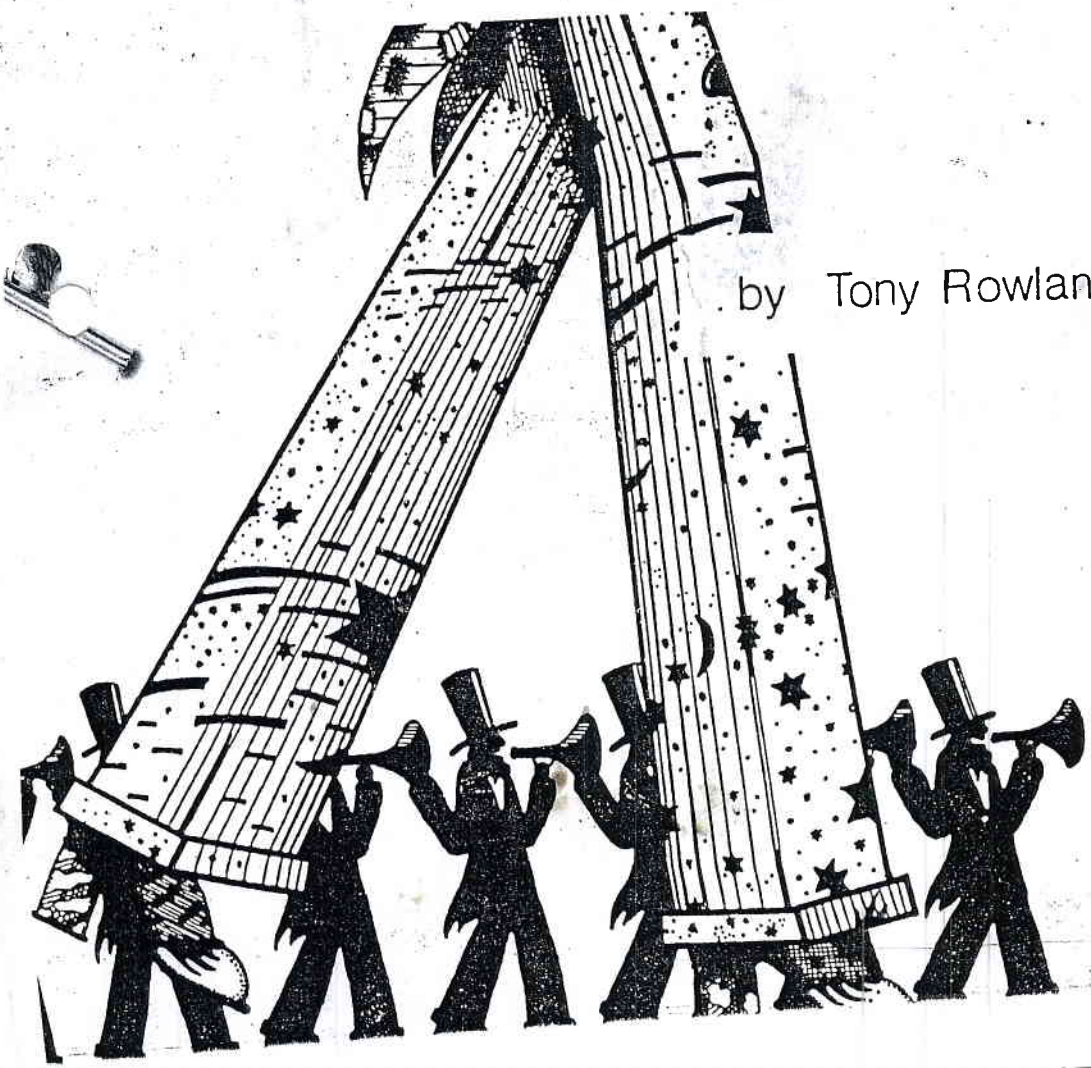
The Bubble Theatre

Castles in the Park

The Bubble Theatre Company 1972 - 84



by Tony Rowlands

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Degree Examinations, 1985.

An acknowledgement.

In researching and writing this first history of The Bubble Theatre Company, I have come to depend on a large number of people. My thanks to them. To all the past and present company members who have generously donated their time and reminiscences. To The Bubble Theatre Company for allowing me to mercilessly probe their archives in the carefully preserved chaos of 'The Roxy', their London base. To Bob Eaton, the present Artistic Director, to Sarah Holmes, the Administrator, and to Val West, the Company Co-ordinator. Above all, my thanks and gratitude to Glen Walford, that woman of grit, to whom this slimmest of volumes is dedicated.

Tony Rowlands. 1984.

'ITINERANT THEATRE COMPANY PLANNED.....'

'Fourteen of the outer London Boroughs each with a population of approximately 250,000 have no profes - sional theatre of their own. Consequently the Greater London Arts Association is proposing that a professional Itinerant Theatre Company should be established specifically for touring the boroughs. It is planned to begin this project in May 1972 to coincide with the Festivals of London.

Earlier this year a working party was set up which includes: Peter James, Associate Director of the Young Vic, James Saunders, Playwright, Ed Mendelsohn, Architect and Designer of the Cockpit Theatre, London, and Jenny Harris, Manager of the Brighton Combination. Glen Walford, freelance director, formerly director of Theatre Vanguard, Sheffield Playhouse, joined the working party as the project's prospective Artistic Director.

It was strongly felt that the Itinerant Theatre should have its own portable environment..... a totally new way of enclosing 'theatre' is bound to attract a greater section of the population because the whole approach will aim at breaking down the present formal structures of box office, booking etc.

It is hoped that the Itinerant Theatre Company will play for a week or more in each Borough in order to involve the entire community in the company's activities. A possible programme could consist of: a main musical extravaganza play; a late - night play; a children's play, plus specially arranged workshops and school playground 'events'; two short revue pieces which could be incorporated into a variety show..... and a rehearsed reading of 'The Cherry Orchard', 'The Wild Duck' or a new play...

It is hoped that the arrival of the company and environment would create the excitement and anticipation of a 1970's type 'circus' coming to town and have something in its repertoire to appeal to everyone'.

The 'Greater London Arts' Magazine.
October 1971.

John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company and Mike Bradwell's Hull Truck were both founded in 1971 as part of a continuing explosion of 'aternative' theatre in Britain. 'In 1968 there were half a dozen 'Fringe' theatre groups: by 1978 there were well over a hundred 'alternative' theatre companies, plus another fifty or more young people's theatre companies. In 1968 there were 34 arts centres (with theatre facilities); by 1978 there were over 140, plus a good 200 small - scale touring venues in London and the regions'(Catherine Itzin, 'Stages in the Revolution). Alternative to, and on the fringes of what? On the one hand, London's West End theatre and its impoverished relation, the national tour. With notable and sometimes bizarre

exceptions, West End listings for 1971 are gloomily familiar. 'Show Boat' plays the Adelphi, 'The Great Waltz' packs them in at Drury Lane; murder buffs are offered 'Suddenly at Home' and 'The Mousetrap', and ribs are tickled by 'The Man Most Likely To' and 'Don't Just Lie There, Say Something'. Storey's 'The Changing Room' at the Globe, and Brook's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych cater for the eclectic thinker with money to burn (West End seats topped £2 when a pint of beer was 12 new pence), and 'The Dirtiest Show in Town' rivals the Soho clip joint for clammy vulgarity. Not that all the plays were bad; Brook's 'Dream' remains a landmark in British theatre history. The atmosphere in the West End was simply elitist and cloying; the National Theatre at the Old Vic was a repository of a peculiarly London culture, and together with its sister company at the Aldwych, and the Royal Opera at Covent Garden, scooped the majority of the arts funding then available. However, via the social and political momentum of the 60's, a new mood had seeped into the bureaucracy; the artistic horizens of people who shunned the maelstrom of respectability which characterised the 'mainstream', were now dotted with small piles of money. Without that slightly guilty re - evaluation, there would have been no 'explosion'. A person with committment and endless stamina, and a proven record in the repertory system (the other hand) had possible options. By and large the regional (repertory) theatre presented in the early 70's a mirror image to the West End. Local funding creates constraints, and the work of John Neville at Nottingham Play - House, Oliver Neville at the Arts Theatre, Ipswich, Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria, Stoke - on - Trent and Giles Havergal at The Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow was continually under pressure from, we might say, Masonic sources. The great warrior - queen of modern British theatre is, of course, Joan Littlewood. Her example, on the road and in Stratford East, remains a guiding principle for would - be merchants of a wayward truth; she was instrumental in the opening of government coffers (under the auspices of the Arts Council) that crucial bit wider. To pay for what? The desire was not particularly innovative. It was to recreate a British theatre tradition whose destruction was begun by James I and continued throughout the Commonwealth and after the Restoration. To give theatre back to the people. To recreate the rumbustuous days of the Shakespearean theatre, or the hilarious magic of the Mystery Plays; to recreate the sense of a whole society living its culture, warts and all, together.

It was in this spirit that the GLAA working party met in 1971, and proposed the idea of an 'Itinerant Theatre Company' for the London Boroughs. Not everyone was amused:

'Mobile Tedium.
Plans by a body called the Greater London Arts Association to establish an 'itinerant theatre' are reported to be getting a cold reception from some of the London borough councils.

This is very good news indeed. It would be even better news if all the borough councils of London, with one loud, concerted voice, told these people to pack themselves into the Round - house, attach a powerful rocket and project themselves into outer space.

> They are asking the boroughs and the Arts Council to give them £40,000 for their venture, the object of which is to mount theatrical performances - mostly, if past experience is anything to go by, of an 'experimental' or Left - propagandist kind - in the streets of London.
>
> At present this boring and irritating stuff is largely confined to theatres. At least people do not have to watch it unless they want to. But if the 'itinerant theatre' gets going, it will soon (such is the growth potential of this fearsome industry) be everywhere. Nobody will be safe from this universal public nuisance'.
>
> The Daily Telegraph.
> December 15th, 1971.

