will come. If anything connects my work together, it is this covert philosophy.

After writing a Sunday night feature family drama for ITV, *The Girls Who Came To Stay* (ITV: 2006) which was actually about the plight of Eastern European children living in third

world conditions, I met Tony Garnett, legendary left wing TV producer who had pioneered ground breaking social dramas in the 60s like *Z Cars*. 'I've read your stuff', he told me, and 'You're a Trojan horse dramatist aren't you?' Garnett discusses his use of covert discourse and messaging in popular drama in reference to his TV Series set in the fictional town of Stanton in the North of England, *The Cops*, in Peter Billingham's, *Sensing the City Through Television* (2005):

More and more in television you have to do Trojan Horse drama if you want to be political. Thirty years ago I could direct and produce dramas that were overtly political. You can't do that now, partly because the broadcasters won't allow it, and partly because the audience is difficult to get and to keep. If I'd gone to a broadcaster and said I wanted to do a series set largely on a really tough, difficult housing estate somewhere in the north of England... they'd have said there's no audience for that. But if I say I want to do a cop show, they say that's very interesting, because 'cops and docs' are the mainstay of the schedule. (Billingham 2005:19)

This idea of developing strategies to discuss potentially contentious issues through popular dramatic forms is not new and the likes of Alan Plater, who also cut his dramatic teeth as a writer on *Z Cars* went on to create popular politicised drama with works like his theatre musical *Close the Coalhouse Door* and *A Very British Coup* for mainstream TV. As a cohort of postgraduate drama students at The Sherman Theatre, Cardiff University in 1987, we had the opportunity to discuss these issues with celebrated left-wing writer Trevor Griffiths. He argued that you should keep the integrity of your politics in your work as clear and unshakeably direct as possible and be as ruthless and politically expedient as possible in getting the work made. All well and good if you have already built up a name like Trevor Griffiths and have written one of the most performed modern plays in the English speaking world and beyond in *Comedians*

(First performance, Nottingham Playhouse in 1975). Tellingly the success of the play, constantly in production around the world since²⁷, has been nowhere near matched by any of his subsequent works and is perhaps one of the least overtly political of his plays. So in both the conservative world of theatrical and TV drama commissioning I have been very careful to present all my dramatised stories with a rhetoric of popular accessibility and openness rather than any politicised agenda - not only to avoid dogmatic positioning and thinking, but also to get them through a heavily-policed commissioning process and sometimes sensitive wider political terrain and on to the stage in the first place.²⁸

So there were elements of essential sale and marketability as well as generic accessibility in the use of the popular form in promoting:

- *Fall From Grace* - as a musical family saga.
- *Ballad of the Sea* – as an epic ballad based on seafarers stories set to music.
- *Walltalks* – as the ghost stories of characters who have passed through an old dockside warehouse, summoned shaman-like by a young African woman versed in her tribal, oral tradition.
- *Shankly* – as football biography with big screen action.

²⁷ See <http://www.trevorgriffiths.co.uk/>

²⁸ In the production run-up to the Liverpool Playhouse version of *Fall From Grace* in 1994 my flat was broken into and my sister Barbara who was company administrator had her house ransacked and car vandalised. Our lawyer Kevin Douglas told us we were being 'got at' and these were standard 'home security' MI5 'unsettling' tactics. Some months earlier, we worked out, I had visited the Sinn Fein bookshop/IRA HQ, on a research visit to Belfast and must have been security tagged and was now under surveillance. Later I had a very good-natured and interesting conversation in my flat with the agent posing as a telephone engineer, who was surprisingly open when I asked him about the bug he was obviously removing from my phone. It had turned out he had been to see the show and had found it 'very fair' and though he did not elaborate, I gathered, his organisation must have decided we were not Irish terrorists or particular sympathisers after all. These incidents unsurprisingly did not make me any more disposed to being overt about the deeper and more politicised elements of my work.

- *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles* – as music a journalist’s scoop interview for the popular press.

As McGrath had employed in the use of deeply embedded and encoded cultural forms, with traditional resonance and generic triggers was deployed in each of the plays to be counterpointed with contemporary advances in stylistic and technical, theatrical aesthetics. *Fall From Grace* was loaded with cross rhythmic world musical textures drawing on Irish Folk and African song and physical theatre set pieces, including a unique twisting choreographed ‘fall’ by an actor down an eight metre scaffold tower. *Ballad of the Sea*, written mainly in verse drew on the artistic development and scale of new music theatre and opera in the 1990s. *Walltalks* was one of the first commissioned, indoor, large-scale, site-specific shows in Liverpool and the Stanley Dock warehouse we transferred to was large enough to drive a car through the audience for one of the final scenes. *The Shankly Show* used TV timeline editing integrated with live performance to deliver an experience as much on multi-screens as on stage. *Epstein*, in many ways the most conventionally written, also uses on-screen interventions, live and recorded song and sound and draws on public fascination with invasive tabloid journalism, testimonial and confessional theatre and the rococo excesses of the pop and rock star interview. The Holy Grail of any theatrical examination, no matter how important the issue or politicised agenda, is to make exciting, innovative shows that draw in and consume their audiences. These investigations and re-definings of what is meant by Liverpool are really cohered by a desire to make vital, complex and vivid theatre. It is this creative, artistic energy that is necessary to keep audiences engaged and our desire as theatrical artists to remain sustained - as McGrath discusses with reference to Roy Shaw’s 1982 paper *Politics and the Arts*

Council, this type of politicised intervention is based on a long term strategy rather than quick results:

Some playwrights themselves question whether they have any real effect, and it is certainly ironical that the decade when left-wing drama flourished as never before, ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher's government. Nevertheless, Professor Martin Esslin, a former Chairman of our Drama Panel, believes that a thorough study of political theatre in the past clearly shows that 'plays are not very useful as short-term tactical weapons in the political struggle: but they are immensely powerful in establishing long-term, decisive changes in consciousness – lasting political results'. (McGrath 1990:33)

Analysis and contextualisation of the publications

Fall From Grace

The project was an examination of the profound impact the Irish diaspora had on Liverpool.²⁹ *Fall From Grace (FFG)* took on the task of making difficult, dense, contentious, politicised material popular and accessible to a general theatre-going and at times first-time theatre-going audience. It was buoyed by its framing as a family saga, with lyrical, vernacular language and liberal use of traditional Irish and original music and song. In part, it was a meditation on the concept of 'Irishness' itself.³⁰ It was also a reflection on the impact that decades of Irish immigration have had on the city.

The exodus from Ireland grew from thousands to hundreds of thousands and in 1847, when it reached its peak, the figure usually quoted for the number arriving in Liverpool is three hundred thousand. (Aughton 1993: 154)

But in the early 1990s at the height of the Northern Irish, 'Troubles', to be Northern Irish and Catholic was a marginalised, embattled and vilified position. A position that Liverpool's

²⁹ There is a wealth of publication on this subject particularly aimed at the US market and experience but a good accessible start is by the popular, Irish documentary author, Coogan, T.P. (2002), *Wherever Green Is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora* – Palgrave; while a range of key academic discourses on the subject can be found in this collection of useful essays, packed with source material and references, Bielenberg, A (ed) (2000), *The Irish Diaspora* – Routledge.

³⁰ The play is about the Irish in Liverpool but it could be about the Irish anywhere. (*Associated Press Writers U.S.A.* - Graham Heathcote Nov 1994)

Protestant controlled council had meted out to its Irish immigrants from the 1870s through to the 1900s.³¹ This created a sectarian religious tension in the city that has and currently persists on occasions like the annual Orange Lodge march on July 12th, commemorating the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne:³²

An Orange Preacher, Harold Longbottom, takes his place to address an Orange Lodge crowd. It is July 12th 1930. The drum beats out a march. The crowd is boisterous and eagerly shouts out anti-Catholic slogans as he speaks.

John is passing and stops to listen. He is wearing a green jacket.

LONGBOTTOM

Liverpool is a Protestant city! Liverpool has always been a Protestant city! But Popery has returned to our shores on the back of the famine Irish, herded in like their pigs, by the priests of Rome. They came, they stayed and their religion stayed with them. But Protestantism is a hardy plant, it thrives in the face of adversity. And though the hothouse flowers of High Church Anglicanism may wither in the face of this Catholic gale, I say to you...Harold Dixon Longbottom, will not falter! We have earned our place in this city! And now, these Catholics want to build a Cathedral, a temple of idolatry on Brownlow Hill, not four hundred yards from our own blessed Cathedral, on land owned by you, the ratepayers of Liverpool! These Catholic upstarts want to build a Babylon on our own doorstep!

JOHN

Ah shut up, yer aul windbag!

The crowd starts to jostle John, the beginning of a scuffle breaks out.

³¹ A full scholarly account of this conflict is discussed in Prof Frank Neal's book, Neal, F (1990) *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914 - An Aspect of Anglo-Irish History*. Frank also acted as adviser on FFG and led several discussion groups on the subject for the company.

³² Erfani-Ghettani, R (2013) Liverpool's Irish Community Under Attack. The Institute of Race Relations published this report by Ryan Erfani-Ghettani in Feb 2013 about an Irish community group based in Liverpool calling for help against growing far-right and Loyalist attacks. [online]
<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/liverpools-irish-community-under-attack/>

LONGBOTTOM

Now we will have no violence. (*Making a sign to a couple of Lads In The Crowd who beat John up*). But must make our protest for that is the meaning of the word Protestant, and we will make it through the proper channels. Don't let them sell land to their Archbishop Downey to build their blasphemous edifice. Protestants of Liverpool, let us march!

(FFG: 22)

This kind of bitterness and internal division contributed to the disenfranchisement and negative branding of the city as discussed in the last section. The play is therefore a continuing discourse around the questions of minority identity when placed within an unsympathetic or hostile hegemonic topology. What are the perceptions of those, who are, or feel they are, ethnically, ideologically, religiously, culturally, economically or socially disadvantaged? And how do they act and react accordingly?

In *Fall From Grace* these tensions and battles are played out by the Deasy family with a complexity of ethnic interwoven relationships. Irish born Pat grows up in Liverpool and marries Liverpool born Mary, who has been educated and brought up in a convent in Ireland. Mary's brother John is of Liverpool and Irish parentage and brought up in Liverpool where he befriends Pat though considers himself more Irish and Catholic than his easy-going friend:

MARY

(*In mock innocence*) I was only going to say that Pat was asked to play for the Lodge today.

JOHN

What? You played with those-

PAT

Orange Protestant bastards, that's right. What of it? Easy Deasy that's me. I'll march down St Domingo Rd singing Faith of Our Fathers and back up Netherfield Rd singing Fuck the Pope. It's all the same to me.

JOHN

Traitor...ow! (*Winces with pain*) (FFG: 28)

The project began life as series of familial anecdotes and tales told over the dinner table and in various pubs and clubs throughout my upbringing in Liverpool. Often central to these were the stories surrounding my paternal grandfather Patrick Sherlock who, despite years of living in Liverpool had never lost his thick, Irish County Mayo brogue. He was wheelchair bound, having been rendered paraplegic after a steeple-jacking accident in which a colleague inadvertently locked hammers with him on top of a factory chimney they were knocking down and pulled him inside. As he fell, he had collided off the inside walls but survived because, having been knocked unconscious, he landed completely limp. This key incident in his mature working life in the 1950's became the key image and stylistic guide for *Fall From Grace*. In their conversational and anecdotal form these kinds of family tales are often told in fragments with various voices interjecting and with jumps in time, content and opinion. In these linguistic, cultural, regional and familial idiosyncrasies, lies not only the desire to capture a satisfying ring of authentic dialogue, but also the democratic acknowledgement of the importance and place of ordinary, working class, urban-street and rural dialects. The particular sense and the peculiar regional sounds of the voices of common folk. This self-conscious lifting of the vernacular to be carefully edited, polished, lyricised and given poetic resonance was a technique I discussed at length with broadcaster Stan Ambrose with whom I made several radio documentaries based on *Fall From Grace* for BBC Radio Merseyside's *Folk Scene* magazine programmes. As we carefully edited sections of the play and interviews from the cast and the company, taking out repeats, 'errs' and 'ums' to make them sound as lucid as possible, he introduced me to Ewan MacColl's Radio Ballads³³ which combined authenticity of recording of voice and atmosphere

³³ BBC Radio 2 [online] http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/radioballads/original/orig_history.shtml

with this rigour of editing. By using a combination of research led documentary-realism and a foregrounded, heightened language, *Fall From Grace* became the linguistic prototype for all the works, in its exploration of a popular poetics which sought to be immediate and accessible, yet also yield a depth of nuance and complexity of meaning.³⁴ What I would later describe on application forms to the likes of the Arts Council as ‘Stories of the extraordinary lives of so-called ordinary people, writ large’, in an often successful attempt to encourage them to fund the projects.

I first imagined the show told in a series of flashbacks as Patrick’s life passes before him kaleidoscopically as he falls. This would knit together the web of stories, songs and characters from both fact and fiction. Later, as the show progressed from an initial reading and studio productions, this fragmentary form would become more linear and simplified to accommodate the complexity of the scale and content of the piece. Though even in its later and more complete version of the Liverpool Playhouse production, which is the one submitted here, there are still clear elements of these time, place, character and narrative cuts and jumps which echo the oral genesis of the piece. My mother’s lucid recollections and her own close relationship with her mother-in-law, my grandmother, Margaret, underpinned this fragmentary web of memories. Margaret had the dubious distinction of being married to the stereotypical, in his younger days at least, hard-drinking, blarney-laden Irishman, Patrick. It was Margaret’s story of a young woman returning to Liverpool after an Irish convent education that was to provide the real emotional heart and key narrative driver of the piece – and the female

³⁴ Worpole, K (1984), *Dockers and Detectives*, Ken Worpole discusses the depth of moral and political questions raised by popular working-class fiction, in some generic detail.

counterpoint to Patrick's masculine exploits. Out of these influences I wrote an initial short story-treatment outlining the main characters and initial stories which became the original blueprint for the play.

Though I could find no dramatic texts dealing with the Liverpool Irish, I was very much aware that many families and our potential audience would have first-hand knowledge of the events and context of the world of *Fall From Grace*. Historical accuracy was therefore of great importance to respect both a shared past and to disseminate information faithfully, especially when dealing with sensitive Anglo-Irish issues when, in the early 90's, Irish 'Troubles' related bombings and shooting were still a regular occurrence.³⁵ This sense of shared history and identity was followed through in the production and casting values; *Fall From Grace* would have a core cast of able and professional performers, but would be open to swelling with a community ensemble into a large-scale production. Throughout its life *Fall From Grace* could either be performed with a core cast of 10-12 performers or augmented for the bigger scenes and set pieces with an ensemble trained into the show:

The process of its creation, under the artistic direction of local playwright and director, Andrew Sherlock, engaged the community and in performance provided an experience that was both participatory and popular, the audience ultimately joining with the cast in traditional Irish dance. (Llewellyn in Merkin 1994: 96).

