

# Joan Maud Littlewood

## IN MEMORY

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Joan Maud Littlewood (1914 -2002) born in London, is one of the seminal figures in British theatre from the 1950s through to the 1970s. Her autobiography, *Joan's Book*, gives a real insight into her career, from scholarship girl at RADA, to working for the BBC in Manchester, to her radical theatre work with Ewan MacColl with whom she set up the Theatre of Action in 1934. Littlewood went on to found Theatre Workshop in one of the most underprivileged parts of London in 1953. From here she was to direct and develop the work of writers and actors who went on to become important figures in theatre, television and film.

Littlewood was outspoken, both politically and professionally - she was consistently antagonistic towards the theatre establishment and despised the class origins of those who decided where financial subsidy in the arts should be placed. Littlewood was a socialist who truly believed in the idea of community. For her, theatre was something to which everyone should have access, not just a privileged few.

Littlewood's socialism and visionary attitude to making theatre is reflected in the kinds of influences brought to her work: Stanislavski, Brecht, Russian political street theatres of the 1920s, Meyerhold, Appia, Laban and the Commedia dell'Arte. Her original company trained daily and collaboratively researched their productions, pay and responsibility were shared out - true ensemble work, unheard of in the British theatre of the day. The fact that she was a woman bears heavily on the documentation and reception of her work. Directing from a theoretical and collaborative basis, as a woman - using training, improvisation, dance and so on - was still considered rather revolutionary. Her early productions included classics such as *Twelfth Night* and *Volpone*, and it is ironically those for which she is more famous, such as *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963), which created the fragmentation of her ensemble company - transfers into the commercial theatres of the West End meant that the company was permanently being split.

Joan Littlewood was feisty and fearless but she was also a visionary, challenging and changing the definition of good practice and empowering actors and writers alike. Strangely there is no really thorough analysis of her work, which details her approach to directing, her work with rough scripts or with actor training. Maybe this is because of the nature of her approach - collective, politically orientated - or perhaps it is because she was a woman who was prolific, eclectic and notoriously shunned the limelight.

Maggie B. Gale