Establishment alarm bells appear to have been ringing! This journalistic curio is proof again, if proof were needed, that the theatre is taken seriously in high places. Fortunately for London (or not, if you read the Telegraph) the 'mobile tedium' was soon to become an actuality. Enter a director.

Glen Walford (the Glen is short for Glennis. She once received a letter from an aspiring actor beginning: 'Dear Mr Walford, you may not remember me, but we met at a party a few weeks ago....') took a degree in English at Bristol before starting her theatre career as an actor/director at the Edinburgh Traverse. She was a founder member of Theatre Vanguard at the Sheffield Playhouse, and directed at the Everyman, Liverpool, and the Playhouse, Nottingham, before being asked to join the Royal Court Theatre in London as an assistant director. It was through William Gaskill, the Court's artistic director, that the GLAA working party asked her to found the 'Itinerant Theatre'. Her appointment was approved by the theatre press, though reservations about the project and GLAA itself remained. This is from 'Time Out', December 24th 1971:

> 'The director they have appointed is an excellent choice, but a few questions arise. Will this new company have preferential treatment over proved, existing work? Will the director have artistic independence under a body which generally seem shit - scared of moving even a finger (GLAA)? Is this a real policy in Greater London, or is it bureaucratic machinery patronising and tampering with theatre - the Eccles' cakewalk? Questions, so far without answers'.

Answers arrived quickly. Glen Walford spent the Summer and Autumn of 1971 trying to generate interest amongst the London borough councils. 'Armed with promises of full bookings for the next season she was able to return to her office and get the Arts Council to match the money promised by these bookings'. The original funding from the Greater London Arts Association, plus money from the Greater London Council and some private backers, added to the new funding enabled the embryo company to approach the first projected budget of £42,000 for the first year.

Glen Walford, founder of The Bubble Theatre.

The first 'portable environment' - the first 'Bubble' - was designed by Polyhedral Developments, and consisted of two interconnecting tents. I quote from the company's introductory brochure: 'It is made from nylon reinforced PVC and is erected over a tubular steel framework with steel sides. Covering an area of 845 square feet it can hold approximately 110 people depending on the staging used. The structure is made up of individual domes joined together but its flexibility makes it possible for the domes to be opened out and used as awnings for open - air or partly protected performances. The whole building can be erected on any flat area - grass, asphalt, or flooring of any kind'. The choice of building was crucial, as was the bright blue and yellow colour scheme. Walford: 'The attraction of the polyhedral itself... proved an advantage. People are intrigued and appreciative of having a 'theatre' brought into the midst of their communities. Enabling them to stroll across the street or park to see the shows has led to a much more relaxed habit of theatre going'.

The Bubble Theatre's first season was close to the working party's projected programme. 'The Blitz Show', the centre

The first Bubble. 'Castles in the Park'.

- piece, was created by the company through research and lengthy improvisation sessions, based on an idea by Frank Hatherley, who had also worked at Sheffield Playhouse. Original music was by Jeremy Barlow, and the show was designed by Constantinos Corovilas. To be asked to join Glen Walford's company was something of an achievement in itself. The actors were chosen for their ability to survive (I do not use the word lightly) an intense rehearsal/ improvisation period, for their capacity for creative inter - reaction, and for peripheral talents, such as playing the guitar or juggling. These first men and women of steel were Mary Cunningham, Graham Gluck, Ray Skipp, Paul Blake, Maggie Wilkinson and Stewart Preston. As well as appearing in the productions, the actors were expected to help the stage-crew, Phil Partridge and Christine Cox, to put up and take down the tent.

'The Blitz Show' opened the first season on May 1st, 1972, in Clapton Square, Hackney. In his Sunday Times review, John Peter neatly evokes the mood of the play, and reflects (apart from The Telegraph) the general critical view:

> 'Tin hats off to the Greater London Arts Association for sponsoring the Blitz Show and The Bubble Theatre Company (director, Glen Walford) who are taking it round the London boroughs. Sitting in their small tent theatre (seating 104, blankets available) you

realise how starved parts of this city must be for live, professional theatre. In King George's Park, Wandsworth, last Thursday the tent was full, and the local audience, all ages from two to seventy, were alternately spellbound and noisily involved. What they saw was a piece of episodic, half - documentary half fictional sing - song, based on an idea by Frank Hatherley, about Londoners in the Blitz; air - raid wardens, postmen, housewives; granddad who'd seen it all in 1918; home - guards, Sir Winston Churchill, and a grim young man who wants to know if it'll be back to the same boring old jobs after the war. Creators of documentary epics should see this little show: for, considering that it has a whiff of agit - prop and a generous sprinkling of old songs from 'There'll always be an England' to 'Room 504' it is neither aggressive nor soppy..... That, the company say, is the way we lived then; brave, generous, scared, self - important, credulous, nerve - racked, stoical and funny. Don't miss this if it comes your way'.

The abundance of theatre companies in 1984 with a community programme makes it difficult to understand how innovative a concept this seemed to be. The Bubble Theatre was from the outset attempting to massage, with irony and good humour, a quietly political idea into the consciousness of the capital. It is worth quoting in full this description of an evening in the Bubble from Time Out in 1972:

'Did you ever spend a night in an air - raid shelter with bombs falling outside hunched up in a blanket with a mug of hot tea? I didn't - but the other night I got a whiff of what it might have been like. It wasn't a theatre - not exactly. It was in a collapsible tent - like structure in the middle of a park in Kilburn. This was the Bubble Theatre Company, London's only 'popular' touring theatre group.

Outside the doors were the local kids waiting to see if there were any seats left, so that they could sneak in without paying 10p. No-one was sending them away. Inside, the hundred or so seats slowly filled with local folk: primly washed pensioners from the old folks home, people who'd been out for a stroll in the park in the afternoon and had come back to see what was happening, local teenagers, a few 'trendies' - and then the kids, who'd already seen their own show earlier in the day and had spent the in - between hours handing out leaflets around their homes. Some had brought back Mum and Dad. What they'd come to see was 'The London Blitz Show', and they loved it.

It begins before you notice it. Efficient looking ladies in 40's overalls pass out tin mugs, and two guitar players in CD uniforms take over from the crackly radio with 'Do you know this one? It's just come out' - and launch into 'We'll Meet Again'. Suddenly a siren sounds.

The show tries to recreate the feel and content of an evening of entertainments laid on by the Home

Guard and the Women's Auxiliary, as it might have been presented in one of the many local shelters that lay beneath London's streets, circa 1940. The Home Guard's brief was to keep civilian morale high and to pass on information about elementary civil defence procedure, like how to deal with an incendiary bomb. The Bubble Theatre Company cleverly preserve these two elements in a balanced 'Music Hall' presentation which hardly ever strays from its period setting. The locale is respected too. As the company move from borough to borough they research the local papers to dig up stories which the residents will remember - if they're old enough - and incorporate these in the show's format.

The script is sound, the atmosphere authentic, the evening's entertainment on the whole is light and gay: even the sadder moments arrive and pass with a deftness which ensures that the general tone of good humour remains unbroken. What counts is that this mixed audience, whose ages ranged literally from 8 to 80, were totally involved in a show which never lost their attention. The Bubble really is presenting 'popular theatre': it's cheap, classless, informal. We don't have a popular theatre in this country - not on any scale. So any venture that pulls people in who wouldn't otherwise set foot inside a theatre can only be good'.

Supporting the 'Blitz Show' in the Bubble's first season were two children's plays, 'Bobby and his Toys' and 'The Frog Prince' under the collective title of 'Double Bubble', and 'Three in a Bubble', a trio of short plays in 'widely varying styles for an adult audience'. The three plays were Roy Kift's 'Villain', 'Their First Evening Alone Together' by Christopher Wilkinson, and 'Ritual for Dolls' by George MacEwen Green. The children's shows were sell - outs from the start. The popularity of 'Three in a Bubble' however, surprised a director who had intended them to be seen by the 'usual theatrical minority'. Glen Walford: 'This is excellent as it means that a rather more sophisticated form of theatre is being seen by this new audience who are being broken in by the 'brasher fare' of 'The Blitz Show'. In the context of an appeal to the arts funding bodies this statement can be seen as less patronising and manipulative than it otherwise might. The fact is that the Bubble's first season was a huge success, both in terms of 'bums on seats' and the company's artistic and social aspirations. The company played to 24,472 people in the Summer of 1972, in 22 Greater London Boroughs, and most of the boroughs had booked the Bubble for the following year.

The company stayed together (illness and television contracts permitting) through the winter of 1972 - 3, touring their adult repertoire to indoor venues such as London's snug Cockpit Theatre, and preparing for the coming Summer.

The popularity of the 1972 reperoire ensured it's continuation. The 'Blitz Show' had captured the popular dreams of populous backwaters which demanded a re-run. The imagination of the company required sustenance too, however, and a major new undertaking, 'The Jack the Ripper Show' was put into early rehearsal. The 1973 repertoire also included a production of

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

THE BUBBLE THEATRE COMES TO TOWN!

With The London Blitz Show
The Double Bubble for Kids
& The Triple-Bill Bubble Show

at 8 pm

THE BLITZ SHOW

Wed. 30 August
Thur. 31 August
Sat. 2 September

THREE IN A BUBBLE

Fri. 1 September

FOR CHILDREN at 2.30 pm

DOUBLE BUBBLE (Suitable for 4—10 year olds)

Wed. 30 August to Sat. 2 September

at KILBURN GRANGE PARK

Messina Avenue NW6

Admission: Evening 10p (OAP's 5p) Children's Shows 2p

Becket's 'Waiting for Godot', an adaptation for the stage of John Lennon's 'In His Own Write', and two new late - night plays to widen the choice for 'Three in a Bubble', Henry Livings' 'Reasons For Flying' and 'Better Days, Better Knights' by Stanley Eveling. The children's shows were retained from 1972, and the company also provided 'Theatre in Action' workshops for schools, which consisted of two sessions demonstrating how a play is rehearsed and put together to form the final product. A certain amount of participation is required from the audience'.