³⁵ ...a production takes to the stage which is simultaneously a good night out and a political education... *Fall From Grace* brings to life the 20th century social and political history of Ireland and Liverpool. (*The Guardian* - Bill Harpe Nov 1993)

By the time we got to the Playhouse production the ensemble was funded through the European Social Fund and accredited through the Liverpool Institute of the Performing Arts, a show made with and by people, about and with their own community.³⁶



Ensemble rehearsal Unity Theatre early 1990's with local performers, drama students from Liverpool John Moores University and an adult community performers from the Hope Street Project

In many ways *Fall From Grace* was a great success story, going from an un-funded reading in the Everyman foyer in 1991, through several successful developmental productions in Liverpool and touring nationally and internationally ending in a full-scale production with a

³⁶ - this expansive work now achieves what all theatre performance aims for. The audience now feels from the start that it is not watching a performance but that it is part of the performance. (*The Guardian* - Bill Harpe Nov 1993)

full community ensemble at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1994, one of the biggest shows outside London at the time. It took on real and vital issues not just historically and in the city, but of wider resonance and importance at a time when sectarian violence, economic deprivation and the immigration debate were high on the agenda and created a resonance in the city.³⁷ But the complete Liverpool Playhouse final three act version was overlong to some and the game of playing off popular theatre, music and humour to balance the historical and politicised content was criticised as too weighty and misjudged by one member of the local press.³⁸ The later, darker story set in troubled Belfast and more contemporary, issue-based content was most appreciated when touring Ireland itself.³⁹ But support for a politicised, socio-economic drama with strong Marxist methodologies and leanings set to music came from some surprisingly appreciative and supportive sources in the traditionally right-wing national press.⁴⁰

The final decision on its relative merits and de-merits must rest with the independent reader. But for me it opened up areas of the city's Irish and sectarian past and revealed key

³⁷ I saw a dress rehearsal of the original production and it was probably the best piece of theatre I have ever seen. From the moment I stepped into that theatre, I was enthralled, amazed by the spectacle, affected – it made me think. (Conaghan in O'Kane 2012: 40-41).

³⁸ Despite the jigs and reels it is a fairly miserable story that is told over five decades with family rows, threats, industrial injury, poverty, corruption and finally death. (*Daily Post* – Philip Key Nov 1994)

³⁹ In conversation with the staff and theatre directors who had booked FFG in Derry and Belfast they felt that the earlier more 'folksy' material would not be as pertinent to a contemporary Irish audience as the grittier urban storyline towards the end of the piece that dealt with the modern Irish Troubles. (Northern Ireland 1992)

⁴⁰ The invasion that led to the city on the Mersey being dubbed the Capital of Ireland is lovingly chronicled in words and music in the ominously titled *Fall From Grace*. This is more than just a tale of immigrants playing out a Celtic twilight in a rosy mist of porter and deedlee deedlee dee music. The events and subjects encountered are gritty stuff. Religious bigotry, family squabbles, economic depression, war, the IRA, are all dealt with one way or another... They sing. They drink. They dance, stepping their way through adversity in Erin's equivalent of the Lambeth Walk. (*Sunday Express* - Alex Lindsay. Nov 1994)

elements of this influence and impact on the character and attitude of its people. *Fall From Grace* went beyond the city's own immediate introspective tribal concerns and began to acknowledge that its strongest influences perhaps came from outside. Ireland might not be geographically far away, but, at this time, to link serious questions of Liverpool's heritage, culture and identity to an island with profound 'Troubles' of its own, was a significant step. The themes of Liverpool/Irish Catholics struggling to understand their own ethnic, religious, cultural and political identities may have been intensely localised in some respects, but the play's exploration of racial and ideological tensions and conflict resonated with global events at the time of its genesis and beyond.⁴¹ 'The Troubles', the Gulf War, the Middle-East and the break-up of the Balkan states dominated world politics throughout the 1990s and up to the present with their shared narratives of ethnicities, factions, tribes and nationalities struggling, at times with extreme and catastrophic violence, to assert their ethnic, cultural and political identity. How you class yourself, and to whom and what allegiances others class you, is, along with the environment, the key global issue of our times. In *Fall From Grace* the Deasy family and its members are constantly at odds, with their cultural identities being placed in situations in which they are rightly or wrongly questioned and challenged. Mary is branded '[a] bit of a Liverpool-Irish mongrel' by an Irish neighbour (*FFG*: 24), Pat claims, 'It's because I'm Irish' (*FFG*: 44) when caught stealing from the docks. Pat and Mary's son, Michael Deasy, marries into a Protestant family and pursuing personal gain in wilful ignorance, he takes lucrative building work in Belfast, transgressing sectarian codes he should be all too aware of – a point his sister

⁴¹ Playing in Normandy, France at the Comedie De Caen International Theatre Festival, *Fall From Grace* received a standing ovation and the French audience demanded we play every song from the show again in a 45 minute encore. (Caen 1991)

Eileen and Belfast brother-in-law Frank desperately try to make him aware of towards the end of the play:

MICHAEL Go on then Frank, tell her.

FRANK Your Michael's doing contract work for the security Forces. Barracks, command posts, fortifications.

EILEEN Michael!

MICHAEL Look, Eileen... Frank... It's a great opportunity. Do you realise how big this deal could be? Millions are going to come pouring in to this place with the army. If we get in now we can make a fortune, just picking bits and pieces up from the big boys. We should be drinking on it...

EILEEN I don't believe this. And to think you were going to offer Frank a job.

MICHAEL Why not? It'll be good money.

EILEEN Jesus Michael, he's a Catholic!

MICHAEL Well, so am I!

EILEEN Oh, Michael! You wouldn't know the meaning of the word.

FRANK Never mind that. Do you honestly believe, the Protestant builders that own this town, will let a scallywag like you waltz in and take their business? They've got their own protection and well you know it.

MICHAEL I'm not scared, I've got a whole security force to protect me.

(FFG: 91)

The message is clear – that you disregard or misunderstand your own cultural heritage and its relations to that of those around you, at your peril. Liverpool in the 1990s, like everywhere else in the rapidly globalising world, was having to face up to what it had been and where it was

now - a world of fracturing national and cultural identities, throwing communities and families into crisis and setting individuals, friends and relations against each other. Michael Deasy's tragedy is not just that his demise is brought about by his own blind and venal ignorance, but that it is a member of his own family that is forced to call him to account:

A single gunshot rings out. Michael lurches catching on to the scaffold and clutches his hand to his chest. Looks at it.

MICHAEL Jesus Christ..! I can't be dead... I'm just an ordinary bloke trying to get on... How can that be a crime for Christ' sake?

Frank slowly enters holding a revolver. Expressionless, as Michael stares at him. Pause. Frank puts the gun in his pocket.

FRANK You left me no option.

Frank shakes his head and leaves.

(FFG: 94)

It is a theme of accepting 'otherness' and knowing how to deal with it that I will return to in my works.

Ballad of the Sea

One time I woke up sober. That was a strange experience I had at sea
(Richard. Retired seafarer, 1993)⁴² (Sherlock/Wood: 1993)

This project had begun some three years earlier when my musical partner Matthew Wood and I were tutors leading an inter-generational venture for the Everyman Hope Street Project. We had a small group of young men aged 18-25 to construct a reminiscence project, as part of their Acting Out community arts training course. With work on *Fall From Grace* already well underway, I had an idea to use this opportunity to begin to explore Liverpool's relationship with its own reason for existence, its function as a port and relationship with the sea and seafaring. As with the Irish influence, I could find little or no extant dramatic plays or fictional texts exploring the working lives of Liverpool's 20th century merchant marine or contemporary seamen's experience. Though I would later draw on earlier works by the likes of Coleridge, Melville and Conrad, I needed to find some primary source material to get to the story of a powerful world port's short sharp and dramatic decline and of the loss of an indigenous seaman's industry. My further research and enquiry led me to the gloriously poetically named 'Apostleship of the Sons of the Sea' which sounded like an epic, movie title, but was in fact a retirement home specifically for ex-seafarers in south Liverpool's district of Gateacre.⁴³

⁴² These oral history interviews were both noted and recorded over a three month reminiscence project led by Matthew Wood and myself on behalf of The Hope Street Project in 1993.

⁴³ *Ballad of the Sea* is an epic tale of tough, lively and turbulent Merchant seamen. It is the second part of a trilogy about the extraordinary lives of ordinary people that began with *Fall From Grace*. Inspired by the lives of retired seafarers and researched for over three years on Merseyside and Nationally it is a unique mixture of music, song, theatre, dance and video. It gives a funny, painful and passionate voice to the stories of a seafaring community whose lives reached across the world in this chaotic century. (Press and Publicity *Ballad of the Sea* at The Everyman Theatre Liverpool 1997)

The management of the home was unsure if the men would speak to us; after long stretches at sea some were used to isolation and their own company – but when we met the dozen or so who agreed to meet us, a natural relationship formed. We were a group of young men and the idea of the ‘old hands’ taking us on board - they still called their rooms cabins - and talking us through their lives ‘showing us the ropes’ was something they could relate to. Those six weeks spent visiting and talking with the old sailors were like sitting in a room with the living echoes of the greatest experiences and events of 20th century history. These men had been torpedoed and stranded in the water on numerous occasions, some had been attacked by sharks, others picked up and interned in Japanese prison of war camps, two had been present when the Graf Spey German battleship had been sunk and weren’t aware each other had witnessed it. Between them, they had been present when Castro liberated Havana and opened up all the bars to celebrate; in South Africa on the day Apartheid was abolished; and seen the QE1 in flames in Hong Kong harbour. They had seen the ports of the countries of the world, most with little schooling, knew numerous languages; Jeff an Australian who I particularly interviewed, spoke thirteen, but shyly admitted he was only fluent in eight. They had found and lost wives and families and friends, but were always driven to get back at sea until they were now too weak and too old. Austin had even tried to stow away in his late 60s and had to be put back ashore by the Mersey Pilot:

‘I first went to sea in 1936 because I had no boots...’ (Austin. Retired seafarer, 1993).
(Sherlock/Wood 1993)

We wrote and recorded their stories, found music that they remembered from each era and event and made slides of their memorabilia and pictures from their ships and ports to present back to them on a memorable St Patrick's night when drink was taken:

The town was wide open, they open up and start the music going and you could drink all night. Everything you wanted for about fifty cents... (Jeff. Retired seafarer - talking about his night in Havana when Castro liberated the city, 1993)

Soon after, packed with all they had told me I wrote or rather poured out onto the page the original *Ballad of the Sea*, one sailor telling his story, speaking in lyrical epic verse just as these sailors had sounded to me:

Jim and John lurch wildly from bar, to ship, to booze, to fight, to woman, to work... And back...

OLDER JOHN Jim picked me up and slapped me down
 And kicked me out of sailor town
 Got us on a high tide ship
 To anywhere doing any trip
 Drinking hell and back again
 Then hanging out in Port of Spain
 Shanghai girls and Bangkok boys
 Hong Kong, Rotterdam all the noise
 Of Port Said the Marseilles
 Market barter Taiwanese
 Casablanca Rick's new bar
 Hamburg fights with old Jack Tar
 Ships of lard and ships of lime
 The Arabs unfermented wine
 Straight on tap to Norway's lads
 Danube delta's cold ice caps
 Mistral whistles Baltic blows
 How long at sea no one knows
 (Ballad: 28)



Ballad of the Sea (1997) Liverpool Everyman, Jimmy attempting to snap John out of his malaise.

This became the narrative spine for the play – but its first incarnation was as an animated monologue with actors playing out scenes and images to the spoken narration accompanied by music in a show I put together called *Tales of the Sea* at the Unity Theatre in 1993. This featured various artists and community groups telling an eclectic mix of dramatic sea-stories and performance linked together with vocal extracts recorded from the retired seafarers. A small scale version of *The Ballad* was then commissioned by the Liverpool Maritime Museum with just a male and female voice accompanied by music to play as an exhibit to their visitors.

Over the next two years I began to flesh out the original narration to write the scenes and characters under the banner of a new company, Landing Stage Productions, funded by the Music Theatre department of the Arts Council of England with Matthew Wood working on the musical elements. Both the writing of *The Ballad of the Sea* and its production values, were expansive, epic and ambitious and stylistically operatic in its heightened language and scale;

with plans for a grand metal set, ensemble singing, vocal effects and movement sequences and projected imagery all built into the thinking of the script. If this was to be a send-off and tribute to a last generation of seafarers, their way of life, thinking, reason to be, it was going to be the biggest and best we could possibly make it. This soon became problematic. Following the success of *Fall From Grace* I now had a reputation for constructing large-scale work, but at that time, though both gave some, the city or Arts Councils did not have the large scale funding to fully support it. Our hosts and production partners at the Everyman Theatre were staving off closure themselves and they like the Playhouse Theatre would soon go dark completely.⁴⁴ At the eleventh hour our European bid fell through, which meant that the ensemble that had swelled the visual impact of *Fall From Grace* and really helped to connect it to its audience was not possible. This put pressure on a small core of actors to double as musicians and we had to go outside the city to find the range of skills to make this possible.

The result was a highly pressured process which produced some startling effects and moments of theatre like the floor of the stage rising like a twisting tanker in a North Sea storm but also some difficult and wooden performances. It was overloaded with songs and musical passages that did not properly move the narrative or characters on. Though we created some wonderful visuals and innovative use of projection with rolling backdrops of stylised waves, ghosting of characters and split screen imagery, still new to theatre at that time, it was the missing scale of the ensemble that really undermined the piece which looked lost at times on its giant set. The testing of linguistic form mixing dialogue prose and verse and the theatrical

⁴⁴ See Chapters 29 -30 in Merkin, R (2004) *The Liverpool Everyman Theatre* (235-244), describing in detail how the theatre slid towards closure.

experimentation, though its eclectic, elegiac tribute to a lost way of life was appreciated by some, it was a stretch for others in our audience. The departure from the expectations set by the much more muscular and socially rooted, naturalistically informed, vernacular of *Fall From Grace* was a challenge.

