

The Toynbee Theatre



The newly opened Toynbee Theatre, 1938. Courtesy of Artsadmin

In its earliest days, Toynbee Hall hosted 'classes in singing, violin, drawing, and musical drill'.¹ This fitted the ethos of Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, Toynbee Hall's founders, who strove to increase people's enjoyment of life, not merely alleviate their economic struggles.

'Men must have knowledge and means which develop taste, draw out reverence and aid the powers of expression. These are as important as those which increase wages'²

Although the arts were ever present at Toynbee Hall, their organisation took a major step in 1938 with the opening of Toynbee Theatre. It boasted 400 seats, avant-garde art décor, and a 50-foot-wide stage. This remarkable space became a hub for artistic expression in the East End despite

¹ H. Barnett, *Canon Barnett, His Life, Work, And Friends*, vol. 1 [London: John Murray, 1921], 326

² *Ibid.*, 336

the Second World War. Toynbee Hall's warden James 'Jimmy' Mallon recognised theatre offered valuable escapism from war. He allowed stage hands and performers to shelter at Toynbee Hall to keep the theatre running, even entertaining them with literature during the Blitz. Against the odds, Toynbee Theatre thrived during the Blitz, providing enjoyment and expression for its players; education and escapism for its audience. It gained positive press attention and was frequented by actors, musicians, and painters at a time when many artistic institutions closed.

Toynbee Theatre also hosted wartime ballet classes, taught by enigmatic Russian Theodore 'Maestro' Wassilieff and dancer Alice Lascelles. Their popular classes ran four days a week. Central European refugees danced in national costumes alongside beleaguered East Enders. For both, Toynbee Theatre was a 'curative influence' for their fractured society. Simultaneously, the amateur players put on open-air shows across East London. This wonderful stage for artistic expression was initially unprofitable. However, audiences and profits slowly grew. The success of these innovative ventures demonstrated the public appetite for escapism and



camaraderie, which the arts offered, was insatiable. This was a high-point for the theatre, the social importance of which took a new dimension in the context of the Blitz.

'Mallon had just finished Shakespeare's *King John*, when his final worlds were drowned by the noise of a plane. A bomb had exploded.' Volunteer quoted *Mallon Papers*

After the war, Toynbee Theatre continued to innovate; 'Before the war', Mallon lamented, 'this country had not gone far in providing theatre for children'.³ He was inspired by professional Soviet actors who specialised in children's theatre. Toynbee Theatre was creative and avant-garde in many of its productions and values, thus, looking to experimental Soviet drama was logical. Toynbee Theatre staged high-quality and popular productions for children which no adults could attend alone.

Toynbee Hall's budget was stretched by post-war reconstruction costs, forcing children's theatre to rely on government grants. Such was the initial success of the theatre's child productions, other theatres – notably the Old Vic – had also introduced them and competition for funding was fierce. Nevertheless, Toynbee Theatre had played a key role in professionalizing children's theatre.

Funding issues peaked in 1959. Toynbee Hall had a dearth of social workers, thus planned a new library, study, and meeting spaces to train new ones. The theatre's budget was cut to fund it.⁴ The players had to leave the theatre. They dubbed this the 'Toynbee Tragedy'. For five years the theatre stood empty. Its players and students became nomadic, traipsing around various East End school halls and theatres.

Head of the Drama School Bertha Myers refused to accept this. A Rhodesian actress who previously founded a drama school in Salisbury and worked at London's Old Vic Theatre, she studied at the Toynbee Drama School from 1955 to 1958

³ *Annual Report 1938-1946* [Toynbee Hall Archive], 22-24

⁴ 'New Shock for evening class students at Toynbee Hall', *East London Advertiser*, [London: 4th September 1959]

before joining the Toynbee Players. To save her theatre, Myers utilised the 'Toynbeeian' alumni network.

'There are so many Toynbeeians flitting around that its becoming increasingly difficult to watch TV without seeing a familiar face'⁵

Due the theatre's earlier success, it had launched the careers of many TV and West End stars. Even with some of their influence behind her, it still took Myers five years to convince London County Council to purchase the theatre. Nevertheless, it re-opened in 1964 as the 'Curtain Theatre' with a sell-out production of Oscar Wilde's *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. Although the purgatory of the players seemed over, they felt disconnected from Toynbee Hall.

'We don't belong... we can't call ourselves the Toynbee Hall Players if there isn't any Toynbee Hall'⁶

They ratified this emotional divorce by renaming themselves the 'Curtain Players' shortly after the theatre reopened. Nevertheless, the Curtain Theatre staged satire which subverted stereotypes about the working class. However, the players' membership stagnated throughout the 1970s, and the theatre could only muster one production per year as of 1971. Its last recorded play closed in 1976 and come 1984, London City Council did not renew its lease. The theatre was declining, and Thatcherite policies had stripped local authority budgets. As in 1959, the theatre's financiers deemed it dispensable.

A company named Artsadmin replaced the City Council and renamed the theatre 'Toynbee Studios'. Toynbee's historic drawing room was also leased to Artsadmin and transformed into a bar & cafe. Artsadmin has faithfully preserved Toynbee Theatre's experimental history; Toynbee Studios remains a 'unique centre for the development and presentation of new work'.⁷

⁵ B. Myers, 'The Toynbee Players', *Smoke Signals* [April 1965, London: Toynbee Hall Archive]

⁶ Drama student Denise O'Shea, quoted Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.artsadmin.co.uk/toynbee-studios>