'The Jack the Ripper Show' continued the process successfully explored with 'Blitz'. A distinctive 'Bubble' style was beginning to emerge. Fast, irreverent, schmaltzy, chilling, hilarious; a blend of the rock concert, the music hall, the melodrama and the serious play, the 'Ripper' was once again based on an idea by Frank Hatherley, with music by Jeremy Barlow, and created by the company. All theatrical styles are amalgams of many others. The debt to Brecht and Littlewood is here inescapable; the fragile illusion of the 'mainstream' theatre is exchanged for an exhilarating directness. The technique is exposed; there is no 'suspension of disbelief', and yet the telling of tales remains delicate and moving, as well as being, when necessary, raucous and to the point.

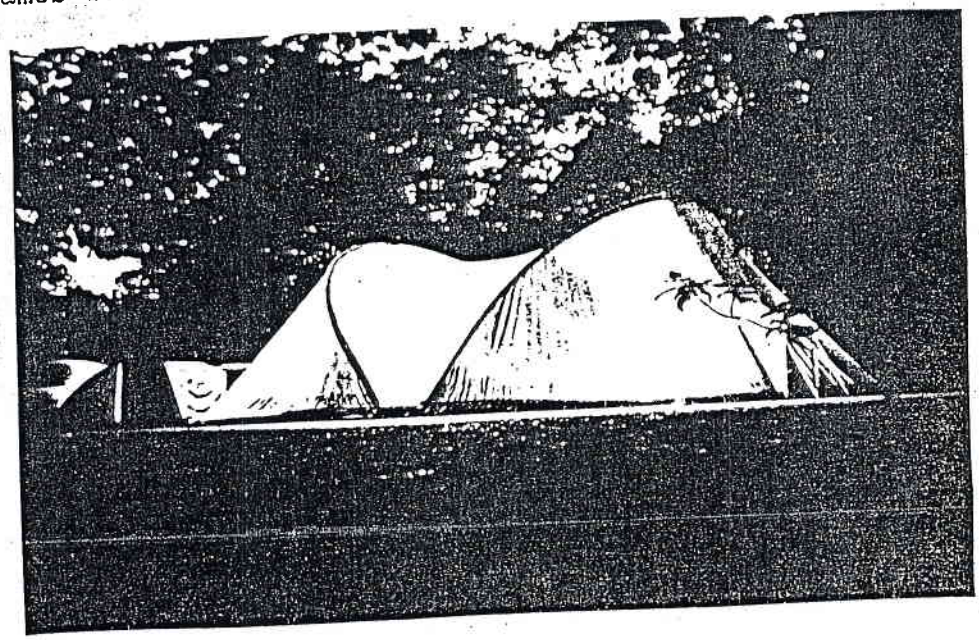
While deliberately not agit - prop, the very nature of the theatre was a political statement in itself. The funding of arts in this country is a minefield, however, and the successful director has to tread carefully. Walford: 'For us, politics are people. I assume our audiences are already prejudiced in all sorts of ways. Our appeal is to all types, and I have no wish to change them. They come for our warmth, compassion, for a good night out'. They do, they do.

The '73 season retained the theatre-in-the-round staging, the exposed lighting rig, and the smell of dying grass. A helpful innovation was the introduction of a licensed bar, while the ever present problems were aging and costly transport, noisy electricity generators, and the structure itself. The Polyhedral was cold, flimsy, and took too long to erect. It also held too few people. The director and the management started to look for a new 'Bubble'.

1973 began a pattern of boroughs which have remained loyal to The Bubble Theatre (or, we might say, whose councillors do not feel threatened by the company's humanist aspirations) up to the present time. These include Camden, Ealing, Hackney, Hammersmith, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Islington, Lewisham, Sutton and Waltham Forest. The interesting thing about these London boroughs is that they do not conform to a class or social scheme drawn up by council sociologists. It is also the case that old class boundaries in the city are penetrated and diffuse. Headstone Manor (the Bubble's usual venue) in Harrow serves an area of insistent suburban respectability. By that I mean that muggings tend to take place within the household, rather than on the streets. Highbury Fields in Islington is bordered by areas of quite dramatic wealth cheek by jowl with areas whose streets are tangible reminders of Thatcherite progress. Boarded up shops, abandoned cars, crumbling houses; all the old movie material. Hackney is (or was then) proudly and unmistakeably London working class. The message, in the biblical sense, is universal; groundlings and nobs can co-exist. The Shakespearean Globe was 'the glory of the (South) Bank': the Bubble Theatre's unique contribution is to be a mobile glory of everywhere.

The establishment of the theatre, and its consequent

increase in subsidy, enabled the company to invest in a new 'portable environment' for the 1974 season. The structure chosen was a PVC 'Tensi Dome', designed and made in Sweden by Barracudaverken, consisting again of two inter - connecting tents. The new 'Bubble' could hold an audience of 200, and the smaller tent housed a dressing room and 'green room' for the actors. A subsidy from the Gulbenkian Foundation provided a large Mercedes van, and the company also received backing from Thames Television.



The New Bubble.

The 1974 acting company was chosen through the now traditional exhaustive (and exhausting) workshop/audition. Ian Giles was appointed associate director, and Michael Napier, known to everyone as 'The Admiral', became the new administrator. New faces at the 'Roxy', the company's base in Kentish Town also included Shane Connaughton as writer in residence, and Phil Boyd ('A bit of a hard case. He had to be') as production manager. A revamped version of 'The Jack the Ripper Show' was retained for the season, and the new repertoire included 'The London Pub Show', 'Under Milk Wood', John Antrobus's play 'An Apple A Day' and two children's plays, 'The Bubble Beano' and 'Kids Cabaret'.

'The London Pub Show' represents, perhaps, the apogee of the early Bubble style. In 1974 the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) was fighting to protect drinking standards, and drinker's environments from the rapacious visions of the brewing conglomerates. Pubs were seen as the vibrant heart of an indig - inous culture; a meeting place for the convivial, but also an anti - materialist emblem. A romanticised notion, perhaps, but the pub as an expression of a local culture was undoubtedly under threat at this time.

The company devoured William Hutt's 'Death of the English Pub', and long improvisation sessions ('Glen would say 'Right, you're in a pub. See what happens'. And we did. For two hours.) gradually produced the shape of the new show. The 'London' was a threatened 'local', serving 'Ruff's Ale' to a collection of

slightly dotty regulars, and hopelessly struggling against the brash intentions of Barry Smart, the thrusting representative of 'Unibeer', the unseen brewing villain. Mr Smart takes possession, but is finally driven off by the ghosts of regulars past. Barlow's lilting melodies enhanced the nostalgic power of the play; 'The London Pub Show' was a huge success.

'The London Pub Show'. 'You're invited, down the London...'

The big yellow tent was by now a familiar landmark in London parks. The average audience in the Bubble rose in 1974 by 69%. The future of the company seemed assured. However, as in 'The London', trouble was brewing.

After three years, Glen Walford felt that the company's image and methods of working were secure enough for her to continue her career as a freelance director. Ian Giles had been spirited away to the prestigious Crucible Theatre in Sheffield; the board of the company therefore decided to advertise the post of Artistic Director. With their (possibly reluctant) approval, Glen embarked

on a course which was, for the theatrical community, a startling innovation. The 1974 actors were to choose the new director. The company, which included Brenda Blethyn, now a West End and television star, had mostly decided to move on. Only Mike Harley, who had created the role of the ageing and irrepressible Lionel Huggett in 'The London Pub Show', was to resurface as a Bubble actor. Nevertheless, they readily agreed to take part in an experiment which was fraught with danger, not least from directors who might resent the fact that 'the boot was on the other foot'. A number of applicants, including David Benedictus and Pedr James duly attended workshop/auditions. The final choice was not unanimous. Peter Coe, the distinguished theatre director, accepted the post of artistic director of The Bubble Theatre Company.

He was immediately at odds with the Bubble ethos. The company had presented an accessible, nostalgic idealisation of London life. There was an innocent, Ealingesque quality in the Bubble's vision; the participants inhabited a world in which kids wore long, grey shorts, wore caps and sucked lollipops, in which dreams could come true through natural justice. That is not to say that the shows lacked bite. Their focus on the 'small man' in a predatory world echoes the 'big and little history' of Brecht. From the outset, Coe was determined to mount productions which reflected a more 'serious' social perspective, and said so. A letter to The Admiral in April 1975 is indicative of the unease felt by GLAA at this development:

> 'We were extremely concerned to read in The Stage (17 April) about Peter Coe's apparant intention to 'Change the face of the Bubble both in style and content'. We hope that this will not mean any change in the Bubble's basic policy.... As I am sure the board realises GLAA is committed to supporting the sort of theatre which the Bubble has so successfully pioneered in the past.....'

However, despite rows and resignations, Peter Coe's season got under way. The company presented four plays in the Summer of 1975: 'Cages', devised by Peter Coe from prison inter - views, 'Storytheatre', a collection of folk myths for children, 'The Great Exhibition', which 'recaptures London life in the... 19th century, a mingled pattern of comedy, colour, squalor and pathos', and 'The Trial of Marie Stopes', a documentary 'based on her trial and her fight to open up the attitudes of the medical profession and ordinary people to birth control'.

The company maintained previous audience percentages throughout 1975, but the board of The Bubble Theatre, which now included Dan Crawford, Jenny Harris, Peter James and Bel Mooney, felt compelled to register dissent in their report on the season.

