

Well, it's good of you all to come along to hear - in a nutshell, so to speak - my life.

I started off as Margaret Greenwood, a North Yorkshire lass born in 1922, living just outside Middlesbrough, where gaining a gold medal at ballroom dancing was the most illustrious achievement in my life so far.

Then came the day in 1946 - the day my life began to change totally.

My father said, 'There's all kinds of rumours going around, about a group of very strange actors staying down road at Ormesby Hall - magic rituals in the woods – witches!' So I cycled down to Ormesby Hall where someone directed me to the actors rehearsing in the stables. As I entered I vividly remember a gravelly female voice saying, 'David - whoever is coming in, show her how to do the sound FX, then put on your wig and go onstage.'

David showed me how to put the needle on the chalk marks on the disc to get the particular sound. Terrifying! But I did it. I looked at the lady, a strange woman but interesting, fascinating, and she said 'You can stay - stay around.'. So I stayed around and gradually was there every day.

The strange woman was Joan Littlewood, director of Theatre Workshop, formed before World War 2 to take theatre to theatre-less communities around the north of England – visual, physical, political, accessible theatre for the people.

I attended weekend summer schools learning what Joan considered the basics of acting, after which I joined the company. All day long we rehearsed with Joan, and at night we'd sit around the great fire in the kitchen singing folk songs and songs from the Spanish Civil War against the Fascists. I knew nothing about politics but I sang lustily with everyone else.

Joan had a particular way of working with her actors, using improvisation - rare in

those days - to immerse yourself in your character, to take risks. I was very self-conscious at first and worked tirelessly on my voice production.

For seven years we toured to towns and villages by train, the sets, props and costumes in the guards' van. During this time, I married John Bury, company member and set designer, also known as Camel from all the scenery he 'humped' around. The company suffered extreme financial hardship, from sometimes small audiences, often disbanding until Joan earned enough money from radio broadcasts etc., to get us going again. In 1948 we secured a tour of Eastern Europe - the first theatre company to go behind the Iron Curtain, playing to full theatres where they gave us standing ovations, climbing onto the stage to shake our hands - they UNDERSTOOD our work. Arriving back in Britain nobody cared, there was nothing in the papers about our tour, no kudos, nothing.

In 1953 Joan rented the Theatre Royal, a rundown theatre in Stratford East, which she and the company transformed into a thriving theatre of the people, and Joan came to be seen as one of the most interesting and successful directors in London. Throughout this time the theatre existed on a shoestring without any assistance from the Arts Council. 'The Arts Council is interested in something which Miss Littlewood isn't – Art.'

In 1961 Joan left the Theatre Royal, disillusioned with the political and social backstabbing. I was devastated and thought, 'I've got to do something about this! I've got to carry on Joan's work.' And so, encouraged by John, my husband, I started a drama school - East 15 Acting School - and called on Theatre Workshop comrades to help me pass on Joan's working methods and philosophy - a collaborative theatre.

Next year will be the school's 60th birthday.

Maggie Bury

Denise Deegan