Despite the problems, the critical reaction was generally good, and following on from *Fall From Grace*, had now become hailed as a great success story. However, the assumption at this time that Liverpool writers should be producing comedy prevailed. At a time of desperate local political in-fighting the preceding show at the Everyman, *Scouse* (1997) had been a satirical comedy about Liverpool declaring UDI (Unilateral declaration of independence) which in its search for laughs had lost the potentially much more stinging politicised bite its earlier reading had promised. With the port's dockers fighting for what was left of their working lives (we even donated a night's takings to them) the idea that Liverpool's past and troubled present could be dealt with elegiacally and taken seriously was not always immediately apparent even to some appreciative commentators.⁴⁵ Some prevalent mediations of the city were awash with the sepia glow of a Liverpool nostalgia for the terraced street-ed days of plucky, close-knit communities living with front doors open and in and out of each other's houses.⁴⁶ Misty-eyed musicals of Liverpool's working class past, like adaptations of Silas K Hocking's, *Her Benny* and

⁴⁵ There is companionship with best friend Jim, tenderness with an Amsterdam lover and a few laughs. But mostly the story is a gloomy one. It is a tribute to a way of life which was more rough than romantic. But it is told so poetically that – like the sea at its harshest – even the sadness seems beautiful. (*Liverpool Echo* – Penny Kiley. March 1997)

⁴⁶ E.g. BBC Radio Merseyside presenters Billy Butler and Wally Scott's 'Remember when...' tales of growing up on the terraced streets of Liverpool feature was both broadcast and serialised in the *Liverpool Echo* from the late 1980s and through the 90s.

Tony Bryan's, *99 Heyworth Street* (1993) had started to appear with some success at The Liverpool Empire with an underlying theme of, 'times were hard but we pulled through them'. So it is perhaps not surprising that there was some resistance to fully accept that the socio-economic realities and the cultural and political devastation of the 1980s and 1990s had destroyed the very communities and values these shows were attempting to celebrate. Even less, to face up to sentiments expressing that it is adversity in the face of past triumphs, that is prevailing. *The Ballad of the Sea's* message is stark and uncompromising and whoever appreciates the messenger bringing veracity's bitter pill? In this scene it is old Harry, a redundant seaman who knows he will never work again, delivering the harsh reality:

| | |
|-------|--|
| Harry | <p>And so we will be left to become old Telling our sad and lurid tales To each other and no one And if they listen the young will romance Our lives out of the harsh boredom And harder work Fickle history will dally with the colourful characters And all the quiet grafting family men Who did the right thing Will be drowned in obscurity A few scribes will scribble their sorry scribble And call our stories miserable The Seaman The Working Man The Ordinary Man Will fall from grace and become so unfashionable That his laments will be labelled clichés And our lives and those of our lost comrades Raided for their adventure will be Forgotten</p> <p>We are the last of a lost generation That's what I think.</p> |
|-------|--|

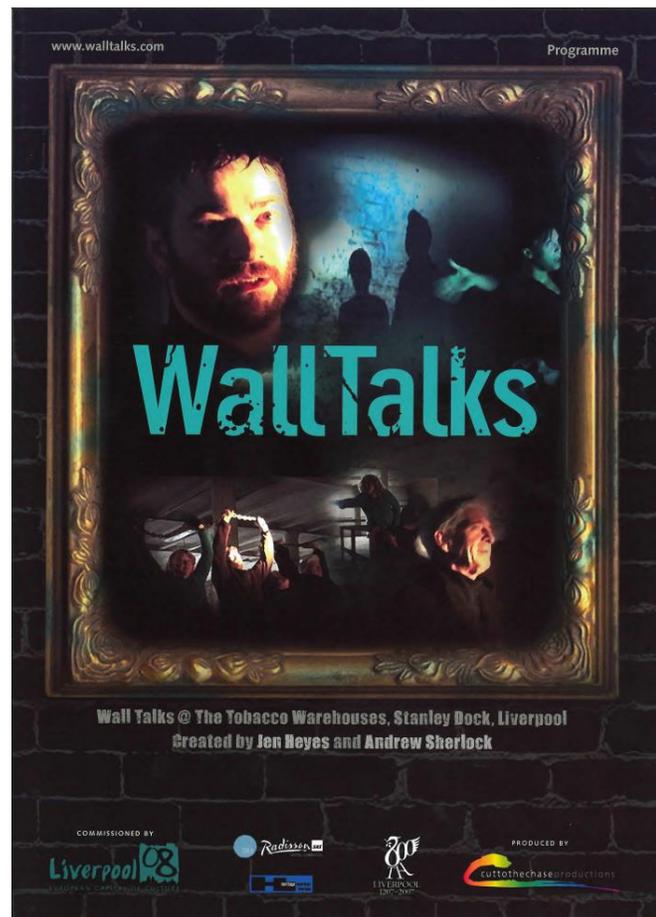
(Ballad: 43)

During and after the run I stripped the piece down and eventually re-edited and re-wrote the whole work, excerpts of which were produced in open air promenade by Iris Theatre in St Paul's

Church Gardens, Covent Garden, London in 2011. The latest re-worked version is included in this submission.

Walltalks

While Liverpool's main producing theatres were in chaos, (eventually to re-open under one umbrella as the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse in 2000), the city was coming to terms with a realization about the destructive consequences of division and a lack of cohesion that the theatres were to have forced on them by their amalgamation. The underlying theme of *Fall From Grace* was that sectarianism, warring and family divides will inevitably lead to tragedy - while the elegy of *The Ballad of the Sea* clearly marks the need to accept that ways of life have been lost, no matter how vital they have been. *Walltalks'* agenda was to utilise the legacy of Liverpool's complex history and experience to fuel its progression and propel its realisation that it is time to move on.



Liverpool was now gearing up to re-brand itself and trade off its unique heritage for its particular function as a world port, commercial centre and a key axis of 19th and 20th century immigration/emigration traffic. Anxious to promote itself as the 'World in One City' as the banner opposite Lime Street Station proclaimed, Liverpool was also careful to hold on to its uniqueness of character. A difference, which, as has been discussed, had at times placed it negatively in wider perceptions outside the city:

Outside the main narrative frameworks of modern British history, Liverpool has long been characterized as different, the proverbial exception within the nation. In the north of England but not of it, Liverpool (and its 'sub-region' of Merseyside) was (and has continued to be) highly distinctive, differing sharply in socio-economic structure, cultural image and expression, political affiliation, health, diet and speech from the adjacent industrial districts. The industrial conurbations of the north grew out of conglomerations of small towns and villages, augmented by short-distance rural in-migration which tended to reinforce their culture, character and status as regional centres. Long distance in-migration – the multi-ethnic, mainly Celtic inflow – transformed Liverpool and its 'Scouse' culture, setting it apart from its environs. In Liverpool, competing and conflicting inflexions of celticism (Irish, Welsh, Manx and Scottish) have been particularly pronounced, tensions (awaiting full scholarly investigation) at the very centre of the multi-national United Kingdom. Beyond the 'inland' Irish Sea, Liverpool's private Celtic empire, the great seaport looked to the oceans, adding an external dimension to the city's cultural life and its migrant mix. The 'community' mentality of the Scottie-Road 'slummy' – the prototype Scouser – co-existed with a broader culture, a seafaring cosmopolitanism which made Liverpool, the gateway of empire, particularly receptive to (un-English) foreign ideas (syndicalism, for example) and to American popular music. A cultural intersection on the geographical margin, 'edge city' Liverpool is thus a critical site for investigation of northern-ness, Englishness, Britishness and the (pre-devolved) United Kingdom. (Belchem 2006: 2)

As Belchem asserts, the influx of these communities and the impacts of multi-nationalism and ethnic diversity in the city are under-explored. In 2004, Jen Heyes, an LJMU drama graduate now running her own production company, had approached me with a commission from the Culture Company. After a series of research and development scripts and showings this led to the creation of a large scale site-specific drama based in the Stanley Dock Tobacco Warehouse

in the lead up to Liverpool Capital of Culture Year in 2008. Robyn Archer, the then Director of the Culture Company, was also keen that it promoted the internationalism of the city. The opportunity to create the third work about impact of ethnicity in the city and the network of stories they brought with them now presented itself.

It was an opportunity and a necessity for a serious European Capital of Culture to represent Liverpool as both a cosmopolitan, world port city with a genuine international pedigree in its heritage – but also as singular, a place whose melting pot had forged a distinctive, local, civic personality with depth and texture to be celebrated. To be different was now to be distinctive and exceptional rather than out of step. To make this kind of impact therefore, we needed to make that statement somewhere distinctive and exceptional, and in a way that was distinctive and exceptional. Hence the iconic building and the odd but engaging premise that the show would be told by a series of fragmentary narratives told by ghosts. We wanted to create apparitions that had been summoned out of and walked through the walls of the past, like recordings of the past somehow stored in the brickwork:

Set in the largest, freestanding brick building in the world, the Stanley Dock tobacco warehouse home of the city's Heritage Market, Walltalks is a site-specific journey through the last 150 years of Liverpool's history, with an emphasis on those who have given the city its identity.

"We knew we wanted to go into somewhere unusual, somewhere with atmosphere, to underline the whole Capital of Culture experience," explained playwright, Andrew Sherlock.



A movement sequence from *Walltalks* (2007)

"We thought it was an interesting angle to give the people of the past a voice, so that as 2008 approaches, and after some difficult times for the city, the lessons of history have been learned and the diversity of the city is something to be embraced."
 (Chris High 2007: BBC Website)

In contrast to the guarded language and tones of the 1990's, when a serious engagement with the more profound and searching questions regarding Liverpool's sectarian divisions and acceptance of lost ways of life was dressed with the promises of 'an Irish musical family saga' or 'epic tales of the sea', it is interesting to see how much more confidently the cultural and heritage agenda in *Walltalks* is promoted in press releases and interviews:

All the stories in *Walltalks* are based on authentic events and all the characters, some actual historical figures but most pieced together from research and imagination, could conceivably have passed through these dock walls. Their lifetimes coincided with the life of the Stanley Dock built and opened in the 1840s and still in use today. But this is not a museum piece, with us diligently replaying conjectured events from within the building. At times our characters and stories explode out of the dock and into the lives and places they came from, telling us who they are and how they came to be here. The dock however remains our beacon, both a receiver and transmitter in its remembrance of things past; as it takes us to many places and always returns us back home. But the dock for all its stone-chilled atmosphere is a building and though its walls may speak, it is the voices of people that capture our imagination.

(Andrew Sherlock, May 2007: Cut To The Chase Website - *Walltalks* 2007)

'otherness' –David, a young Jewish immigrant tries to comfort Clementine after the loss of her black GI, Joe:

David You need someone to look out for you.

Clementine A Liverpool-Irish, Chinese girl carrying a black man's child?
(Walltalks: 21)

The intention is to show where Liverpool has come from and potentially the way forward. An intention in *Walltalks*, that even elements in the usually implacable local press appreciated.⁴⁸

In *Walltalks*, the events of the past bring responsibilities for the present and future, and in the culmination of the play, a warning of the dangers of straying from the right path of decent socially motivated behaviour. The past is always there to haunt the characters. The ghost of a morally upstanding father, Joe, comes back to warn his errant son, Sam, to behave properly. Sam, his now adult Liverpool, gangster son, who wants to turn the warehouse into a casino has just attacked his half-brother David, a Council officer who has questioned the validity of Sam's plans and refused a bribe from him. Joe appears as a WWII G.I. from the shadows of the dock, where he was in charge of repatriating the stored dead bodies of American soldiers⁴⁹ during the 1940s when stationed in Liverpool, with his own warning from history for his son:

Sam sticks out his knife towards Joe of frighten him off. Joe spins him around and takes it out of Sam's hand with military precision. Now with a firm grip on Sam from behind Joe pulls Sam to him tight.

⁴⁸ *Wall Talks* is an in-situ production where history, geography, sociology and economics are engagingly intertwined to prove that even every unthought action by the most anonymous of individuals has a tangible consequence. (*The Liverpool Echo* - Joe Riley 2007)

⁴⁹ Anecdotally I'd picked up the story that the dead bodies of American G.I.'s were actually stored in the Stanley Dock awaiting repatriation because the cool damp conditions of the tobacco warehouse were the best to preserve them.

Joe I met your mother in here. She worked for some shipping clerk a-ways along there and just happened by one day. She sure was a welcome change from the dead GI watch and other shit they gave us black boys back then. So when I found out she was pregnant I went to see my C.O. told him what had happened and that I'd like to do the decent thing. You know what he said? 'We didn't bring you niggers over to breed more of your kind offa decent women'. And he shipped me back home on the next boat on a charge. When I finally got discharged I tried to find your mother and you, but with all the upheaval after the war..? A lot of other boys were in the same boat. But no one wanted to help. No one even wanted to talk about us.

Sam So, you're Joe. My long lost father. Sad story but at least it's filled the sixty year or so gap. Thanks very much and pleased to meet you and all that but aren't you a bit young to be my old fella?

Joe Oh I'm long dead son. See after what happened to me I got kinda tired of being pushed around and I decided to do something about it and went back down south. A group of us had rushed to investigate the burning of a black church in Mississippi. We were arrested by the police on speeding charges, jailed for a few hours, then released after dark into the hands of the Klan. So you see, I got some strong feelings about treating people right. Now this man's father brought you up like his own son and this is not how you treat a brother.

Sam Didn't you hear him, we're not brothers.

Joe Look at him. Look real hard. Yes, you are.

Sam I don't believe this. You're not here. You're dead.

Joe squeezes the knife to Sam's throat

(Walltalks: 30)

The general critical success of the show was matched by steady rather than sell-out audiences with the demands of a huge cold and wet warehouse, even during a hot summer and a customs raid on the warehouse for counterfeit goods being sold in the weekend market, closing the show for several days of the run, did not help. But the audiences and commentators found it a rewarding experience⁵⁰ and for me it was an opportunity to combine some of the socio-historic detail of earlier work with an adventurous, fragmentary form and lyrical language set against the atmospheric and visual opportunities afforded by the unique setting. Despite some difficult and demanding stories chronicling the immigrant experience in Liverpool, *Walltalks* ends on a defiantly positive note with a young African woman asserting her will and intention to use her experience of passing through the city to re-build her life and family and to find a home:

Latasha

I miss my farm, my family, my parents and though they gave me a tower block to live up high, I feel closer to them down here by river. This city has many different people from different places and sometimes I get so confused. So I walk the streets, come here and listen. Back home, my name, Latasha means surprise and in this town, every day is full of them. So I am learning language and hope to study to be a lawyer, I would like a family of my own one day and I would like to find a way to make a home.