> 'They (the productions) have all been ostensibly more serious in intention than previous Bubble shows..... The board has taken the overall view that the nature of the productions has led to a lessening of that special contact with local communities that Bubble had nurtured and of our ability to attract a true cross - section of the population. We reaffirm our belief that a major aim.... is to attract into the structure people who would not normally go to the theatre'

In other words, the company was patronising a loyal clientele. Taking the tent to, say, Hackney, created an immediate social frisson; teenagers and young children would surround and take part in the erection of the 'Bubble', balloons would rise in the air; festivities seemed imminent. An alienated culture was about to be celebrated and identified simply by having a theatre in its midst. To come back in the evening and watch the kind of theatre one would now expect to see in the Barbican must have been a bitter anti - climax. Though press reviews of Peter Coe's productions were generally favourable, there were incidents of heckling and violence in the tent. The jollity was threatened. Coe resigned at the end of the season. The board:

> 'The season as a whole, then, has not been satisfying, but it has left (us) with a clearer understanding of what kind of theatre it ought to be and a determination to regain its true nature. And in spite of the failures there are also grounds for optimism; the successful aspects of this season should be retained and combined with the best of the past'.

The view was therefore not anti - progressive. The Bubble Theatre had simply found a formula in its first three years which worked, and which was expected. An evolution was envisaged, rather than a departure from a system which guaranteed success. Moving towards 1976, the board of management embraced that safer process, with certain radical additions:

> 'The Bubble is two things: it is a performing company, and it is the management of a moving theatre building. There is a growing feeling within the company that the cost of operating the mobile building can only be fully justified by putting that building to a lot more use than it can have from one company. We therefore intend to encourage other organisations to use the tent during the season.... for instance magicians, clowns, puppets, music hall, and jazz....and... small dance companies..... The Bubble will become not only an itinerant theatre, but a travelling festival of the performing arts, and so begin to fulfil another of its long term objectives'.

So while some members of the board privately applauded Peter Coe for the standard and the committment of his company's productions, the way ahead was clear. How far the board's wishes would be carried out remained to be seen.

The projected budget for 1976, based on grants from GLAA, the GLC and individual boroughs, was £70,500. £30,500 was for wages, which were apportioned on a sliding scale from the artistic director and the administrator at £60 per week, to the actors at £45 per week, and assistant stage managers at £35 per week. The remainder of the budget was divided between such items as production costs (£3500), the electricity generator (£1550), security (£1580), publicity (£3500) and insurance (£1250).

Once again, the post of artistic director was vacant. Michael Napier, 'The Admiral' had also weighed anchor during the Peter Coe season (for reasons, it would seem, concomitant with the disparity between the 'old' and 'new' guard), and so the post of administrator was also advertised. It might be added that The

Admiral is affectionately remembered as an avuncular and humourous influence on the company.

The problem of recreating the Bubble's original style left the board with very few options. Glen Walford was approached, and eventually coaxed into accepting the post of guest director, with Stewart Trotter sharing that artistic burden. Jon Nicholls became the new administrator. The board's evolutionary aspirations were abandoned to a cautious rediscovery of the company's roots with the improvised 'The Last Theatre Show', 'The Mask of Satan' by Steve Thorn and Paul Wolfson, and the children's play, 'The Witch and the Circus' by Peter John. Michael Maynard, one of the season's new performers, and now a member of the Bubble Theatre board, also presented his one - man entertainment, 'The Oh - One - Show' in the late night slot. The licensed bar, banished by Coe, was also reintroduced, a matter of much delight. Rick Lloyd, of Albany Empire fame, and now a member of the 'Flying Pickets' singing group, took over from Jeremy Barlow as the company's composer. The '76 season played to 71% capacity, and local press coverage echoed the suburban pleasure that was felt on discovering that the Bubble was letting its hair down again.

At the end of the season, Glen Walford bravely committed herself as artistic director of the Bubble Theatre for the next three years, with Howard Gibbins as administrator and Adrian Harris as her associate director. She was not prepared to be the company's emergency repair man, or the absent and mystic repository of the 'Bubble Style'. The company had to develop along the lines laid down in early '76; she decided to withdraw when that development was complete.

1977 was therefore a watershed year for the company. For the Bubble to reconstruct itself artistically season by season also required a continuity of vision and purpose. The company was to present a year round programme of visits to schools, hospitals, old people's homes, pubs and clubs, as well as the Summer season in the tent.

1977 was Jubilee Year. The Bubble added to the festive shenanigans with the improvised 'Silver Jubilee Show', and also succeeded in confounding its more serious critics with a sound production of an English classic, John Gay's 'The Beggar's Opera'. The company had traditionally employed actors who could sing, rather than singers who could act to perform its musical pres - entations. The '77 season was fortunate in having a collection of actors who could sing very well, from Rock to Weill and Opera, and popular 'Band Shows' acted as a kind of herald to the coming in - tent productions. Tina Jones' musical pedigree included six months as Mary Magdelene in 'Jesus Christ Superstar', and John Ashton's rendition of 'Whispering Grass' and Wendy Morgan's pink jeans are recalled, by one who saw them, as being memorable show stoppers. The company also enlarged its programme by presenting productions at Street and Neighbourhood Festivals, and made available 'Variety Acts, a Pub Show, Masters of Ceremonies and the Bubble Band for performances in venues other than the Mobile Theatre Structure'. Other productions in the '77 season included 'The Golden Samurai' by Geoffrey Case, and the improvised 'Stan Bolovan and the Stupid Dragon' for children; the company visited 25 London boroughs in its Summer season, and played to a total audience of 37,317. Quite an improvement!

The structure itself was beginning to show signs of wear. The original cost (£20,000) required several more years of continuous use, so an exterior design, by Free Form Arts Trust

Limited, was erected around and above the tent, partly to disguise the increasing number of patches, and partly to enhance the structure's visual appeal. I quote from Free Form's own brochure:

> 'We have emphasised the architectural qualities of the structure, using the curves of the PVC membrane. The lighting is used structurally to give vitality and life to the theatre's varied locations and is programmed to change constantly. The lighting support arches continue and complement the shape of the main supports identifying the 'Bubble' image, and are erected in one, with the main structure. The 'Barrier Bubbles' allow for people to paint their own images and so contribute to the whole'.

Such an idea might seem optimistic for a society moving into the age of football hooliganism and social unrest. The very nature of the company's work makes the 'Bubble' itself vulnerable to social vagary, and though Free Form's exterior design (however time - consuming it was to put up and take down) gave the tent a visual immediacy, a kind of theatre stockade soon became inevitable. The Bubble Theatre thrives on accessibility. That is a basic tenet of its ethos, but the company's realisation that high spirits (another basic tenet) can generate a rampaging fury dictated, in part, its attitude to security. The age of innocence had drawn to a close; the Bubble Theatre's purpose was inevitably entwined with a need to protect that possibly romantic notion, while the jagged screams of a culture in torment howled in the outer darkness beyond the thin walls of the tent. More importantly, the cultural dilemma of the community theatre is that it demands on the one hand that the street corner hard case is as likely to benefit from seeing a performance, as he is likely to disrupt the enjoyment of the majority. The Bubble Theatre Company claims no magical conversions, and there is no paradox in the fact that they would not wish to. The company attempts an exercise of identification within a particular community by the mere fact of placing themselves within it. It offers its audiences a humourous 'cheeky' and ironic appraisal of their lives and their times. With - out being patronising, and occasionally injecting (as with 'The Beggar's Opera) notions of 'Art', the company presents a version of the world which is based on an idea of human community, and the individual's right, one might say, of truthfully experiencing himself within that community. A few rips in the fabric, and the odd stink - bomb under the seats is, unfortunately, grist to the ever turning mill. The dilemma created by more serious disturbance is sadly resolved in the stockade. The image of 'us in here, and you out there' remains to be broken. The argument continues. The individual's response to his community, and to society as a whole, is the company's area of supreme importance.

'77 moved into '78 without a break. The Winter was punctuated with a series of financial crises culminating in the GLC's withdrawal of their grant to the company of £11,000. Glen Walford introduced the new season with a defensive appeal:

> 'The 1977 season was 'assessed' by a panel of professional theatre experts set up by our major sponsor, the Greater London Arts Association. This report very strongly emphasised the need for the Bubble to continue and to receive a much larger

> injection of funds to enable it to expand and develop its work. Among its findings were...'the only theatre which reaches a comprehensive cross section of the population.... Bubble is capable of providing a vivid and vigorous taste of good popular theatre..... has the accumulated experience, talent, conception and track record of a big city touring company which is probably unique in the world and could become an example to the world....'
> In spite of this acclaim..... it was not until February that we knew we had enough money to continue this professional project into its seventh summer season..... Please do not take us for granted..... We need your support.

The GLC under Horace Cutler was a kind of paternalistic despotism for the age of the motor car. All art was treated with suspicion, unless it involved exclusive cocktail parties, or pictures of Horace in the Evening Standard. Worker's playtime of the Bubble variety (or, indeed, anybody's playtime) was strictly not on, however rational the GLC made their reasons sound in public. The Bubble Theatre replied with a fund raising offensive which netted contributions from the Midland Bank, the Co-op, Pepsi Cola, Mercedes, and North Thames Gas. Together with GLAA's grant of £90,000 for the year, the company was able to proceed. The argument against private funding is well known; it is in itself an implicit censorship. To preserve a theatre which freely reflects a multi - faceted culture, requires money freely given to bona - fide companies. The debate is not new. The Mystery plays were funded by craftsmen and businessmen offering a free and educative entertainment for a common cause; they were not a commercial venture. No doubt the debate will continue.

1978 was the year of the Bubble 'Dream'. Part of the company's evolution made a Shakespeare production inevitable. The Bubble's audience had progressed from losing their feeling of intimidation to being thoroughly relaxed. It requires no leap of the imagination to visualise the relationship between this audience and the Shakespearean audience, particularly in the areas of London where different classes were colliding and entwining.

