

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CORNISH THEATRE

Julian Munday charts the rise of performance as we now know it

Invented by those clever Greek chaps, graced by the mastery of Shakespeare and refined on the creaky boards of the West End, theatre is the thousand-faced reflector of life. And in more recent times, Cornwall has landed a leading role in theatre's epic journey.

In 1971, Oliver Foot and John Paul Cook returned to Cornwall to realise an ambition to set up a theatre company. Oliver left a London drama school as best actor and John Paul the Jacques Le Coq mime School in Paris as a top mime artist.

Accompanying them were a total of six performers from their respective schools and a group of local musicians. After

borrowing some money they managed to buy a farm near St Keyne, Liskeard and set to work rehearsing in Oliver Foot's barn.

Footsbarn Theatre Company was born.

Working with stories inspired by Cornish myths and legends, they developed a unique, edgy style of raw, rough theatre fused together with mime, dance, music, comedy, mask-work and Commedia dell'arte. *Giant* was one of their first shows and - accompanied by a colourful fanfare of performance and music - they walked a giant puppet through Cornwall enlivening the places they passed. Each year they travelled up the north coast of Cornwall and Devon and back down the south coast performing one to two shows daily.

"The aim from the beginning, our absolute aim, was to get out to the people, so we performed in streets, pubs and car parks," says Paddy Haytor, who joined in 1973. "The fact that you're driving down those wiggly roads, or performing on the cliffs at St Ives or with your feet sinking in the sand at Polzeath - of course those things affect you, but the biggest influence was a desire to communicate with people who had never seen theatre."

United by their ideals, Footsbarn became a way of life and Cornwall the ideal place to support and feed their progress. As well as



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rehearsing or performing every day they lived as a community in the farmhouse or in caravans around the farm - growing their own vegetables, buying brown rice in bulk and breeding chickens and goats.

"We did 20 years without a wage structure and that's a fact," says Paddy. "We'd come down the stairs in the morning, look inside the food cupboard and there'd be one egg with somebody's name on it, but that was the way it was. We did it because we loved it." Around 1984, powered by a desire to travel the world and hardly obliged to stay by a workable level of funding, Footsbarn left Cornwall and would remain nomadic until finding a new home in France in 1989.

The sheer power and magic of their work had already inspired others to pick up the baton. Bill Scott recalls watching a "full of life Footsbarn playing to a diverse audience as the most powerful and exciting experience," and formed Miracle Theatre Company in 1979. One year later, similarly roused, Mike Sheppard created Kneehigh Theatre Company.

Both companies resourced what they had, innovating and driving to create new performance spaces around Cornwall: forests, fields and cliff tops, abandoned mines, barns and quarries. Like Footsbarn, they worked with the unique natural architecture of Cornwall: the rocky steps down to the Minack and the smell of a wet forest all part of the theatre experience.

Kneehigh started with *The Adventures of Knawful Awful* - a comedy about the world's worst stuntman. Performed in a barn in Mevagissey to an audience sitting on straw bales, it was brought to an abrupt end when the police marched away Mike Sheppard for not having a performance licence. However, Kneehigh found their way looking deep within folk tales garnered from home and abroad to organically grow and refine an exciting, anarchic signature of witty, enchanting and even nightmarish storytelling.

Miracle Theatre's heartbeat was powered by laughter. Sourcing a



(Left) *Beauty & the Beast From Mars* - Miracle Theatre's latest show

Fun and frolics from Rogue Theatre



Miracle Theatre busking in Covent Garden in 1984



Kneehigh perform at Tregeagle ion 1984



A promotional shot for Rogue Theatre, which explores fantasy and human nature

variety of stories from local myths, world stories and classical literature, they invented script-based comedic, and sometimes surreal, adaptations. After overcoming red tape, they pioneered the first theatre to be shown at Trevisick Gardens with their adaptation of the *Origo Mundi*: the first of a trilogy of plays known as the *Cornish Ordinalia*. To digress momentarily into the medieval realm, the *Cornish Ordinalia* is a trilogy of plays written in the Cornish language some 650 years ago by the monks at Penryn's ecclesiastical Glasney College. Created in order to take the teachings of the Bible out to the local people, they were performed at parish fetes in amphitheatres known as Plen-an-Gwary (playing places) of which just two - from an estimated thirty - survive in St Just and Perranzabuloe. So touring theatre had been around in Cornwall for a long time. But it was in the mid-1980s that things started happening on the contemporary scene.