(Walltalks: 32)

This story of Liverpool has moved on from dealing with its own tribal troubles and accepting the losses of the past and is beginning to look towards a progressive, regenerative future. The expansive Stanley Dock warehouse setting signalled a desire to aesthetically

⁵⁰ Covering 150 years of identity building, *Wall Talks* is a cross-the-arts promenaded piece examining what it is that has made Liverpool the place it is today. Industrialisation, Slavery, Shipbuilding, The Merseybeat generation and the riots of the early eighties are all covered until at last we come to today's rejuvenation... a tight script that rarely disappoints... a captivating piece of theatre that should be enjoyed and experienced by all. (*The Stage* – Chris High, 2007)

engage with bold contemporary, theatrical stylistics and experimentation with the form. While companies like *Punchdrunk*, now famous for site-specific, large scale and immersive theatre and taking audiences on journey's through spaces, from more modest beginnings small scale shows were really finding their feet in London with their larger scale events like *Masque of the Red Death* in 2007, we had been working in Liverpool with these ideas in *Walltalks* and with a number of student shows at LJMU Drama, using discrete and non-theatre spaces since the early 2000s.⁵¹ Both in terms of a newly invigorated sense of optimism in the city and artistically a will to challenge, investigate and take risks with commitments like on-going support for the *Biennial*, Liverpool began to believe it was a Capital of Culture. The *Walltalks* experience took dense research and textual, historical material and presented the characters and stories growing out of this material in action, dance, speech, projection, live and recorded music and sound. The show became an exploration of the readability of historical events in order to construct potential interpretative possibilities towards a progressive intelligibility. It was a genuine attempt to deal with the difficulties of reading a multi-faceted concretised, mass of factual information in order to re-constitute and re-mythologise a city, its people and glean a vision and a way forward.

The central character Latasha's journey is out of adversity and towards an ambitious optimistic future. Latasha is based on a young woman from the Congo, Suzanne, a young

⁵¹ Drawing on the influences of companies like The People Show established in a London bookshop basement in 1966 - www.peopleshow.co.uk and Welfare State Theatre who, though best known for their outdoor work, also have made extensive use of site-specific locations and were established 1968 - www.welfare-state.org. In her *Guardian* Theatre blog (14th September 2014) Lyn Gardener argues that immersive theatre has now potentially become over-used to the point of cliché www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/sep/19/immersive-theatre-overused-marketing-gimmick.

and unlike prevalent representations of immigrants⁵⁴ entering the UK to exploit the benefits of what it has to offer, she brings an intelligence, experience and a courageous ambition, that has everything to offer. If Liverpool is to live up to its 'World in One City' branding it is this kind of progressive, diverse ethnicity that it has to fully accept and embrace along with acknowledging the warnings of the wrongs of the past:

David Get off me nigger.

Joe grabs David hard, looking like he is going to give him a beating but instead drags him to an opening in the warehouse floor looking down on the basement below.

Joe You, come look here boy.

David My name's David.

Joe Well now David. What you see down there?

David Just rows and rows of bags, like big sacks.

Joe Any idea what's in them?

David shrugs, shakes his head.

Joe Dead American boys. Stored down there nice and cool, quiet, all waiting to get shipped home. It's my job to look after them. Get them back safe to their families who are all types from places all round the world. They ain't wops or spicks, Polack's or chinks, coons or darkies. They're just dead Americans. And me? I ain't no nigger, just a real live American called Joe. G.I. Joe, ain't hard to remember now, is it, David?

(Walltalks: 16)

⁵⁴ The Truth About Immigration in the UK 2014 (BBC, HD 720p) BBC Political Editor, Nick Robinson's investigation is an intelligent commentary on the issues - available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHpIEJgevqM>

The Shankly Show

By 2007 when I submitted an application⁵⁵ to the Liverpool Culture Company and the Arts Council for England for a commission to create a new work for the 08 Capital of Culture year my relationship had changed considerably from my return in 1989. I had begun as a writer and artist researching and investigating Liverpool's past and its legacy in order to create dramatic works, asking key and ,at times, difficult questions and issues to face up to. I had now been advising Sir Bob Scott and his 08 bid team at the Culture Company for some years and had been part of the hosting day for Sir Jeremy Isaacs and the judging panel who would decide the award. They had taken my advice and been to see a school rehearsing a play about street safety as part of the Driving Ambition initiative about car crime that I set up with young people making drama on the subject from all over the city. They were impressed that we were tackling difficult issues and negative aspects of the city rather than just showing them edited 'glory of the cultural garden' highlights. But even I began to question this 'warts'n'all' policy of dealing with problems in dramatic public when Boris Johnson's now infamous article had attacked Liverpool in the Spectator after Ken Bigley's execution.

The extreme reaction to Mr Bigley's murder is fed by the fact that he was a Liverpudlian. Liverpool is a handsome city with a tribal sense of community. A combination of economic misfortune — its docks were, fundamentally, on the wrong side of England when Britain entered what is now the European Union — and an excessive predilection for welfarism have created a peculiar, and deeply unattractive, psyche among many Liverpudlians. They see themselves whenever possible as victims, and resent their victim status; yet at the same time they wallow in it. Part of this flawed psychological state is that they cannot accept that they might have made any contribution to their misfortunes, but seek rather to blame someone else for it, thereby deepening their sense of shared tribal grievance

⁵⁵ See Appendix 5 on page 124.

against the rest of society. The deaths of more than 50 Liverpool football supporters at Hillsborough in 1989 was undeniably a greater tragedy than the single death, however horrible, of Mr Bigley; but that is no excuse for Liverpool's failure to acknowledge, even to this day, the part played in the disaster by drunken fans at the back of the crowd who mindlessly tried to fight their way into the ground that Saturday afternoon. The police became a convenient scapegoat, and the Sun newspaper a whipping-boy for daring, albeit in a tasteless fashion, to hint at the wider causes of the incident. (Johnson 2004:7)

I was one of the people asked to respond from the city for a Radio 4 special on Ken Bigley and began to fully appreciate the need to accentuate the positive image of Liverpool as well as acknowledge its problems. Soon after, I pitched an idea to the Culture Company, called *Icons of Liverpool*, for a series of works about talented personalities who represented the best of the City in different fields – the politician Bessie Braddock, Lennon and McCartney in music, Ken Dodd in comedy and Bill Shankly in football. When the Arts Council announced it was funding commissions for 08 for Liverpool artists the city asked me to apply with a show that would be unashamedly popular, Liverpool based and proud of it.



Sandy West as Shankly - The Shankly Show, Olympia Theatre Liverpool 2008

If *Walltalks'* Latasha's fortitude had begun to acknowledge the need for a defiant optimism in the face of adversity, the character of Bill Shankly would be its iconic charismatic leader to show the way. A man who led a football club from second division obscurity and built Liverpool FC into one of the most successful teams in the English and European game and laid the foundations for its international renown - Shankly would be portrayed as the mass city's motivator a proto-urban-regenerator, to restore pride and determination when it needed it most,

| | |
|---------|---|
| Shankly | Because this is Liverpool. Where the finest team, in the finest club, in the finest ground, in the finest city in the world, play football. Welcome to my home... THIS IS ANFIELD... |
|---------|---|

Anfield Stadium high, mighty and majestic - a cathedral of football.

Wasn't always this way though, ah no. The place was in a shocking state when I arrived. But there was something about this place that was... special. C'mon let's have a cup of tea and I'll tell you all about it.

(Shankly: 3)

The Shankly idea eventually won through a competitive selection process and was commissioned by the Arts Council for England and Liverpool Culture Company. With criticism that the 08 year was dominated by high profile and high art events commissioned from outside the city, like Sir Simon's Rattles visit with The Berliner Ensemble, The Culture Company was keen to promote a popular people's show, generated locally, drawing on accessible cultural forms. There were potential copyright issues with the title, *An Audience with Shankly*, because of the existing star, with a celebrity audience ITV show 'An Audience with...' But I still needed a bold, attention grabbing headline and went for the definitive or the definite article, at least – *The Shankly Show*. The aim was to put Liverpool in the national and international spotlight and

the remit was therefore to create an event to capture a mass interest and audience. The making and marketing of the show would therefore be just as important as the show itself.

I launched 'The Search for Shankly' in a media campaign co-ordinated with the Culture Company's Press Office to find an actor to play the role and the show took off. National newspapers ran the story, TV features on BBC, ITV and Sky Sports TV. I was even interviewed on Radio 4's *Today Programme*, the first Arts story they had run for several years. Mike Doran our assigned Press Officer from the Liverpool Culture Company informed me that *The Shankly Show* went on to generate more media coverage and PR exposure than any other event for the 08 culture year other than Paul McCartney's Concert and the opening event itself. But if I had managed to capture a mass attention, I still did not have a show or a clear idea of how I was going to tell this particular story.

During the time when Liverpool's theatres had been dark and in financial difficulties in the 90's I had become interested in film-making and television. I completed an MA at Liverpool John Moores University in Screenwriting and was commissioned by Granada TV for two feature drama screenplays soon after. I had also started making independent promotional and educational video productions, learning to direct for the screen. With football now such a televisual event and having been elevated to the operatically emotive after-events such as Italia 90's World Cup opening credits accompanied by Pavarotti singing *Nessun Dorma*, it was ripe for some form of big screen - live theatre crossover. The initial concept seemed simple. Sky Sports graphics-savvy and effects-laden audiences would not sit through some creaky traditional play about Shankly – so the plan was to give them the man, speaking directly to them, on his own, backed by big on-screen football, images embellishing the background. A live show camera (an

idea borrowed from watching stand-up comics and bands playing large-scale stadia) all creating an epic sense of larger than life, visual poetry. As Shankly spoke, the pictures and words writ large would jump out of his monologue and straight on to the screen not just as a backdrop for the show but also as an integral stylistic commentator and fluid character in it.



This would allow the show to be at once a simple, accessible tale of Shankly's account of his time as Liverpool manager but also to make contextual comments, such as the social deprivation he encountered in the city and the need to promote a restorative mental attitude or pride:

Shankly I knew the value of money, we were now talking huge sums and the board were nervous. But I also knew I'd had to watch my own village die as the black blooded veins of coal stopped flowing...
And I was damned if I would let it happen here. This club, these people, this city deserved better!

(Shankly: 10)

But what started out as a seemingly simple idea became more technologically and intellectually demanding. Shankly himself was a complex character eschewing a philosophy of ruthless competitive, winning football, 'If you are first you are first, if you are second you are nothing' (Shankly: 18) but played in a fair, egalitarian and unselfish way:

Shankly You see, the socialism I believe in is not really politics. It is a way of living. It is humanity. I believe the only way to live and be truly successful is by collective effort, with everyone working for each other, everyone helping each other, and everyone having a share of the rewards at the end of the day. This may be asking a lot, but it's the way I see football and the way I see life.

(Shankly: 18)

He became one of the first football managers to fully utilise the power of mass media and his oft-quoted sound bites litter the show, '...if Everton were playing at the bottom of my garden, I'd close the bloody curtains!' (Shankly: 13) This media-savvy-ness became a developing theme of the show as the 'people's game' has become the mass mediated game, so the level and frequency of cross-theatre and media intersections become increasingly sophisticated in their inter-textual strategies. This led to interesting and complex decisions in how to implicate the audience in their choice of image to view, as well as interpret, with strategies like the alienating effect of simultaneous live and digital representation.



The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.... The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal. (Baudrillard – 1993: 71-72)

By displaying the competing forms of live theatre with the actor in front of them and his immediate digital reproduction just above, the audience is forced to make a perceptive choice or decode the dual presentation of two representational worlds. In its own way this kind of exercise in alienation is a deeply politicised activity, yet our popular audiences highly trained in the use of decoding techniques by watching hours of Sky Sports, BBC and ITV visual and aural razzamatazz in their football presentation accepted our use of digital effects much more readily and easily than they would, perhaps, sit through a straight Chekhov play and its arcane techniques of character, dialogue and acting out of assumed psychological motivations. The popular theatre audience is technically savvy and highly sophisticated and the juxtapositions of documentary on-screen images and sequences, together with highly stylised theatrical stage-imagery was designed for a viewer well versed in the graphics, sound and digital effects that complements the live broadcast spectacle of any Sky Sports football coverage.



But I still needed a theatrical conceit to bring all these elements together and to connect with a popular audience. The answer came out of primary research one day at Anfield football stadium when Brian Hall turned up with the keys to show me round the empty cathedral. The shell resonated with his memories, like the old seafarers, to me it sounded like poetry:

Bone house:

A skeleton

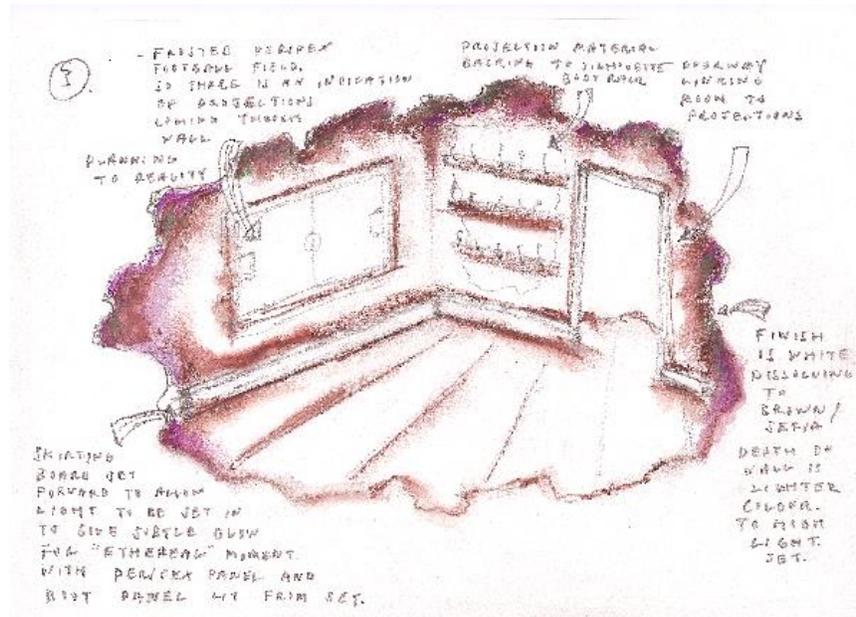
In the tongue's

Old dungeons.

(*Bone Dreams* – Seamus Heaney 1975)

Like *The Ballad of the Sea*, Shankly's story was an elegy, but in his case one with an overwhelmingly positive legacy in terms of what the club went on to achieve from the humble 2nd Division state in which he found it. Shankly's physical monument was the Anfield stadium itself whose re-building he personally oversaw - the mythical centre of which was the boot-room in which he and the chosen few coaching staff plotted this rise of the club. I asked designer Sam Kent to rip the heart out of Anfield and put it on stage for me theatrically it was a

confession-box for an open-mass addressed, testimonial theatre: a live, animated football bio-documentary.