'A Midsummer Night's Dream', with costumes sponsored by the Midland Bank, played, with 'great panache and no pretension' (Evening Standard) to packed houses throughout the season. The director used improvisation as a back - up rehearsal technique, and the text was cut to make a two hour show. Glen Walford has taken to her bosom the still pioneering rehearsal method of working out the themes of a play long before approaching the actual text. Improvisation on, and around, those themes is the preparatory work; it also underpins the final presentation. The production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' seems to have struck a lost cultural chord in the consciousness of the Bubble's audience. The applause, The Evening Standard said, was heartfelt and prolonged.

Other productions in the 1978 season included a revival of the '77 'Beggar's Opera', 'Kiss Me Quick, or The Last Resort', a seaside extravaganza by Michael Maynard and the company, and two children's plays, 'The Minstrel, the Witch and the Wicked Duke' by Adrian Harris and the company, and 'Gary Foggerty and the Devil's Circus' by John Hartoch and the company, and directed by

John Ashton. The 'Bubble Band Show' continued to divert the musically inclined with its blend of sweated originality and affectionate parody. It is remembered as 'demanding, enveloping, raucous, melodic and funny. They could sing, alright'.

Despite Free Form's 'exterior design', the Bubble's board, under the chairmanship of John Richardson, and the director, were beginning to consider a new and larger structure. The '78 season played to 85% capacity, in spite of 'that well known conditioner of English people's pleasure - the weather', and in some areas large numbers of Londoners had been turned away for lack of space. Also, according to 'The Stage', the structure 'has quite simply had it; the framework is warping, it leaks, and the crew cannot give more time to darning it'. The same article goes on to describe the new look envisaged by the company:

> 'Bubble have commissioned a new design from a New York/London based consultancy called Pentagram, which holds an enviable reputation right across the world. Together with engineers Ove Arup they have come up with plans which have generated much interest in the architectural world.... The new structure is dazzling.... Based on the... pneumatic tyre it consists of three dome shaped tubes which when inflated, form the main rib of a rigid, free standing structure, requiring no more than anchor - age to the ground.
>
> The main ribs give the central space a height of 9M (against the existing 5M) and a floor area of 416 square metres (against the existing 210 square metres). They are supplemented by a series of smaller ribs forming half domes which enclose the open ends of the central space. Areas between ribs are filled by low - pressure air cushions which can be folded up.... allowing addi - tional audience capacity outside the interior.
>
> Two identical smaller structures answer Walford's complaints about.... loos and dressing rooms. These form the foyer/bar, and dressing/green room, and can be attached to the main structure at any point between ribs, allowing for adaptability of overall shape to suit different sites. Seating to a maximum of 350 (against a present 225 capacity) will be flexible arrangement of tables and swivel chairs, which will solve sightline problems and give an intimate, cabaret - stage theatre atmosphere.
>
> Traditional Bubble colours will be retained to produce a spectacular striping effect of a nylon fabric coated with rubber and known as neoprene. Vivid blue domed ribs, interspaced with yellow air cushions, will accentuate the circus/fairground environment, which is a vital part of the Bubble's social/artistic quality..... Bubble's next step is to settle sponsorship from the private sector for this £80,000 project. 'And we are confident of obtaining the money', Walford says.

Alas, this extraordinary project has yet to be realised. The company was, however, able to buy a new 'Tensi - Dome' from Barracudaverken. The crew still carry darning kits.

In her introduction to the 1979 season, Glen Walford spoke optimistically of being 'on the threshold of a Brave New Bubble', but also described the fragility of the company despite the enormity of its success:

> 'Bubble depends very much on you, our audience, to keep it afloat. Our mobility means we cannot belong to any one borough, however we belong a little to you all. We continually suffer from the changing personnel and attitudes of the local councils; often the long standing good relationships with a particular area can be broken by the whim of a single personality. You can help by expressing your support.....'

Trying to fund the projected structure gave Glen Walford less time to direct productions; her artistic contribution in 1979 was to exploit the success of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' by presenting a popular version of another Shakespeare. 'Twelth Night' was set in 'an enigmatic, unclassified, coastal landscape, to explore the timeless mood of the play'. It was designed by Elaine Garrard, with original music by Paul Abrahams. Kevin Robinson directed 'Two Lads from London', his own adaptation of Farquhar's 'Beaux Stratagem, and 'The Goose Girl', an adaptation for children of Grimm's Fairy Tales, with music by Ian Milne, and choreography by Ruth Carney. John Ashton, who had played Macheath and Oberon in the previous season, directed his own play for 'eight to twelve year olds', the 'Hero of the Gods', a sort of cartoon Odyssey for the 'Star Wars' era.

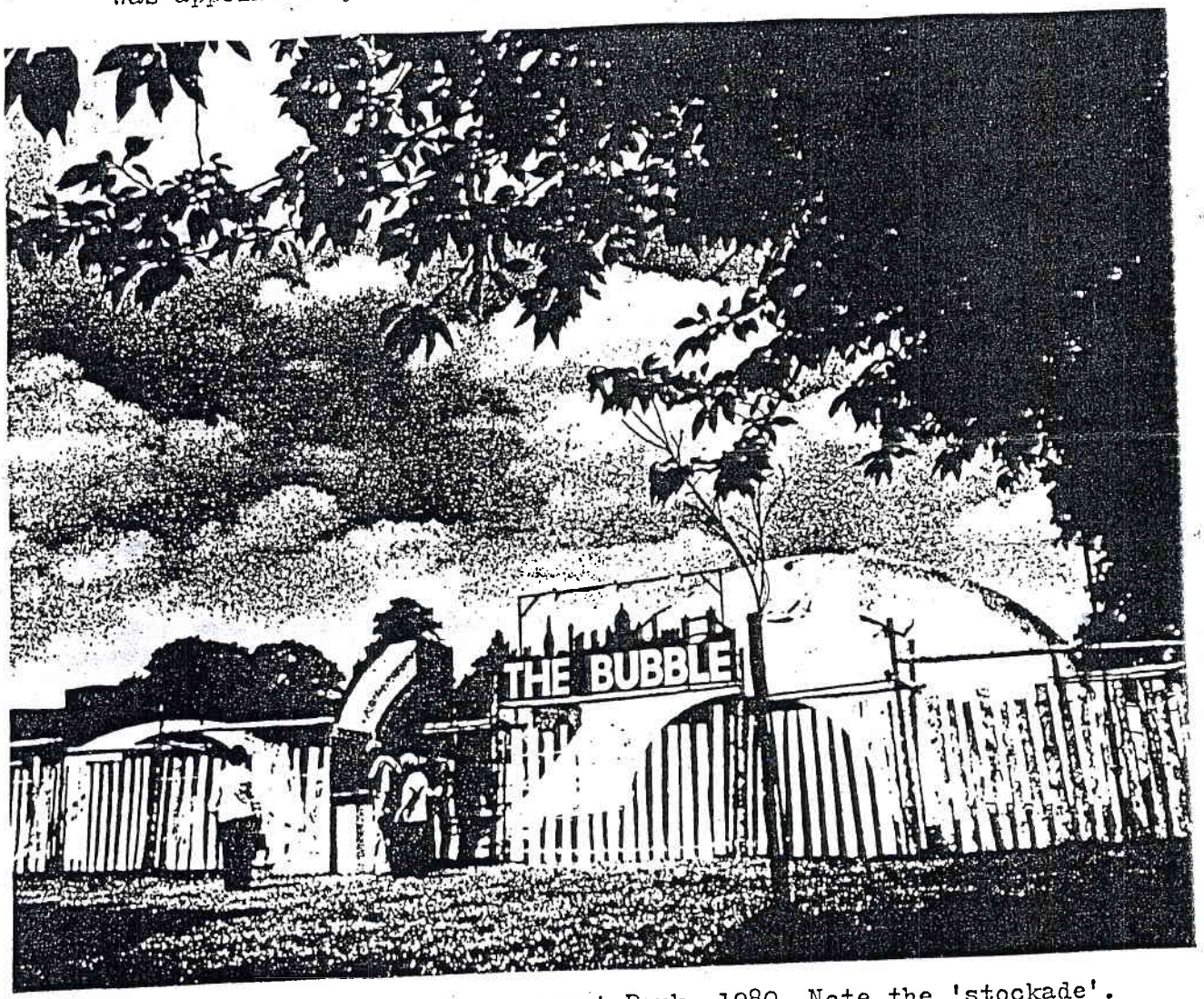
Though production budgets were tiny, (the entire production cost of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' had been £1500) the company set great store by the meticulousness and originality of their designs. This quote from the company's brochure leaves no room to doubt the pedigree of the designers:

> 'David Short, designer for the magical production of 'The Goose Girl' trained at Sadler's Wells Design School before working for the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court. He has also designed for the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre and the Crucible, Sheffield. Elaine Garrard.... studied at the Central School of Art and Design. Claire Lyth (who designed 'Two Lads from London') trained at Sutton College of Art and Bristol University Drama Department, subsequently designing shows for Crewe Theatre, the Theatre Royal Bristol and the Pitlochry Festival Theatre. The best known examples of her work are 'Arturo Ui' at the Dukes Playhouse, Lancaster, and 'Streamers', at The Roundhouse'.

The Bubble Theatre company constantly explodes the myth that community theatres are 'breeding grounds for potential actors, musicians, designers and directors', where they can make mistakes in an informal atmosphere before finding work in the 'real' theatre. Actors are not saints; they move on because companies like the Bubble can rarely afford to pay more than the Equity minimum wage, but there are many who 'bubbled' merrily (and with a committment which surprised themselves) for a season or

so, and who now look back on that time as a personal and theatrical 'Golden Age'. The committment required by the Bubble Theatre is the kind, as Glen Walford says, which 'breaks marr - iages', but 'on a really good night in the Bubble, it's like nowhere else. It's just magic'.