Cornwall wasn't exactly teeming with conventional theatre spaces, though regular spots included the Acorn in Penzance, Falmouth's Poly, the Elephant Fair at Port Eliot and the stunning cliff top splendour of the Minack Theatre. A radical theatre course also started to emerge at the Hub Theatre School just outside St Austell. Created by an ex-member of Footsbarn and sourcing influences from local theatre companies, it taught an unconventional but brilliant syllabus, which produced many of the current Cornish-based performers.

In 1984, Bill Scott received a small inheritance and after investing it all into a yellow tent, Miracle Theatre set off in a yellow 'Cliff Richard' holiday bus to tour an adaptation of *Macbeth* as far north as Colchester. Bill recounts, "The tent became quite a landmark and drew people in, but it was a very long and hard tour and we only just kept it together." Future tours saw Miracle focus their ambi-

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tions within Cornwall and the South West. Committing to employing local actors and crew and going on to successfully tour over 25 rib-ticking shows at an average of 100 venues a year, including *The Time Machine*, *Waiting for Godot* and six Shakespeare adaptations. The most recent, *Romeo and Juliet*, attracted record-breaking total audience figures of 11,000.

Kneehigh, with plays like *Tristan and Yseult*, *Cymbeline* and *The Red Shoes* set their sights further afield. As well as performing at Cornish venues like Restormel Castle and the Eden Project they embarked on national and global tours to places including South America, China, Australia and the Middle East, also becoming regulars at the National Theatre. In 2007/08 they aired 215 shows in four different countries and one night had three shows playing simultaneously in Columbia, on Broadway and at the West End. This year saw the launch of the Asylum: a magnificent marquee, which houses 1000 spectators and will enable Kneehigh Theatre to reach new audiences.

Clocking even more miles, the idiosyncratic Footsbarn have transcended the barriers of language with a unique brand of magical, musical theatre, travelling around the world 10 times and performing on six continents with a multi-national group of performers. They remain dedicated to going 'out' to the people and were the first ever performers to play in the Aboriginal reserves in Australia. "Playing to one of the oldest and wisest races on the planet," recalls Paddy, "to people who have no sense of revenge or possession ... moments like that are very powerful."

Reaching the heights of the aforementioned companies demands commitment and passion and a little support helps too. In 1984, seemingly a *Brave New World* for Cornish theatre, the formerly barren funding landscape started to bloom with the Arts Council's

decision to set up the Arts Centre Trust (ACT) to support the arts in Cornwall. Funded by Cornwall County Council, Carrick District Council and South West Arts, ACT would be instrumental in the Hall for Cornwall campaign. Throughout the 1990s ACT concentrated on supporting contemporary theatre and dance at National Trust properties, of which a typical year saw around 100 performances. Further funding at the start of the Millennium got the Carn to Cove rural touring scheme off the ground in Cornwall: a scheme similar to others around the UK, enabling rural communities to promote events in their local venues and theatre companies to book tours.

Even with funding, companies must summon superhuman levels of commitment, often having to work long hours for free. Kyla Goodey — an ex-performer with both Kneehigh and Miracle and now running her own theatre company — says "We're glorified removals staff. One day we're struggling to fit an over-sized set into a tiny village hall the next we're loading up vans in the pouring rain until 1am."

But, this is the nature of Cornwall. It demands commitment and in return offers inspiration and some of the finest training an actor can receive. The land tests and tries the players — demanding they prove their worth to carry Cornwall's name to the far corners of the world. Working outside in the elements the actors must be on their feet at all times and respond and adapt to what is thrown at them. There is an unspoken camaraderie with the Cornish audiences too: a hardy lot who will walk through muddy fields and sit in all weathers at venues like the Minack and Carn Marth quarry and expect the show to go on and the actors to work through whatever rain-soaked, gale-force face nature reveals.

The Cornish land seemingly invigorates them with an unflinching



Trifle Gathering recently toured Cornwall with their Charity Shop Cabaret