Shankly would be clearing out his desk in the boot room (though he never actually had one there) on his last day before announcing his shock retirement – this was the conceit for the story and the key to unlock the whole show and placing the personal, intimate story, at the heart of the digital and technological.



The Shankly Show Set Olympia Theatre 2008.

The Shankly Show was undoubtedly successful⁵⁶ in Liverpool with a sell-out one-off gala opening at the Olympia Theatre in 2008, then a successful run at the Royal Court theatre later that year and a revival in the BT Convention Centre at the Liverpool Arena in 2009. The initial 50K budget did not extend to a more theatrical set. So I commissioned a much more adventurous one with a mass of flying and stage effects for the Royal Court remount later that year with the proceeds from the original production. Also with new visuals and images from Sparkle media and a sub-plot film, which ran throughout the show 'The Boy Who Dreamed of Football'. This was designed to identify directly with the fans' childhood aspirations of being the footballing icons they idolised and returned to a familiar image recurrent in my work of the lost child or boy searching for a parent or father figure. The local Liverpool Echo even gave me some direct advice on content which I also took.⁵⁷

The Shankly Show developed with each production and was seen by over 15 thousand people in large scale short run event performances. But as the initial disappointing sales of the

⁵⁶ Bill Shankly was always going to be a crowd-pleaser of a subject. But West also turned in a triumphantly crowd-pleasing performance as the straight-talking manager... (*Liverpool Echo* – Catherine Jones, April 2008)

Shankly drama wins standing ovation; THEATRE REVIEW The Shankly Story/Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool.

'LOSING - I hate it!' With those oft repeated words, Alexander "Sandy" West brought his triumphant impression of iconic Liverpool FC manager back to his adopted city last night. (*Liverpool Daily Post* - Alan Weston, Sept 2008)

The Shankly Show brilliantly combines live theatre with video footage to capture the emotions Shankly must have felt when in charge of LFC. (*What's On Stage* – Michael Hunt, Dec 2009)

⁵⁷ But while the team-building of the early 1960s was explored in detail, the final years of the Scotsman's rule at Anfield – culminating in the 1974 FA Cup final, felt somehow rushed. (*Liverpool Echo* – Catherine Jones, Feb 2008)

high quality DVD version, made with the expert sports media company Paul Docherty International, confirmed there was a much more inherent problem with its progress.⁵⁸

The show had a finite number of supporters who were interested in Liverpool football, Shankly's era and going to the theatre. It may have fulfilled its brief and been made with quality, but the oxygen of popular theatre is the ability to play repeatedly to ever expanding and wider audiences. The tribalism of football is such that when a product caters for only one set of particular supporters its engagement will always be limited. Andy Harries the Executive Producer of *The Damned United* film of David Peace's celebrated novel about Brian Clough, told me they were also disappointed with the sales and audience figures for a story which had also a big media presence. Even concentrating on the ambiguous, outspoken character of Clough rather than the football and his allegiance did not bring the results they had hoped for. Though it did not make more of a national impact, despite media interest, and at a time when Manchester United fans were singing 'Capital of culture, you're having a laugh', *The Shankly Show* reminded Liverpool that it had and could overcome the seemingly insurmountable and, with the right attitude, be a success:

Shankly So I told them individually they were the best. I told them as a team, they were the best and I told everyone they were the best. And little by little, slowly but surely we began to believe.

(Shankly: 13)

⁵⁸ This inspiring show is a must for any red and it's a great shame that it will struggle to receive recognition outside of the city as loyalties will prevent anyone other than Liverpool supporters attending or enjoying the performance. A commemorative DVD is available now at HMV. (*Liverpool Live* – Rich Denton 2009)

An honest, but at times harsh, civic analysis had begun to give way to the discourse of positivity. Using a sophisticated digital technology, intercut and inter-textually integrated into the motivational rhetoric of a self-consciously mythologised and iconoclastic embodiment of localised self-respect, this representation of Bill Shankly brought people to their feet.



This was surely not just because of the afterglow of football played over fifty years ago, but an expression of the desire to shake off the gloom of being a city last to come out of post-war depression and first into modern recession and to thrive again. But lest we get carried away with effulgent, civic pride there is a darker tone shot through *The Shankly Show*. The play ends with Shankly never quite achieving, the European Cup glory he aspires to and his obsessive desire for competitive success starts to become a restless torment leading to his sudden departure from the club,

| | |
|---------|--|
| Shankly | Home sitting in the armchair the hated close-season. Time to stop and think. Hate stopping. Hate thinking without football to shape your thoughts. (Shankly: 26) |
|---------|--|

That, you do not always get what you wish for, was a stark warning for Liverpool too, as investment on the back of the competitive success of Capital of Culture and opportunities

began to present themselves in the lead up to 08. The glittering prize of new initiatives like the L1 shopping complex in the city centre threw the poverty of the Anfield area surrounding Liverpool FC's ground into darkly ironic relief. Home to the richest young footballing men in the city, the stadium sat alone in splendid isolation on a sea of derelict urban housing and social decay - where some fans wait for autographs after games they cannot afford to see their heroes play. A wealth made possible largely by the global mediatisation and TV revenues, which had forever changed the game. To re-interpret Shankly's legacy was therefore to stylistically examine the mediations of football to its audience. To make the show experience a perceptive challenge of readability and orientation, using mass popular football TV coverage and making contemporary digital theatre techniques accessible,⁵⁹ in order to begin to unravel these ironies:

...a critique of capitalist processes must and can only be produced by and within the processes that regulate it and that therefore it is *through* the actual modification of its performance, by means of *contamination of its branding*, that we are able to intervene in capitalist processes. In other words, radical artistic practices need to be utilising the very processes of empire, globalisation and capitalist production that they aim to critique. Operating by playing with the semiotic ambiguity between economic, theatrical and discursive performance, radical practices can aesthetically subvert, the mechanisms at the heart of globalisation and empire.

(Giannachi 2007: 11)

As much as *The Shankly Show* is about regenerative and restorative pride it is a reminder of how much the game of football has changed and been re-branded as a mediatised

⁵⁹ Liverpool City Councillors had bitterly complained when the first, short-lived, Capital of Culture Director, Robyn Archer, had commissioned the Builder's Association Theatre Co. to produce, *Surveillance* in 2006, a meditation on urban mediatisation, on the grounds that they could not understand it.

global enterprise motivated by vast profit. The show plays off its array of narrative, visual and mediatised intertextuality against a much more naive age of community engagement:

Shankly I looked around and the whole city was in need of a lift and we both needed the same thing, some new money and some new players!

(Shankly: 8)

And footballing simplicity:

Shankly Take the ball and pass it to the nearest red shirt and if in doubt just put it in the opposition net.

(Shankly: 21)

Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles



By May this year the Beatles had become a world-wide phenomenon, like nothing in any of our lifetimes, and like nothing any of us will ever see again.

(Epstein, B 1964: 11)

When my colleague Jen Heyes with whom I'd collaborated and written *Walltalks* approached me to write a one-man show about Brian Epstein in 2011, my initial thought was to refuse. My agenda had always been to uncover the hidden, politicised stories of Liverpool. Even Bill Shankly was relatively untouched theatrically and led rather than followed the way for a rash of Liverpool based football plays and dramas that followed⁶⁰ and set his struggles in Liverpool's social context. But the Beatles and related stories seemed like such a tired cliché

⁶⁰ *You'll Never Walk Alone* 2012 – *A History of LFC* created at the Royal Court Theatre Liverpool borrowed heavily from the use of screen in *The Shankly Show* and *One Night in Istanbul* 2009 – a comedy play based LFC's European Cup victory was an idea for a show and title I mentioned to writer Nicky Alt at a Writing On The Wall Festival reading in 2008. He has since had some success with it at The Liverpool Empire as a play and as a feature film adaptation.

now shamelessly turned into a tourist trap industry in some parts of the city. After Shankly, I had been approached and had thoughts about several figures to base another bio-show on but nothing appealed with the same visceral presence of Shankly. Epstein, from the admittedly little I knew about him, certainly had nothing of that kind of commanding presence to hold an audience for a whole show. But I agreed to think about it and read Deborah Geller's short interview compilation based book, *The Brian Epstein Story*:

Alistair Taylor: The main thing is he had this nose for finding hit pop tunes. He didn't like pop music and yet he could just listen to a promo copy and say, 'That's going to be number one'. (Geller 1999: 31)

Epstein: In March 1954 I returned to business. It was after I left the army I found out about the existence of the various rendezvous and homosexual 'life'. My life became a succession of mental illness and sordid, unhappy events bringing great sorrow to my family. (Geller 1999: 9)

No matter the narrative context, for a character to be interesting they have to have two things - great abilities and flaws, ideally both and if they are related and clash to bring demons to confront so much the better. To paint homosexuality as a character flaw in our post politically correct days may seem harshly retrograde, but this was a time when it was still outlawed and as the eldest son in a traditional Jewish household, a massive social and cultural taboo to deal with for Brian and for him it was definitely a demon. Or rather, that it made him a disconnected, lonely and restless outsider. I said yes to writing the Epstein show, but it could not be a one-man show. He would never command or confide in an audience no matter how stylistically or theatrically contrived.

With Epstein inevitably came the Beatles and the weight of responsibility to all the devoted and in some cases, knowledgeable fans not to mention the self-appointed experts, the likes of which I'd had to deal with working on Shankly. But here was also the opportunity to

both contribute to the aspirations and needs of the city from the earlier soul-searching and questioning *Fall From Grace* and *Ballad of the Sea*, to the more outward facing *Walltalks*, to the pride and passion of *The Shankly Show*. Here was a world-wide subject, Liverpool's greatest cultural export and a potentially genuine international story.

It was not going to be easy to find a narrative conceit to contain all the elements of a life much more ambiguous than Shankly's. His only fault seems to have been loving football too obsessively, (try selling that one as a fault to thousands of football fans), and Epstein's was also a life that blazed brightly in the full glare of an international stage. In the end the answer was not in the research but what was not in it. In everything I'd read⁶¹, spoken about and studied Brian left his Sussex, country house late on the Friday evening of the weekend of his death in August 1967. I later found he was disappointed that rent boys had not turned up to a party there with his colleagues, so he had left them to return to London already quite drunk. Epstein phoned the friends in Sussex, the following Saturday afternoon saying he had not slept much and would get an early night then drive out to meet them in the country for Sunday lunch the next day. He was found dead on that Sunday morning and it was pronounced that he had died sometime that night. Sometimes it is the lack of information that can open up a story and here it was – what happened on that late Friday night early Saturday morning? I could find nothing and therefore anything within reason was possible.

Disappointed about the country house party, I conjectured he had gone back to London to find someone to be with, confide in or pour out his heart and tell his late night troubles to, as friends like Alma Cogan say he often did. Epstein picks up a young man from Liverpool in a

⁶¹ Coleman, R (1989) *Epstein – The Man Who Made The Beatles*, is the key text here.

London bar and brings him back to his city home to find, to his disappointment, that he is not an easy one-night stand, but a wannabe journalist who hopes he may have stumbled on a scoop. It is a simple and bold premise, but for an international story with which to tell the contextual background of the 60's Merseybeat scene and The Beatles and to open up the complex character of Brian Epstein that is what I needed. Along with an ex-Coronation Street star to bring in the media interest and audiences, it seemed to work, as the general tone of the reviews in November 2012 reflect.⁶²

Finding the right tone for the writing of this piece was difficult. I knew a popular theatre audience would want to know about his relationship with the Beatles, but a more demanding theatre and knowledgeable popular music audience would want more than that. The balance of context and creative conjecture to set up and fuel the drama was not something this time that all the local 'experts' appreciated.⁶³

⁶² Andrew Lancel as Epstein is terrific... As the boy, Will Finlason gracefully mingles brashness and compassion. (*The Times*)

Epstein: The Man Who Made The Beatles is at times comic, at times intensely moving... Epstein is not merely an exercise in nostalgia 50 years on from the Beatles first hit. It also finds the real man lurking inside an enigma. (*The Arts Desk*)

A show with style and substance and with an electrifying performance from its star... Andrew Lancel as Epstein was simply mesmerising... It is a class act; uncynical, passionate, real theatre. (*Made Up: On Stage in Liverpool*)

Superbly written by Andrew Sherlock and with two absolutely first rate performances by Andrew Lancel and Will Finlason, Epstein captures the very heart and essence of the man and of the city it was his and their fortune to be forever linked to. (*Liverpool Sound and Vision*)

⁶³ Sherlock's play is strong on research, packed almost relentlessly with the sort of titbits of information a music anorak could eat out on for a month, but it lacks the flights of fancy needed to fill in the blanks between the man we've all heard of and the one that, in this version at least, begs young men to come back to his swanky apartment to stem the loneliness... While the play may interest those who know little about Epstein, it could go much further in exploring the motives of such a pivotal figure in musical history and his

Here the same organ that demanded theatre work should be lighter and funnier when dealing with the city and its issues, now wants a darker in-depth story, particularly delving further into his homosexuality already covered, at times uncompromisingly, in the piece⁶⁴. I also sat near audience members during the play who were obviously disappointed that there was not more Beatles songs during the show (there is one cover song released by but not written by the Beatles) who obviously expected a much more usual bio-play narrative that served to string together a number of hits like Bob Eaton's *Lennon* show. While Epstein may be a well-known figure in his own right, from my canvassing and research he does not seem to be a character that a general audience knew much about and the relationship with the Beatles in the piece tends to concentrate on his emotional attachment with them:

Brian ... But it wasn't the sound or the way they looked – both were raw to say the least. It was the energy that was so tremendous, the beat, that confident stage-humour. More than that they had charm and an attitude, it was the way they made you feel.

This Boy And how did you feel?

Brian Like all that pain, all that endless, restless, tormenting, need and want and drive of desire, had found what it was looking for. The Beatles. The Beatles were the story I needed to tell.

This Boy I think they call it love, Brian.