At the end of the 1979 season, the magician herself was exhausted. After three years of fighting for funds, and to maintain the high standards now expected of the company, Glen Walford resigned the artistic directorship. The post was advert - ised in the traditional way, and in November 1979, Bob Carlton was appointed by the board to steer the company into the new decade.



The Bubble, Ravenscourt Park, 1980. Note the 'stockade'.

Bob Carlton studied drama at Hull University before becoming assistant director at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. He was the associate director at the Duke's Playhouse, Lancaster, and immediately prior to joining the Bubble, the associate at the Theatre Royal, York. His long and close involvement with community theatre projects, as well as a large number of successful main - house productions, commended him to the board from the usual large number of applicants.

Taking over a company with 'a following of fans as faithful as the average football team's'(Sunday Times) requires a deft hand. Carlton devised a season for the hot Summer of 1980 which remained determinedly 'Bubblesque', but which also reflected

the new director's personal leanings towards precise production values and wry sophistication. The intimate, brash jollity of the early Bubble style had begun its metamorphosis in the late '70s into what can best be described as a kind of professional matiness, with increasing splashes of pure and magical theatricality thrown (with infinite care) in. Walford's spontaneous approach to the making of a drama is here replaced with an orchestration and a choreography.

The 1980 season consisted of five plays. 'A Knight at the Bubble', by Rony Robinson, with music by Paul Abrahams, was an adaptation of Beaumont's 'The Knight of the Burning Pestle'; 'an uproarious romp in true Bubble style, with plenty of songs and lots of jokes and surprises'. Paul Allen's 'Big Shot - The Rise and Rise of Catgut Leone' was a play for 7 to 11 year olds, featuring favourite hoodlums from gangland America, while 'Mario's Magnificent Marvels', by Philip Whitchurch, was a whodunnit for 4 to 7 year olds, in which Freda the charlady sets out to solve the riddle of Mario the conjuror's missing diamonds. The 'results are amazing'. Ray Herman's 'They Shoot Horses Don't They?' with music and lyrics by Paul Abrahams and Leon Rosselson, was an adaptation of Horace McCoy's depression novel, dealing with the marathon dance competitions which were characteristic of the era. A high point of the season for many of the audience, the production captured the yearning, bleak exhaustion of 'The Aspirin Age', compounded by an original score which accentuated the moving and hopeless dreams of the dancing participants. On a sweaty night in Hammersmith, the play's relentless, down - beat message held an audience who seemed to lean to the stage with an affinity for the lost legions of the American Dream. 'Three Days and a Porridge', written and performed by Philip Whitchurch, completed the season. A 'day in the life of an institutionalised person, Tom Copperthwaite, who at 47 has spent 23 years of his life in British prisons'. The performance ends with 'Tom' answering questions from the audience, and talking about his life in and outside. 1980 was a shorter season than usual, playing to only nine boroughs; the company received extra sponsorship that year from Truman Breweries.

1981 was a year of innovation; Brecht was performed in the Bubble, and the company toured the twin bastions of matinee theatre, Brighton and Chichester. Michael Billington reviewed the Brecht/Weill gangster musical 'Happy End' in Hammersmith:

> 'The Bubble.... has certainly come a long way since I first saw it in 1972: the audience now sits round the stage at white cafe tables drinking and (if they're really depraved) smoking. It is exactly the kind of relaxed cabaret atmosphere Brecht himself recommended and it suits perfectly well.... Bob Carlton's production, played around an ornate, multi - coloured tower that serves both for Bill's Beer Hall and the Sally Ally HQ, is also fast, funny, and makes deft use of animation to depict a Chicago heist. It's a lovely show.....'

Michael Coveney, in the Financial Times represents the alternative view of a 'Bubbled Brecht':

> 'Bubble Theatre's tenth summer season.... started in predictable fashion on Tuesday night. The

> stage was awash with awful Bubble jollity while customers under the canvas shut their ears to the pounding electricity generator outside, and got down to the serious business of scraping the mud off their socks. Chicago gangsters, thinly dis - guised as actors of nudging joviality, winked among the serried ranks of beer glasses, muttering such doleful imprecations as 'Have a nice day' or 'Don't move, the show's about to start'.... The company falls straight into the trap of schmaltzy self indulgence..... Anne Miles... and Willie Gaminara.... at least supply a little acting muscle ..... (but) the slapdash knees - up ambience... is both a betrayal of Brecht, and, I would wager, anathema to the working class audience.

This petulant display of artistic distaste might be expected to have been echoed in Chichester. This is from the Chichester Observer:

> 'The plot to this cartoon like presentation was closely related in technique to the expressionist movement. Light hearted and amusing in places it might have been, but the typical Brecht political theme runs right through the show with a violent shudder..... The evening was packed with the unconventional. The colourful, if slightly eccentric cast mingled with the audience before and during the performance. It was the first time the Bubble had performed in a traditional theatre - they are more accustomed to plying their avant garde wares in a tent pitched in a London park - but gradually they won over the audience. The show... thundered along at a raw, brash, but never unprofessional pace....'

The review is minutely, but unmistakably patronising. Of course. The jesters have come to be entertaining, but one might glean from the final warmth of the response an optimistic inference. Even from the hazy comfort of Chichester's bourgeois Utopia, the lulled townsfolk may, indeed, look out at the struggles of a tormented world for justice, and very occasionally show 'an affirming flame'.

'Happy End' was complemented by Ken Hill's adaptation of Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', with original music by Paul Abrahams. Roger Mortimer's review in the Finchley local press also wittily describes the company's mobile venue up against the weather:

> 'One of the most pleasant aspects of a night at The Bubble Theatre is that you can take your drink from the bar tent into the adjacent auditorium. So, after aquaplaning through the rain down to Hammersmith.... I repaired instantly to the bar to equip myself. Clutching the glass, I gingerly trod the pathway of soggy duckboards to the great yellow theatre tent, where, miraculously, all was dry and cosy.... The sea of squelch which lapped the tent had not dampened

> the spirits of the audience - or those of the company, as became clear when the show started.
>
> 'Dracula' is described as a musical horror show for all the family. It proved enormously entertaining, with just that happy blend of originality and informality - as well as highly disciplined ensemble acting - that one has come to expect from this remarkable touring company. Ken Hill's script retains all the horror of the Bram Stoker novel, with a delightfully humourous element that is all Mr Hill's own. Add this to some splendidly enter - taining musical numbers by Paul Abrahams, the spine - chilling lighting effects by Andy Hutcheson, and the sheer theatrical flair of director Philip Whitchurch, and you have a really top class evening's entertainment presented in the Bubble's own inimitable style. Don't miss it....'

The '81 children's shows were 'The Crown and the Crimson Dagger', a celebration of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, and 'Tales of the Mountain and the Moon', a collection of Japenese stories of 'magic and adventure'. The programme was completed by 'The Great Swarfega', an 'illustrious escapologist (who) could invade your locality at any moment. His stunts are attracting a fanatical following it seems...'

Carlton faced the perennial frustration of having to disband the company 'just as it starts working at optimum pitch'. The yearly search for the right performers (1500 actors applied for ten jobs in 1981) was time consuming and painful, and at the end of the '81 season the company hoped to keep together during the Winter by putting itself 'on the open market'. This commendable scheme foundered, like the projected new Bubble, for lack of funds. The company went their several ways, with only Clive Corner and John Ashby re - emerging in '82.

Also reappearing in Bob Carlton's '82 season were the writers Rony Robinson and William Shakespeare. The Bubble Theatre's production of 'The Taming of the Shrew' was descibed in 'Time Out' as 'spring - heeled.... a ready made cure for anyone who's sick of Shakespeare...' The Banstead Herald loved it:

> 'The Taming of the Shrew throws a laser beam of modernity into every part of the plot and every character with hilarious and suitably violent results.... The company's acting is so good, their versatility (and even their musicianship) so wide, the characters so well realised, the plot so coherently unfolded, that this fantastic presentation is compulsive viewing'.

Rony Robinson's contribution to the season was a children's play called 'The (Continuing) Story of Bungalow Bill'. We must turn this time to The Banstead Advertiser for a critique:

> 'My favourites in the production are definitely the dusty birds who live on the flat roof of the family's council flat - and a certain visitor who drops in at the end of the play.... It is all very

> good fun, with enough spectacle, wit and general lightheartedness about to keep young people of differing ages amused.'

Two shows made the '82 season one of the Bubble Theatre's most successful. 'The Hubble Bubble Band Show' was about as loose an adaptation of Macbeth as could be imagined. 'Come see a man with murder lose his soul, a tale of sex and drugs and rock and roll' shrieked the posters. 'Tis a tale stolen from Shakespeare and put into a 1980's setting of rock 'n roll. Dramatis Personae include the music scene's wierdest manager, Duke Box, and his rock star, Terry King (leader of the Coronets) who is laid low by the suspiciously scheming Eric Glamis, Later Thane Cawdor, and his side kick, Queenie, an exotic back up singer'. The show was 'decorated by classics from the world of popular music 1958 - 1980', and included the songs of Presley, the Shangri 'Las, Ritchie Valens and the Beatles. The term 'smash hit' litters the reviews of 'The Hubble Bubble Band Show', and the Bubble was besieged 'by mighty audiences beating the grass to its door'. Whether the celebration of 'New Wave' sophistication, with its pounding rhythm, satisfied the company's backers, remained to be seen.

'Glitterballs', Stephen Wyatt's musical expedition into the world of East End crime, was Bob Carlton's second big success in '82. This is from 'City Limits':

> 'The Bubble Theatre Company have formed their tent into the 'smartest nightclub in town' in order to explore this musical story of the Kray brothers, 'stars' of the underworld, and the slickest double act in London. Through the ingenious device of a series of cabaret turns performed by the twins and their acquaintances, we watch the development of Ronnie and Reggie from birth to crime via teenage delinquency and corruption in the army. It's a pity that rather than exploding myths about the Krays, it tends to glorify their villainy, deodorising them into inoffensive comic 'artistes'. Still, a fine production, and a virtuoso performance from Michael Mears as both twins makes for a faintly subversive, sometimes illuminating, and frequently enjoyable evening'.

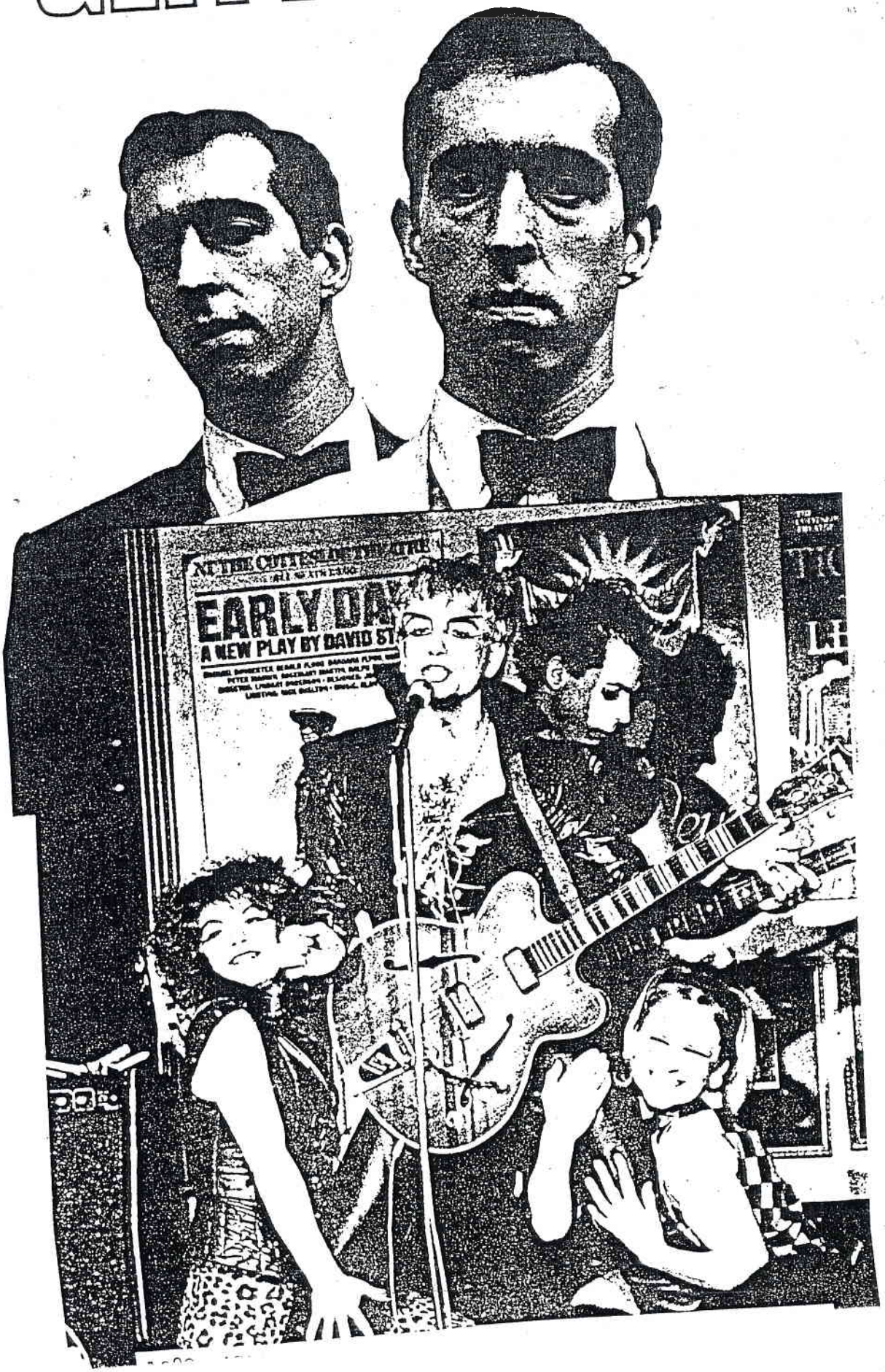
'Time Out' thought the show 'deftly combin(ed) menace and madcap humour; two hours of heady enjoyment', and the 'Times Educational Supplement', commenting on the season as a whole, insisted that 'The Bubble Theatre must be one of the best reasons for staying in London during the summer'. The company managed to find several winter dates during '82 - '83, but, such is the nature of the acting profession, still had to reconstitute itself in the new year.

It is interesting to note the kind of actor that the Bubble fostered and employed. Kate Edgar's biography from the '82 programme is by no means unusual:

> 'This is Kate's third season at the Bubble. Kate trained at Hull University where she gained a B.A. in Music and Drama. She has worked with Bag and Baggage, Pentabus, Theatre

The BUBBLE THEATRE

GLITTERBALLS



Kit, and has been Musical Director for the last two pantomimes at Watford Palace Theatre, returning to the Bubble each summer. As well as being a wizz on the keyboards, Kate also plays piano accordian, flute, clarinet, alto and tenor sax, bass guitar, juggles and blows fire'.

1983 was the year the Bubble nearly burst. With Stephen Wyatt, now the company's writer in residence, Bob Carlton produced a programme which capitalised on the previous summer's success. Carlton's Bubble eschewed the idealisation of innocence; having helped to recreate a community identity simply by establishing themselves, it might be said that the company were now exploring and suggesting new parameters for that identity. It might also be said that rock shows put bums on seats, but the arguments which characterised the '83 season were not founded on such (theatrical) cynicism.

Five new shows made up the season. Music dominated. Wyatt wrote 'The Rogue's Progress', celebrating the 'dastardly exploits' of Jonathan Wild, 'a double dealing 18th century villain, the first king of London's underworld and the man credited with introducing the term 'double cross' into the language', and 'Pick Yourself Up' an adaptation of Moliere's 'The Doctor in Spite of Himself' translated into 1930's New York and 'incorporating many of the well loved numbers of the era'. Tracey Frazer from The Stage saw 'The Rogue's Progress' on Tooting Bec Common:

'...This enjoyable production certainly does bubble along leaving hardly a moment to catch your breath.

Here is the story of Jonathan Wild - 18th century thief-taker general, based on Henry Fielding's novel - as told by the Fourth Year of Parkside school with a number of interruptions from their history teacher. It is a cheerful and light hearted subject and the cast of nine create an uproarious atmosphere of fun...'

Joe Darlison, who had written the 'Hubble Bubble Band Show', turned his attention in 1983 to Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' and came up with 'Return to the Forbidden Planet'. Hugh David's review in the Times Educational Supplement also takes a look at Hereward K's 'Hell Can Be Heaven', the company's late - night entertainment:

'Anyone living near one of London's larger parks or commons will know all about the Bubble Theatre. Taking the dog out for a walk, coming home from work, they can hardly miss the lorries, the generator, the jeeps and the trailers parked around the tented encampment in which the touring fringe company perform. This year, there seem to be more than ever; hardly surprising, perhaps, in view of the increasing technical sophistication of the troupe. Now their tent theatre is equipped with video and their five new shows all feature pounding electric rock music.

'Return to the Forbidden Planet'. Billed

GLC assisted

BUBBLE THEATRE

Financially assisted by Greater London Arts Association

91 Kingsford Street London NW5 (01-485 3420)

PRESENTS 5 GREAT NEW SHOWS!

RETURN TO THE

FORBIDDEN PLANET

THE

ROGUE'S PROGRESS

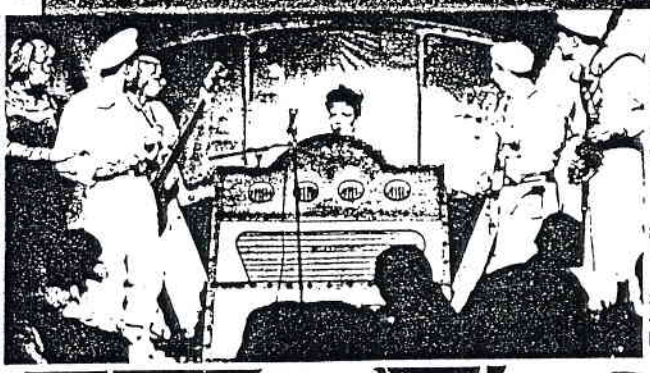
UNDER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

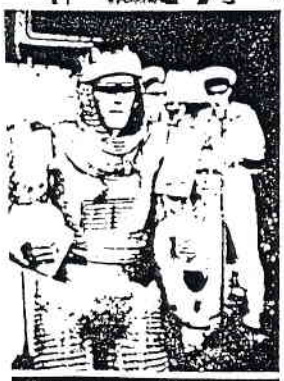
PICK YOURSELF UP

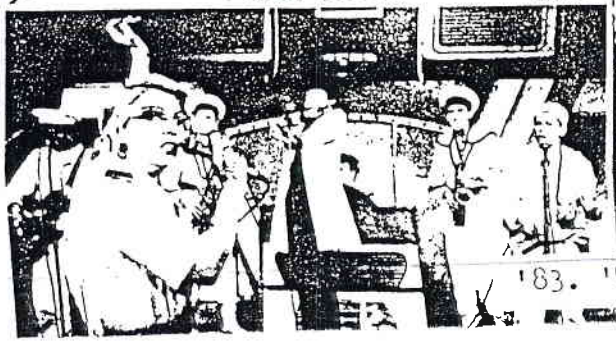
HELL

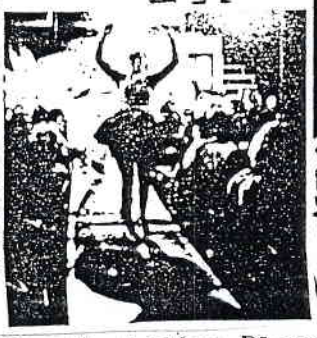
OR

HEAVEN









'83. 'The Forbidden Planet'.

as 'Shakespeare's forgotten rock 'n'roll masterpiece', Joe Darlison's play achieves the impossible by successfully fusing the plot of 'The Tempest' with the conventions of the 1950's sci-fi B-movie - and then serving up the whole outrageous confection with lashings of fifties' and sixties' music.