(Epstein: 30)

struggles to be accepted as a gay, Jewish man at a time of intolerance. (*Liverpool Daily Post* - Laura Davis, Nov 2012)

⁶⁴ Compare Philip Key's earlier statement in *The Liverpool Daily Post* - footnote 19. Despite the jigs and reels it is a fairly miserable story that is told over five decades with family rows, threats, industrial injury, poverty, corruption and finally death. (*Liverpool Daily Post* – Philip Key Nov 1994)

Interestingly, conversations with Paul McCartney's brother Mike 'McGear' McCartney, Peter Brown, Epstein's close friend and business manager and member of the Epstein family were all to varying degrees very positive and independently made the comment that they thought the representation was 'fair' and offered a balance between the private tormented traumas and public success of the man. How this will translate onto a wider international stage remains to be seen. At the time of writing producers are negotiating a transfer to Canada, Australia and South Africa after a successful run the Leicester Square Theatre in London for *Epstein - The Man Who Made The Beatles* in 2014. Unlike the earlier works whose social and artistic ambitions had their genesis in the aims and objective discussed in this paper the real judge of the Epstein piece as a production will ultimately be made by that most fickle of arbiters, commercial success.⁶⁵



Andrew Lancel as Epstein and Will Finlason as This Boy in Epstein – The Man Who Made the Beatles 2013

⁶⁵ An experience not to be missed (*The Stage*). The reviews for the London run were largely very positive.

Epstein, with only one ‘tester’ showing in Liverpool, as a work in progress about to transfer to London, is a different contextual proposition from the other plays, in which there is a more digested perspective. But in re-writing and the course of this contextualisation its themes of obsessive drive, the outsider, sectarian division and exclusion, (this time, largely by virtue of a homosexuality illegal for much of Epstein’s life) are a continuation of the earlier works. Stylistically it is the most straightforward naturalistically written ‘straight play’. A strategy, when courting more widespread audiences, often adopted by playwrights whose initial leanings have been towards more experimental and stylistically challenging theatrical forms⁶⁶. But the challenge of telling one of the pivotal and best known stories in popular music with a fresh insight through mainly a two character dialogue is no less demanding than other forms I have employed.

As far as the dialogue with Liverpool and what the play is saying, like Shankly, there is a celebratory aspect of achievement to be proud of and a darker warning tone. Like Shankly, Epstein’s success comes at a price. His public desire to stand-out and make something of himself and those around him, despite the social and cultural disadvantages of his Jewishness and homosexuality, by asserting his management position also militates against his private need to belong, feel inclusive and form proper relationships:

| | |
|-------|---|
| Brian | Sometimes, even now when I’m with them still. Just us. I’m not the eldest son of a Jewish family, I’m not the manager of a business, I’m not a lover or anything anyone else wants me to be. I’m one of them. |
| | (Epstein: 52) |

⁶⁶See Castgano, PC (2001) *New Playwriting Strategies* for a full discussion of more experimental writing strategies that return to accepted naturalistic forms in search of a wider popular audience.

So too Liverpool's pride in its distinct persona has its celebratory advantages and uniqueness, but also the ability to alienate itself:

On the positive side, the city has a high and growing profile overseas that assists with tourism, inward investment and in the international conference and convention market. Some impact is even being made with China. But the reputation within Britain remains mixed, with residual stereotypes and out-dated associations with the worst aspects of urban decline. (Heseltine & Leahy 2011: 44)

And for all the success and wealth Epstein achieved, it brought him a life of under-developed relationships and personal unhappiness cut short by an early drug-fuelled death. For all the potential regenerative investment, national and international re-branding and buoyancy may bring, Liverpool should also still be careful what it wishes for, or as Lennon and McCartney say:

Because I don't care too much for money, money can't buy me love...

Thoughts and Findings

A journey in theatre practice that started with the guiding principles of McGrath's *A Good Night Out* has not been an easy one. He began his work returning to the theatre at the Liverpool Everyman at a relatively flourishing era of popular politicised theatre in the early 1970s. When I returned nearly twenty years later the post-Thatcher world was a very different one which saw the beginnings of a systematic attack on first the radical arts, then the liberal arts and now seemingly on all art in the UK.⁶⁷ What I appreciate about McGrath is the unshakeable belief and the socialist principle of his generation, defined by the radical optimism of the 1960s and that underpins all of his work. McGrath ends his chapter 'Anti-Apartheid Stand' in his collection of *Naked thoughts that roam about* (Holdsworth 2002) with this refreshingly unequivocal declaration:

My intense political conviction at this time is perhaps best experienced in a short poem I wrote:

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Is the writing on the wall
In letters of arrogant red
Twelve feet high
Perhaps, you think, a little overstated?

Look to the foundations of the wall itself;
The bricks are crumbling.
Soon all that will hold it together
Will be the red paint.

(Holdsworth 2002: 42)

⁶⁷ See Alistair Smith, 'The Arts Council Announces More Cuts in 2014' - *The Stage* 19th Dec 2013

What is interesting is that it is both determinedly defiant and darkly prophetic of what was to come. The problem for myself and other dramatists of a politicised persuasion who were really beginning their careers in earnest at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s was that by this time not only the wall, but the red paint was now seriously cracked and crumbling. Theatre too was going its separate ways.

In the face of the breakdown of a radical ideologically driven theatre of the left, straight or middle of the road theatre continued to build on familiar income streams. The educational pound with block booking curricula GCSE and A Level set text appeal, Shakespeare and the odd modern classic that pays its own way. All now bankrolled by the ubiquitous Christmas show, increasingly reliant on private or corporate patronage and arts subsidies. The whole bandwagon continues to chug along desperate to get bums on seats and not to upset anyone about anything for fear of losing audience or most importantly, its Arts Council or local authority funding and therefore stripped of any radical challenging edge. As it continues to do, the commercial theatre poured more and more money mainly into gambling on its musicals and continues to boom and bust on audience approval and ticket sales. Large scale cultural institutions like The Royal Opera House continue to survive on the unholy alliance of major public subsidy, private benefactors and high ticket prices. As the acceptable face of an alternative theatre, that did or still does not really challenge the destructive ideological dominance of later capitalism, two movements appeared. Firstly lead by organisations like the ICA in London and off the back of a rapidly fading touring circuit, the contemporary theatre movement created some interesting imagistic and linguistic provocations in some of the work by companies like The Kosh, Theatre De Complicite and later Ridiculusmus. This also became mired in the quasi-intellectual, vacuous, postmodernist posturing

of the stunningly platitudinal dereliction of the likes of Forced Entertainment or Quarantine masquerading their dull obscurity under the banner of experimental theatre.⁶⁸ Secondly, In Yer Face theatre has been and gone and produced some interesting work on the commodification of human relationships with a materialistic obsession and desire to barter twisted emotional and intellectual agendas in the best work of Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Sarah Kane *Blasted* (1996). It can also be pointlessly prurient, narcissistic, nihilistic and self-indulgent like Anthony Nielson's *Penetrator* (1993) and also elements of Ravenhill and Kane et al.⁶⁹ Verbatim and tribunal plays have also come and perhaps waned in recent years with susceptibility to questions of their own impartiality, authenticity and ethics.⁷⁰ Though there have been some interesting developments with the form like Alecky Blythe's use of the spoken word set to angular music in *London Road* (2011) and the brilliantly informed exposure of the 2008 and subsequent UK financial crisis in *The Power of Yes* (2009). But a clue to the audience this work has been made for can perhaps be found in the latter author Sir David Hare's title and that they are both National Theatre productions and therefore pretty select in their London centrality.⁷¹

⁶⁸ To join the debate see Quarantine's *Quarantine: Entitled* <https://vimeo.com/42999169> (2012) or the work of Forced Entertainment at www.forcedentertainment.com and make up your own mind.

⁶⁹ 'The kind of theatre bed-wetting middle-class kids make to upset their parent's friends at dinner parties' is sometimes a statement I use to introduce work of this type to students. It usually gets the debate going. For a more serious introduction to how would-be bourgeois theatre radicals revile sections of society see Brecht's poisonous view of the working and under-classes exposed in Brustein, R (1965) *The Theatre of Revolt* – Methuen or for an In Yer Face overview <http://www.inyerfacetheatre.com/nasty.html>

⁷⁰ 'Does verbatim theatre still talk the talk?' *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner, May 2007
<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/may/07/foreditorsdoesverbatimthea>

'Does documentary theatre get away with murder?' *The Guardian*, James Fritz, April 2011
<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2011/apr/21/verbatim-theatre-misleading-audiences>

⁷¹ David Hare is keen to distance himself from any kind of Marxist position and has his establishment credentials nicely polished in this article, *Suits You, Sir* - *The Daily Telegraph*, Nigel Farndale (July 2005)
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3645342/Suits-you-Sir.html>. *London Road* had on short run outside of London at the Bristol Old Vic (2014) performed by the Bristol Old Vic Drama School. One of those plays perhaps more talked about than actually watched.

But as for McGrath and the future of popular politicised theatre the writing was indeed on the wall. His own position as director of his radical alternative company 7:84 ended before the 1980s were over and struggled even in the more elusive and ideologically fertile Highlands of Scotland:

McGrath came under increasing pressure to adhere to bureaucratic conformity in the running and organisation of 7:84 Scotland. In reality this meant an end to co-operative working and equal pay as well as a threat to the company's tours to remote Highland venues. When the Arts Council demanded the imposition of an orthodox Management Team and Board of Directors, McGrath knew that the ethos which underpinned the company was under threat to the extent that he would have to resign. (Holdsworth: xix)

Though he continued to write and to produce throughout the 1990 and until his death in 2002 it was perhaps without the fervent impact of his earlier work and in increasingly marginalising conditions for an artist of his convictions.

Picking up the baton from McGrath and his generation of theatre-makers, however and attempting to run with it was never a question for me. Though his theatrical times were defined by a powerful force to articulate a clear and direct message of a democratic equality that he was for, mine have been no less strident as part of an alternative artistic generation's response to the legacies of first Thatcherism, then Blairism and an increasing tolerance of injustice and inequality that we are against. To produce and survive this has meant a much more elusive, tactical and guerrilla approach to strategically infiltrating and subverting the dramatic means of production. A diversification that rules nothing out and values the contribution of all forms from large scale mainstream theatres to the smallest touring venues, from television and film to micro-budget community video and constantly being prepared to switch roles writing, acting, directing, producing, teaching and the academically placing of the work that I am engaged in now. If this

sounds like a battle plan, it is, because as McGrath pointed out in one of his last lectures *Theatre Today* in 1999 that is where I found myself:

The combined Arts Councils can clearly be seen by their actions as agents for the Security Forces, a kind of MI6 of the imagination, determined to crush all oppositional theatre, to insist on what Castoriadis called the 'closure of the social imaginary... (Holdsworth: 237)

The inherent danger of this strategy is that it becomes so diverse, with messaging so covert or subliminal, that it becomes wrapped up in its own slippery rhetoric of openness. One that, even if it succeeds in promoting the awareness of issues and relevant social discourses never really address them with any clearly socially motivated or progressively politicised answers. But we live in a multi-media driven post-modernist age in which any proselytising, polemic is quickly labelled as didactic or dogmatic and one that relies on a sophisticated set of consensual agreements continually fragmenting and being reinvented in the social, economic, political and artistic coalition chaos of these times.⁷² The role of the theatre maker, artist or any intelligent human response to this is to keep flagging up the concerns with the local firmly keeping one eye on the global and trusting in an optimistic belief in humanity. McGrath begins his ending of *Naked Thoughts* with this vision, though the means and the methods may have been developed and had to change it is one of edged naivety I still subscribe to:

⁷² See Mike Bartlett's deeply self-conscious, multi-stranded and rambling, epic plays *Earthquakes In London* (2010) and *13* (2011) both full of potentially interesting ideas and both disappointingly unfocussed and lacking in the punch, delivery, lyrical and atavistic provocation that Jez Butterworth finds in the rightly celebrated *Jerusalem* (2009). Butterworth skilfully crystallises a collision of dramatic themes and motifs in the central character of Johnny "Rooster" Byron. A writer's achievement under-acknowledged in the clamour to laud Mark Rylance's undoubted powerhouse performance of the brilliant role that, let us remember, Butterworth initially created.

The Future

I can't end there. Apart from being a ridiculous optimist, I embrace Ernst Bloch's principle of Hope, and believe the dialectic of society can never be stopped or suppressed for too long. There is in every human being, as well as a proclivity to passive authoritarianism, a spark of perception, of self-interest, of anger at injustice, of the desire that Blake saw in every mortal, that will not allow the human spirit to be finally broken. (Holdsworth: 238)

With a seeming rash of new plays in 2014 with a political agenda, in London at least, fuelled by first the Scottish independence debate and the general election of 2015 and concerns about spending cuts in plays like Jack Thorne's *Hope* (2014) at the Royal Court, London, let us indeed hope that McGrath's faith in irrepressible febrile dramatic debate will be borne out.⁷³

Findings on the Plays

Fall From Grace taught me that I could appeal to audiences interested in their Irish Celtic roots, cultural history and identity. The show played well for over four years, both in Liverpool on two national tours and internationally in France, where the audience made us play every song again for an encore. But I rather think it was the emphasis on strong characters, bold storytelling, the music, singing and dancing that pulled in audiences rather than the inherent discussions of identity and sectarian divisions. It challenges some of the barriers and provoked discussion in the city surrounding notions of who should participate in theatrical drama and under what conditions.⁷⁴ The extensive use of local research and use of a training ensemble both delighted and alarmed with its participatory democracy or amateur intervention on to the sacred

⁷³ See, What's Next For London's Political Theatre? – *FT*, Sarah Hemmings (Jan 2015)
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7688c36c-89f7-11e4-8daa-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3YyNr45Gr>

⁷⁴ David Llewellyn Head of LJMU Drama told me that there was a heated debate amongst the drama students during an Applied/Community Drama session after I announced that *Fall From Grace* would be transferring to the Liverpool Playhouse in 1994 – I had apparently 'sold out' its community roots to the established repertory system. Infiltration and subversion of the established means of production, I would argue.

professional stage. I still remember the alarm on former Everyman Theatre Director John Doyle's face when I suggested at interview for an Associate position that we should think of theatres less as programmed playhouses and more as cultural exchange centres where people could meet more freely to interact and find ways to perform and share ideas.

The experience with *Ballad of the Sea* became about an experimentation with language and form and is perhaps the most self-consciously authored and writerly of the works. A quest to find an appreciation of a working class experience that moved away from the grinding social realism of harsh lives, hard-lived portrayed through agonisingly detailed naturalistic theatrical performance, to find a more lyrical, elegiac, poeticism and an audacious, imagistic, presentational style. The problem with this kind of self-referential artistic alienation is just how alienating this can be for a popular working class audience that it is supposed to represent. This play is also the least directly connected to Liverpool and there are no references to the city in it and in theory it could be set in any UK port or even translated to a European port. When played at the Liverpool Everyman, none of the lead sailors or the cast used Liverpool accents and perhaps this lack of the local and particular signposting may have impacted on its effectiveness, though its roots as a Liverpool port story are still very clear to read.

Walltalks sits at the centre of the works and is the most theatrically experimental. Though I wrote the script, it is also credited as 'created by' Jen Heyes and myself. This is because our detailed discussions about the tobacco warehouse site-specific show and how to immerse our audience in its history were as much about what and how we would performatively tackle the piece as much as what characters would do and say. The creation of the piece was more of an assembly with the dance, movement and video sequences given as much thought as acting and

drama scenes. This kind of experiential event, promenade in a non-theatre space was never meant for a large audience. It was strategically pitched and created to show that Liverpool and regional theatre was capable of creating progressive, contemporary theatre and multi-media performance. In a city aspiring to be a European Capital of Culture, Robyn Archer the original director of the Liverpool 08 winning bid was keen to both be rooted in the city and yet show off its artistically aware fragmentary, post-modern credentials. Though the experience was based on that of the immigrant, the dispossessed and those struggling to find their way, one that everyone in a port city like Liverpool can trace their roots to, it was an audience of theatre-going diehards who found their way along the dock road out of town and to this show. It proved to me that the more artistically and conceptually challenging you make dramatically based theatre the more you are potentially limiting an engagement with a wider audience no matter how rooted it may be in its experience. This is not to say that popular theatre cannot and does not innovate and attract both large audiences and critical acclaim, though I do think these are, rather than the norm, rare gems like:

Theatre Workshop, (1963) *Oh What A Lovely War*

Berkoff, (1969) *Metamorphosis*

McGrath (1973) *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

Godber (1977) *Bouncers*

Russell (1982) *Blood Brothers*

Cartwright (1986) *Road*

Burke (2006) *The Black Watch*

It is with some irony then that perhaps one of my most successful and popularly attended works is the most technical multi-media work, *The Shankly Show*, with its complex AVID media timeline containing CGI, stills, sound effects, music, voice over, documentary and commissioned footage which is queued live and switched between live broadcast of the onstage event itself. But this is a grammar a popular audience already knows as anyone who has watched Jamie Carragher and Gary Neville digitally deconstruct a football match can attest. The show taught me that a city's reflection on its own problems and dark issues from the past is not always what it needs and there is a time and a place for self-referential pride and appreciation of achievement. As for its local rather than national or global appeal, its own locale is what the show was commissioned for and whether there is an appeal in it for Liverpool and football fan-bases outside the city in say Ireland, Norway and Australia is a test project for the future.

Epstein – The Man Who Made the Beatles, showed me that a local knowledge or cultural saturation in a topic to the point of cliché, does not mean it is not worth investigating. While the other works are all, to an extent, concerned with exposing facets of characters, events and knowledge uncommonly discussed, anything to do with the Beatles is well-investigated and well-mined ground. But external signifiers are key to any identity, especially that of a port-city looking to re-emerge from out of a somewhat tarnished image. The trick here was to find amongst the already known and familiar some fresh perspective on the story to both feed off and contribute to the wealth of knowledge and provoke further debate. When looking for dramatic material in a city like Liverpool that is re-branding itself with tags like 'Beatle City' sometimes the answer is

staring you in the face.⁷⁵ What was surprising for me and I think for many of the audience I have spoken to after shows is how emotional the telling of Brian's last weekend was.

So what makes a popular, meaningful dramatic theatre? One that:

- Can use a dramatic grammar or genre an audience can relate to in a way that is also fresh and challenging
- Tests and innovates artistic, theatrical form and expression without alienating its audience
- Engages with its local audience, but has the ability to speak and resonate beyond it
- Provokes a necessary introspection no matter how hard, but also a respect for the pride of achievement
- Is emotive but also offers clear information and choice
- Provokes opinion, discussion and potentially change

How the city itself has fared and changed over the years since I began this work I will discuss in my conclusions, but in terms of my own development and practice for producing work I have developed a working methodology.

Arriving at a Research Methodology

For me the process of researching a theatre project begins with the oral and anecdotal. Theatre is the medium of the spoken word and at the heart of any production is the script. For a play to be popular and accessible, as well as informative, provocative, emotive and edifying, the

⁷⁵ Liverpool City Council have commissioned a report (2015) from the Liverpool universities Institute for Cultural Capital on how the city is and can further benefit from the Beatles.

authenticity of the original voices of those close to the subject is imperative. It is the detail of the turns of phrase and nuances of diction as much as the accuracy of content that I listen for when absorbing the spoken stories I often use as a basis for my theatre scripts. This then follows a fairly meticulous process of orthodox referenced research along with further anecdotal interviews and supporting, complementary and contextual research such as film, music, fashion, period lifestyle and culture. The method works as follows:

- Hear a story through family, friends, colleagues or recommendation or decide I am interested in a particular subject and seek out people with direct experience.
- Arrange to meet or listen to the story as informally as possible. In this way the teller is natural, relaxed and uninflected and is not anxious to either colour or sell the story or withhold or censor the story for fear of unwanted disclosure.
- Then arrange a more formal interview at which I ask if it is possible to both record and to note the teller's responses. (This is a transcription process I picked up from making a number of social documentary films earlier in my career).⁷⁶
- Identify acknowledged experts and professionals in the field and if possible arrange to meet and interview them and ask for precise recommendations for research publications and sources.
- Identify and read published texts and carefully place reference cards in the pages of the most relevant sections. (Often if it is a key text like a biography I will do a 'clean' continuous reading first time to get a sense of the whole work then go back and on subsequent reading create this reference guide).
- Build up a supporting picture of the subject through complementary Films, TV, newspaper and magazine articles, music, food, fashion and anything I can find related to the subject.
- Start to collate and group the research (sometimes on a large notice board) or file the subject into sub-groups.

⁷⁶ Details of these are on my CV attached as part of this submission.

- Cross-reference the material and see where various events and details recur and intersect and how themes, concerns, patterns and connections emerge
- Out of these links, begin to construct a sequence of events or timeline for an initial story-lining and scripting of the play.
- When appropriate set up discussion groups with the relevant production team and actors to discuss the material, recommend and share reference sources and invite guest speakers and experts.
- This body of research material will in some cases become an output in its own right and has been in the form of published articles, radio documentaries, DVD and CD-ROM.⁷⁷
- As the play progresses through all stages of writing, rehearsals and production, continue talking to people who have knowledge or experience of the subject and story and even make changes during the run of a play if useful information emerges or inaccuracies are spotted.
- At the end of the run of a play, write up a final version of the play and update and revise as necessary.

Further details and examples of how this process has been applied to play texts and productions are attached as appendices in **Research Notes and Key References**.

⁷⁷ Details of these are on my CV attached as part of this submission.

Conclusions

Since the late 1960's and in particular the 1970's, the years of Alan Dossier's directorship of the Liverpool Everyman, there has been dialectical exploration of the immediately felt social, historical and political forces impacting on the local audience. There has also been a desire to experiment and make accessible theatrically, material which can become crushingly prosaic, worthy and downbeat. I entered the Liverpool theatre-making community at a time when this notion of regional theatre that had a duty to understand, promote debate and directly comment on itself had seemed to have slipped off the agenda. The Liverpool Everyman and the Liverpool Playhouse were not only separate theatres, but hostile in their competition for audiences, with the small scale Unity Theatre seldom visited by or properly professionally regarded by the staff of either. Crucially audiences were dwindling in the face of this division to the extent that both the Everyman and Playhouse would go dark and be threatened by permanent closure with the Unity theatre fighting constantly for survival and much needed refurbishment.

My response to these theatrical divisions and the wider effects of recessions was fuelled by a personal desire to understand some basic questions of why Liverpool had become what it was. This began with a number of research projects, initially strongly based in anecdotal and storytelling traditions, from conversations in bars, at bus-stops and crucially around the family dinner tables. This has led to a series of works that attempt to explore the identity and formative characteristics of the city of which I am from and have now lived most of my life. Their strategies, styles and subject matter have also changed and developed as Liverpool's

agenda, public and private faces and needs have changed. For me there is no right or wrong opinion. Rather, these works have entered into the debate of what Liverpool, was, is, and should be, with some sort of insight, rigour and creative enthusiasm. The key concept to come out of re-reading and presenting the works spanning over 20 years is that of a dialectical balancing-act of: form and content; light and shade of tone; clearly objective, socio-economic, historical fact and character-based relationships with the empathy of emotional purchase. With also the clear intention that these elements should be played out and off each other with a genuine concern, care, affection and wit. As my colleague the director Tim Hopkins, who once recommended me for a Staff Producer's job at ENO, said – 'Never met anyone who understands the concept of dialectics who doesn't have a sense of humour'.⁷⁸ A notion of balanced perspective and representation that seems crucial at the time of writing as the city analyses and debates its present and future. There are obvious economic advances being made with major investments in projects, like the glittering retail palaces of Liverpool One shopping zone, giving rise to the re-branding of Liverpool as 'A World Class City', a potential that a key report is keen to promote:

Liverpool has a unique global brand. Over the past decade it has done much to build and exploit it. Liverpool is now the 6th biggest visitor destination in the UK.
(Heseltine & Leahy 2011: 43)

But at what expense for some of the outlying districts of the city, like Anfield, still plagued with poverty and unemployment? City analyst and commentator Philip Boland is sceptical of aspects of this kind of re-branding of Liverpool:

⁷⁸ Hopkins and I studied together at The Sherman Theatre, then of Cardiff University in 1987 where we had a continuing discussion about Marxist approaches to theatre practice and cultural materialism.

The increasing faith in neo-liberal market solutions to urban disadvantages, of which city branding is now a key component, merely paper over the cracks of the underlying structural problems facing cities, and fails to improve in any meaningful manner the economic welfare of large numbers of the populace.

(Boland 2013: 269)

In the theatre sector in the city, with the lion's share of the Arts Council of England and Liverpool City Council subsidy going into the, now united, Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse Theatre, per annum and a newly re-built Everyman Theatre building - my conversation with colleague Nick Owen MBE, who ran the locally based Aspire Trust arts and training organisation, echoes a familiar concern amongst some of the arts community in the region:

With the Everyman and Playhouse getting millions of quid a year and twenty eight million to buy a new theatre what's left for anyone else who wants to make theatre in Liverpool or for audiences who aren't interested in those kinds of traditional building-based plays?⁷⁹

(Owen 2013)

But there is also an argument that without ever slashed subsidies being concentrated into the more secure arts organisations, the arts could slip off the state funded agenda completely in cities like Liverpool⁸⁰. So perhaps wisely, the local press remains steadfastly optimistic and supportive of the Liverpool's larger arts organisations at least:

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society, the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse and FACT are among the Merseyside organisations who have secured three year funding from the Arts Council England (ACE)

⁷⁹ Liverpool Everyman Playhouse Arts Council funding: 2012-2013: £1,649,019 2013-2014: £1,689,352 2014-2015: £1,721,833 the total funding from various sources is much greater than this see: Browne, A (2014) 'Arts Council announces funding for Merseyside's creative organisation', *The Liverpool Echo* 1st July 2014. [online] Aspire was forced to wind down through lack of funding in 2015.

⁸⁰ Newcastle City Council has published plans to completely remove funding to all arts organisations in the city, including Northern Stage, Newcastle Theatre Royal and Live Theatre, by 2016.

Due to reductions in its grant from central government, the local authority is faced with having to make cuts of £90 million, around a third of its budget. It has put forward proposals to completely remove funding from all external cultural services, warning that some organisations may not survive the cuts. *The Stage* - November 21, 2012

The figures released this morning show how much ACE will give to organisations over a three year period from 2015-18.

By doing so, the organisations confirm their status as part of the National Portfolio of major arts companies throughout England, which the Arts Council describes as those “reflecting the real quality and excellence of the arts in England”.

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society is to receive the largest investment from ACE, with a proposed total of £6.6 million over three years.

Just months after re-opening following a major refurbishment, Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse secured a proposed total of £4.9 million.⁸¹

(Browne: 2014)

Clearly there is encouragement to continue the development of the arts and performance in the city, and I would like to think that my work has made a positive contribution to this process and the advancements made, but there is still obviously work to be done in terms of both the theatrical representations of Liverpool and in the wider sense to the image it presents to the world:

Elsewhere, particularly in England, there has been a tendency to view Liverpool as being smaller and more peripheral than it actually is, with few appreciating that the city region has some 2.3 million people. It has also been wrongly perceived as a place still locked in decline, (despite GVA growth having been exceptionally high in the last decade), and as a place with high crime, although statistics show it actually has the lowest crime rate of the biggest British cities. European Capital of Culture broke through some of the worst misapprehensions about the city, but many remain.

(Heseltine &

Leahy 2011: 44)

⁸¹ There has been a resurgence of plays about Liverpool especially via the Everyman since Gemma Bodinetz has arrived. Their Made in Liverpool Tag has led to various kinds of conversations about and representations of the city through a variety of new plays . There are an extraordinary number of them from plays like Helen Blakeman’s *The Morris* about a young dance troupe, to Jonathan Larkin’s play *Paradise Bound*, about the Dingle and Capital of Culture through to Jeff Young’s dystopian gaze in his latest play production *Bright Phoenix*. This alongside the rise of a steady stream of Liverpool Royal Court and ‘Scouse comedies’ such as Fred Lawless’s steady stream featuring ‘scouse’ in the title, *‘Little Scouse on the Prairie’*, *‘Scouse Pacific’*, *‘Scouse of the Antarctic’*.

My next major piece about the city is therefore about how Liverpool can present itself both nationally and internationally. The premise is that Liverpool has joined with Manchester and the major cities of northern England to declare independence from the south and the intention is to ask: What role does a city like Liverpool fulfil in a modern European landscape as part of a United Kingdom? Unsurprisingly perhaps the plan is to stage it at the Royal Court, Liverpool as a state of the nation comedy. The play is called, *The Great Divide*.

End Note

I began this thesis with some personal thoughts and some ironic humour in the quoting of Willard's lines from the film Apocalypse Now in relation to what I was taking on with my plays:

Willard: Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one.

(Francis Ford-Coppola, 1979)

Willard's next line is 'When it was over I'd never want another one'. The measuring of cultural impact is a difficult and slippery business to assess. Liverpool has certainly changed for the better in many respects since my return to the city in 1989 and I'd like to think I've played some positive part in that. But the mission is far from over...