Magnus Pike, no less, has videotaped the prologue and epilogue. A dozen Shakespearean texts are pillaged for lines, and author and company obviously revel in the memory of younger days doubly misspent at the juke-box and the cinema. No need to go any more deeply into their manic plot than to mention that Prospero is a mad scientist living in exile on the planet Dillyria (which lies in an outer galaxy somewhere between delerium and Illyria) and that despite the attentions of a Starship cook, Miranda eventually falls for the pipe-smokin', bass-playin' Captain Tempest.

Much the same anarchic humour pervades Bubble's late-night show 'Hell Can Be Heaven', except that there it's not the complete works but the songs of Elvis Presley which are quarried for lines. The play (with an effective and appropriate pastiche score) follows the singer's number one fan down to the underworld, where he believes the King will help him answer the questions in a New Musical Express competition....'

The fifth show in the '83 season was John Curry's 'Under the Hills and Far Away', a children's musical play for 4 to 7 year olds. 'The tale follows the adventures of Pip and the Mayor in their search for the children who left Hamlyn with the Pied Piper, told with music and magic, puppets and fun'.

Soon after the end of the season, which had repeated '82's box office success, the Greater London Arts Association announced that they would be withdrawing the Bubble Theatre's annual grant of £152,000 for the forthcoming year. Rumour had abounded during the season itself. This is from City Limit's review of 'Forbidden Planet':

'I haven't had so much fun for ages. Bubble's outrageously irreverent approach to the 'Tempest' via Starship Enterprise and 50's and 60's pop music proved irresistible to the many kids in the audience (who ranged from 3 years old to 79). Ironic and disturbing, therefore, that GLAA's axe is poised over such an obviously successful community tour de force....'

From the inception of the company, the Greater London Arts Association, apart from being the major backers of the project, had been jealous guardians (quite rightly, in many people's view) of what they saw as the Bubble's particular purpose as a community theatre. Carlton appeared to be diverging from what they regarded as the correct political dimension of the theatre's programme. Glen Walford's nostalgic 'cheekiness' (with a persuasive moral) had perfectly fitted that conception, and

the popularity of the early improvised plays enhanced the company's image. The Association's alarm at Peter Coe's 'serious' theatrical aspirations is echoed in their view of Carlton's developing programme, though in this case their objection is based on the company's penchant for electronic extravaganzas with little or no community framework. The fact is that in 1984 the 'London Pub Show' would probably be regarded (by the same audiences which had applauded it in '74) as a political curiosity; the 'idealisation of innocence' might now be seen as preaching sermons on a lost Elysium. The company itself was also in the business of filling the theatre; the 'shock of the new' was inevitable. The overwhelming response by audiences in the Bubble's huge catchment area was proof that the company's programme was expanding agreeably.

Carlton and the company decided to fight the very real threat of closure. Their response to GLAA's 'political' objections was to the point: 'The wide ranging and large area covered in the Bubble tour necessitates a broad based and balanced programme of work during the summer season, which does not address itself to specific minority groups or specific social or political problems. The company has been on a standstill budget of £152,000 for the last three years but has continued to expand, extending its work to involvement in local festivals, visiting community centres and old age pensioners clubs with a specially designed 'outreach show', taking children's shows to summer playschemes and adventure playgrounds and playing host to local groups and celebrity concerts'.

An appeal was launched which resulted in hundreds of letters, from audiences, critics and borough officers being sent to GLAA. The climax of the appeal is described in City Limits:

> 'The threatened axing by GLAA of the Bubble Theatre grant.... took a new turn this week. Last Thursday evening members of the Bubble gathered outside the GLAA offices to treat supporters, bemused commuters, and the executive committee of GLAA (who were meeting inside) to a selection of songs and wisecracks from their repertoire. The reason for this impromptu performance, explained Bubble member Val West, 'is that some of the people making the decisions have never seen us perform, so we thought it would be a good idea to do a show for them'. Unfortunately, such was the exuberance of the performance that a representative of GLAA asked for a twenty five minute silence, saying that much as the eminent committee memebers were enjoying the music, they were having difficulty in making themselves heard. A gentle but optimistic rendering of 'Good Vibrations' ended the set. This optimism was at least partly justified by the decision of the committee to set up a working party (with four nominees from the committee and four from the Bubble) to review the artistic policy of the company and to look at the possibility of multiple funding..... Meanwhile, the company are left somewhat in limbo, though as Sarah Holmes, the company administrator points out, 'at least we have now got a dialogue going with GLAA'.

The dialogue went on into the winter. The reprieve

came in late November, and was conditional. GLAA's original proposals, together with the '76 Bubble board's long term projections, were now to be implemented in terms of the Association's own appraisal of the capital's shifting cultural landscape. The Bubble would now place itself more firmly into a smaller number of communities, reflecting the social and ethnic needs of those communities, and their multi-cultural nature. In return, GLAA would restore its grant of £152,000. At the same time, the GLC, in agreement with those same conditions, offered to fund the company to the tune of £100,000 per year. This meant that the company had to find just £50,000 from four London boroughs who would then host the Bubble at different times throughout the year, in an atmosphere of cultural discussion and celebration.

By the time an agreement had been reached, Bob Carlton had resigned. Every director knows that the holder of the purse is, sooner or later, the arbiter of form. The irony in this case is that Carlton had, perhaps, been too successful. The humour of his productions was also sometimes of that anarchic kind which irritates the powerful; it is in fact an elitist tendency to suppose that 'poking fun' at classic drama is a peculiarly middle class divertissement, and, in any case, Carlton had proved the supposition wrong. The man had patiently navigated the Bubble across uncharted cultural oceans; innovation in production had worked, the tent was crammed, and the company's serene progress towards a safe theatrical harbour had seemed assured. Some would say 'that's show business', and of course it is. Sad and frustrating, all the same.

Once again, the company was deluged with letters of application for the post of artistic director. Before the year was over, Bob Eaton, who had been the associate director of the Contact Theatre in Manchester, and the artistic director of the famous Everyman Theatre in Liverpool, was asked to take over. The new man was therefore faced with the gargantuan task of compiling a programme and strategy which excited his backers, the London boroughs and the Bubble audience, many of whom were eagerly awaiting 'Return to the Forbidden Planet II'.

The '84 programme drew on 'twelve years of excellence in performance, taking theatre literally beyond the fringe', while 'flexibility is central to the Bubble's strategy, and local input influences the shape of all our projects'. I quote from the director's report for the year:

> 'February '84 saw the beginning of a major expansion of the London Bubble's activities and an important development of its policy. The major concern... was to increase the relevance of the company's work to the areas in which the Bubble operates... to strive for more in-depth contact with the communities.... thus reducing the 'hit-and-run' nature of the work. It was decided that four boroughs would be found to take on the Bubble for a year round programme. This would include a three week extended tent visit in the summer and a programme of long term and short term workshops, one-off events and performances throughout the rest of the year....'

Three boroughs took up the offer. These were Lewisham, Hounslow and Greenwich/Bexley. A total company of over thirty, including a 'Community Team' started a series of long term work-

shops, including ' a black women's drama group and a pensioner's reminiscence project'. The summer season itself presented a programme of short term workshops, including 'music workshops, body popping workshops, a video programme with young unemployed people, drama workshops on racism, and circus projects for the under nines', as well as a number of major productions in the tent. These were Brecht's 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle', 'In the Groove', a 'comic and moving wartime story... featuring the songs and dances of the 1940's' by Gillian Richmond, David Holman's 'Frankie's Friends', a children's play for 'tough kids on roller skates', and 'Duckin'n Divin', an 'all singing all dancing musical about Mrs Thatcher's Britain' by Tunde Ikoli and Bob Eaton, with music by Paddy Cunneen. Eaton:

> 'It is the policy of the Bubble to create a multi-racial company which reflects the multi-cultural nature of Greater London....'

This epic design for the company's future has still to prove itself, though after only one season, 'Greenwich and Hounslow have already indicated their intention to engage (the company) for a further year's work'. Bob Eaton's final comment for this brief history of the Bubble Theatre Company echoes the committments and the dreams of all its years:

> 'Both shows and workshops will aim to develop ways in which a touring theatre company can relate in depth to the areas in which it works. Their common theme will be an attempt to enlarge people's vision of their own possibilities as individuals and as communities, to encourage people to have confidence in their own abilities and creativity, and to attempt to challenge narrow thinking and prejudice wherever possible. The keynotes of the Bubble's policy are challenge, open-mindedness, access and opportunity'.

Glen Walford is now the Artistic Director of The Everyman Theatre, Liverpool. Bob Carlton is a successful freelance writer and director, and Peter Coe remains distinguished. The Bubble Theatre's extraordinary durability in an often hostile world is proof of both its artistic excellence, and the fulfillment of its social aspirations. The Bubble Theatre is an honest attempt at communion. The arrival of the tent stirs emotions of hope and curiosity. As Shane Connaughton, a long serving writer, director, and member of the Theatre's board of management says, 'The Bubble is in the business of liberating the human spirit'. The present company is continuing the process of plucking castles from the clouds and determinedly placing them in the park.

Tony Rowlands. 1984.

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