Appendix 1

Fall From Grace – Research Notes and Key References

The research consisted of many hours in Liverpool's Central Libraries piecing together the historical background for the show using publications like (1939) *The Influx of the Irish into Liverpool*, *The Liverpoolian* and Raven, Canon, Charles E (1931) *Irish Immigration into Merseyside*, *The Liverpool Review* – Vol VI: 268-271. The British Economic historian and Anglo/Irish academic Frank Neal, author of Neal, F (1990) *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914 - An Aspect of Anglo-Irish History*, Manchester University, **provided** not only key text for the project but became an advisor and met with the creative team on *Fall From Grace* to run discussion groups and seminars. I also met with the University of Liverpool's, Patrick Buckland, then Director of the Institute of Irish Studies and Irish Studies Lecturer Frank Boyce for further advice on later immigration and contemporary Anglo/Irish politics. On a hugely entertaining research visit to colleagues in Belfast, I also met with former Northern Irish Trade Unionist and Politician Paddy Devlin at his home. After some robust debate about politics in Liverpool and Ireland, through which Paddy had squirmed uncomfortably, it turned out that it was not the subject matter that irked him, but the loaded revolver underneath the cushion he was sitting on – 'Just in case'. For me this established a working pattern which I repeat throughout my practice, with the research becoming completely immersive and obsessional. As well as the primary anecdotal and secondary textual and academic sources, I would explore all possible sources of information and

experience: films, television, music, dance, food, drink, visual art, Dave Jacques large canvas painting of *Irish Immigrants Entering Liverpool*, that I came across on a visit to the Walker Art Gallery, for example, eventually became the main backdrop to the touring and Liverpool Playhouse productions. Researching and making the drama became a lifestyle choice.

Appendix 2

Ballad of the Sea – Research Notes and Key References

Again I consulted with academic advisor Frank Neal, who has written extensively on the socio-economic history of the port of Liverpool and its shipping industry. I had interviews with the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) – seaman’s union and interviewed Blue Funnel Line ex-employees and one of the remaining Holt family members, who owned the shipping company, at their monthly reunion afternoon. I also met with Tony Lane, who was a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool and a former merchant seaman who provided invaluable and authoritative advice and his books Lane, T (1986) *Grey Dawn Breaking: Merchant Seafarers of the late Twentieth Century* and (1990) *The Merchant Seaman’s War*, Manchester University. I read a number of seamen’s training manuals, the most famous being, (1926) *The Admiralty Manual of Seamanship*, HMSO, and became conversant with sailing manoeuvres, wave formations and wind and weather patterns at sea, as well as spending hours charting routes and getting to know ports through the Atlas. I read and absorbed widely from obvious literary sources such as Masefield, but also studied contemporary poetry and met with the black poet SuAndi, now OBE and Cultural Director of

Black Arts Alliance. Her experience as the child of a Nigerian sailor who had married a white Liverpool/Irish woman and advice on the form and content on reading the original Ballad was also invaluable and helped me relax with issues of poetic structure and metre:

There is nothing clever about my writing and I write for performance, not the page. I come from a family of talkers. From both sides of the globe my family have retold their lives to each other around coal fires in a converted terrace shop with a crooked window installed by a whole village of Black men, to whom my father never spoke a word because they were Caribbeans. (Another example of the ignorance of those times).

I do not attempt to follow any form, it doesn't interest me. I want my work to sound like a conversation - the exchange of secrets, often some that should not really be spoken. My mother's mouth was filled with the over-the-fence chatter of Liverpool, expanding her expressions with an inherited Irish superstitiousness - we never did anything that might tempt fate against us. So we never wrote anything down, preferring to whisper it on.

(SuAndi. 'Parents'. In *Moving Manchester, Writers' Gallery*. Lancaster University. [online]
<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/writersgallery/content/SuAndi.html>)

Appendix 3

Walltalks – Research Notes and Key References

In 2005 I was commissioned by the city, through the media company Splinter Design, as a lead content writer to research and produce material for an interactive CD-ROM which would be published and disseminated to all schools to support the teaching of History Key Stage 2. Generating the depth of knowledge involved meeting and interviewing leaders from the Indian and Chinese communities and historians such as Dr Ray Costello, author of *Costello, R (2001) Black Liverpool: The Early History of Britain's Oldest Black Community 1730-1918*, Picton Press

and Joe Wolfman, the archivist of the Liverpool Jewish community. I then led the research team's in-depth study of the major ethnic communities in the city. This research also fed directly into two Liverpool John Moores University student productions dramatising Liverpool's history, *City of the Sea* (Everyman Theatre 2005) and *Around the Pool in 800 Years* in partnership with the Liverpool Culture Company (St George's Hall 2007). But more adult themes like the deliberate separation of black G.I.'s from their white UK brides by the US army and contentious content, like the involvement of indigenous black Africans in the slave trade found a home in *Walltalks*.

Appendix 4

The Shankly Show – Research Notes and Key References

Shankly biographer Stephen F Kelly, who had written by far the best documentary book Kelly, S F (1997) *Bill Shankly: It's Much More Important Than That*, Virgin, was one of the advisors on the show. I also asked Stephen Hale, who had taken many football pictures and in particular the most famous image of Shankly, ironically celebrating with Liverpool FC fans on St George's Plateaux after losing the FA Cup final to Arsenal in 1971. Steve also advised on the show and negotiated the use of his pictorial archive in full.



Copyright Steve Hale 1971.

I approached Sue Woodward, who was chair of the Culture Company and then also a Senior Granada TV Executive based in Manchester and suggested that they might allow me to use all of their archive football footage as their contribution to Liverpool's year of culture. Though I later had to pay to clear the rights when the DVD was published, I got over 13 hours of TV footage on Shankly to use in the show for nothing. Then LFC agreed to come on board and their Head PR officer, Brian Hall, who had played under Shankly agreed to help with my research and to promote the show.

Appendix 5 (Footnote 55: 82)

An Audience With Shankly – 08 Project Proposal Liverpool Culture Company

In order to form a just estimation of the character of any particular people, it is absolutely necessary to investigate the Sports and Pastimes most generally prevalent amongst them, Joseph Strutt – *Sports and Pastimes of the people of England* 1801 P: XV, Methuen.

Project description:

One actor, 45 minutes each way – first half in black and white with half time oranges, then second half in colour - possibly set in the infamous boot room at

Anfield – a live television event in a theatre. It's a new piece of interactive multimedia documentary theatre, using digital recording technology and giant projection screens – a cross between a personal audience with Bill Shankly, the legend and the myth – an in depth documentary about Liverpool and Match of the Day, complete with Gary Lineker and Steven Gerrard. There will be interventions and contributions from the audience – there are literally thousands of Shankly stories, all of which add up to the creation of the myth. This production is an exceptional blend of forms; mixing film archive, digital recording and projection with live theatre and outside broadcast television. Never before have a football club, a television company and a production combined with the community in such a way. This production is a new representation of Liverpool's cultural identity on a map of the world drawn by football and popular culture.

It seems important to say that this is not just a play about Bill Shankly - a legend and a myth; but also about an age, a city and its people. Shankly was one of the people who transformed that city and a man who many people came to see as symbolic of that regeneration. It seems appropriate at a time when regeneration is a key word in our vocabulary to look back at the 1960's and 1970's when the city emerged from a dismal post war world of rationing and economic hardship. In January 1959 second division Liverpool were knocked out of the FA Cup by non-League Worcester City, In December of that year, Shankly became Liverpool manager and over the next 15 years he transformed them into one of the top club sides in Europe. But this production goes far beyond football and seeks to recreate the spirit of optimism, pride and hope that Shankly brought to Liverpool and the world. The moment at which football became a defining influence on the self-image of a city and arguably the nation, happened during this period. Shankly gave football a significance beyond itself, an influence which reverberates for better or worse to this day. In the same way that Shankly lit a fire that has never gone out; the Culture Company can set off a spark here that will grow into a worldwide light.

As we write, Liverpool FC are favourites to win the European Cup – to bring this trophy back to Liverpool for the second time in three years and for the sixth time since 1977 would be a sporting achievement to equal any in the football world. The fusion between culture and sport is arguably what has helped Liverpool to stay afloat as a major city during economic decline. Now that 2008 is the current vehicle of regeneration we feel that we should take a look at some of the things that made us what we are. Crucially, we want to look at ordinary people's view of their city, through their most passionate allegiances to their team and its greatest icon, Shankly. (Andrew Sherlock, Footballing Legends LTD. May 2007)

Appendix 6

Epstein The Man Who Made The Beatles – Research Notes and Key References

As soon as the intention to create an Epstein show was announced all sorts of ‘experts’ appeared with their own scripts, in one case from a well-known local radio presenter and apparently frustrated playwright and from people like the owner of the Hard Day’s Night Hotel who demanded my email address so that he could contact me to ‘verify’ my script when it was written. I had a number of strategies to deal with the ‘ownership’ of Epstein. My research methodology was supported by a mass of publication on and around The Beatles and in particular Ray Coleman’s thorough and well written biography of Brian Epstein. As usual, I gained access to primary experts, my father-in-law Geoff Hogarth was the original owner of the reportedly first club to play ‘beat music’ or rock-n-roll as it became, The Iron Door. Geoff had booked the Beatles on several occasions and dealt with Brian Epstein on numerous occasions. Geoff had also introduced me to Joe Flannery, Epstein’s childhood friend and confidante for most of his life who has recently released his own version of his story, Flannery, J (2013) *Standing in the Wings – The Beatles Brian Epstein and Me*, The History Press. I had already met and interviewed Joe along with Liverpool 60s bands and stars like the Swinging Blue Jeans and the Searchers at an Iron Door reunion where I was making a documentary of the event for Geoff, which also became a resource I could draw on. To flesh out the cultural landscape there was also a very good BBC Arena documentary special on Epstein and there are worse thing to do than listen to the Beatles and hunt down archive footage of the 60’s Cavern and Merseybeat scene.

Continuing and further research has also had an impact on this project. New publications on the subject, such as Lewisohn, M (2013) *All These Years - The Beatles Tune In*, Crown Archetype, claiming to be the definitive version of the story is thorough and well-researched as well as being lengthy and pedantically tedious at times in its detail. Though it informs about the possible circumstances rather than providing definite answers to familiar questions like ‘Why did Pete Best leave the band?’ But also anecdotal accounts of what happened to Brian Epstein can help - a colleague, very well informed on all things *Beatles*, told me he had heard that Brian had been found dead in his flat under compromising circumstances. This led me to thinking just how far Epstein’s addiction had escalated as his mental, emotional and physical state had deteriorated and on to a key quote on addictive men from the *Betty Ford Clinic Website*:⁸²

Philosophy of Care for Men in Addiction Treatment - The Betty Ford Center recognizes that there are social and cultural influences that encourage, tolerate and sanction the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by men thus making it difficult for men to understand and develop their individuality. In addition, we understand that there are other external pressures encouraging men to assume a masculine role at the expense of the authentic self. This focus on an externally defined masculine image blocks men from addressing their addiction, impedes their ability to process feelings and interferes with relationship development.

This has fuelled a darker-edged, re-written script for London’s West End, which is less comfortably partisan than the original Liverpool version:

| | |
|-------|---|
| Brian | What, I’m not even good enough for the gutter press now? Was I not drunk and pathetic enough for you? Stupefied with drugs, sexually twisted, depraved and desperate? |
| | (Epstein: 50) |

⁸² See more at: <http://www.bettyfordcenter.org/why-choose-betty-ford-center/state-of-the-art-treatment/philosophy-of-care.php#sthash.VFWaF3D1.dpuf>

Appendix 7

Professional and Teaching Impact

The method of using primary, secondary, anecdotal and complementary research sources runs through both my work as a professional dramatist, teacher, academic and researcher. It is a methodology I have passed on to the students and provide guidance notes on how to research a subject for dramatic representation on undergraduate courses such as Applied Drama.

Through the connection of the local historical research material I have negotiated a close relationship with the Liverpool City Council Culture Department and as Liverpool John Moores University Drama Department we have often collaborated on themed work to chime with the interests of the city. That has included working on the themed culture years leading up to Liverpool Capital of Culture 08⁸³ with large scale shows, *City of The City*, *The Pool of Blood* as part of LJMU's Adapting the Text course and *Around the Pool in 800 Years* which was commissioned for the 2007 re-opening of the St George's Concert Hall by HRH Prince Charles. More recently the city's current concerns with commerce and investment was reflected in the LJMU Drama Department's large scale event which animated The Cunard Building in 2013 and engaged with the business community as part of the Applied Drama course.

The plays themselves have had strong links to the university. Since a cohort of LJMU Drama students was trained into the ensemble of *Fall From Grace* as well as graduates involved as actors and technical staff in the early 1990's, every one of the productions has had

⁸³ See Beatrice Garcia's Study of Cultural Impact for Liverpool Capital of Culture 08
http://www.liv.ac.uk/impacts08/Papers/Creating_an_Impact_-_web.pdf

involvement in the preparation and performance of all the plays. *The Shankly Show* alone employed over 30 graduates and undergraduates. The plays have become a conduit from full-time education into the theatre for ex-students like Chris Tomlinson, who was Assistant Director on *The Shankly Show*, and now runs his own theatre company and directs The Everyman Youth Theatre. I continue to use my professional and practical drama experience to develop links with professional partners and am currently researching and writing *Liverpool – The Musical* a history of the city for professional production by The Royal Court, augmented with an ensemble of Liverpool John Moores University students for summer 2015.

Having developed a reputation for understanding Liverpool's culture, identity and Liverpool-ness, I have been invited to speak and appear on regional and national television and radio to comment on issues like the murder of Ken Bigley for *BBC Radio 4* and to present and contextualise my work. *BBC Radio Merseyside* made several special documentary programmes on the making of *Fall From Grace*, BBC Radio 4's Today programme featured *The Shankly Show* which was also featured on *BBC 1*, *ITV1*, *Sky Sports* and all the major national press. *Epstein – The Man Who Made the Beatles* was named in *The Times* as one of the top five 'must see' shows of 2012.

I was invited to speak and delivered a paper on *The Shankly Show* at the 2012 PSI International Theatre Conference as part of a joint 'Football and Theatre' paper with Dr Ros Merkin of LJMU Drama and John Bennett, of Liverpool Hope University Drama Department. In September 2014 I was invited to speak about my work at St Johns College, Cambridge at their conference, 'Whither Political Theatre?'

Using the experience gained from researching, writing and integrating the plays into my teaching and academic practice, I am currently in the process of creating a new MA in Playwriting for Liverpool John Moores University with playwright Willy Russell and the three major producing theatre companies in the City, The Everyman and Playhouse, The Royal Court Liverpool and The Unity. The new show, *The Great Divide*, is scheduled for spring 2016 at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool.

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