

*Reunion Weekend 2007: Alan Plater lecture, 30 June 2007*

### **SING A SONG OF TYNESIDE**

Last year I experienced a small shock to the system, professionally speaking. I was being interviewed at Stratford-on-Avon by Professor Carol Rutter on the subject of Comedy – sharing billing, for the only time in my life, with the artists from Viz and with Ken Dodd. This was all part of a Festival of Comedy being held at the Memorial Theatre. You are probably aware that Comedy is the new rock and roll and has been for about twenty years – and if you're not aware of it, well, you heard it here first.

Carol opened her interview by saying: 'Alan, you have written thirty-eight stage plays,' and I said, 'That can't be true, I'm sure I haven't written that many.' She said it must be true, because it was on a website. Parenthetically it occurs to me that these days Moses would have found the commandments on a website, without the bother of schlepping all the way up to the mountain top.

But when we got home we checked and sure enough, there's a man in Yorkshire who's assembled the credits of various writers whose work he admires and there they were – all thirty-eight plays, together with the dates and places of their first performances, including some plays and performances I would rather forget. There was one omission and one very tiny error but otherwise he'd got the whole lot spot on and it was very impressive.

Though a bit casual about my own writing career, I'm not a total stranger to anorack syndrome. I can recite the Sunderland team that won the cup in 1937 – something I learned from my grandfather in his backyard in Jarrow – I can list the members of the legendary 1940 Duke Ellington Band – and I'm pretty good on old music-hall artists, including many who died or retired long before I was born – which means there are no comebacks when I re-cycle their jokes – and you'd be surprised a) how often I do that and b) how often they get a big laugh which is, naturally, why I keep on doing it. So much for early twentieth century history. By comparison, what happened last month is a bit of a blur and as far as contemporary popular culture is concerned, I wouldn't know a Kaiser Chief from an Arctic Monkey if one of them walked in the door this minute.

The good thing about having written thirty-eight stage plays – well, it's now thirty-nine and a half but that's a technicality – is that I've overtaken Shakespeare. To be sure, he died in his early fifties, but he did nothing for television or radio – a great pity. I'd love to have seen one of Will's cop shows. But I'll get back to Shakespeare later.

The pertinent statistic about these forty plays – pertinent in terms of this talk – is that nine of them are set in the North-East and they were all premiered here in Newcastle. The saga began in 1968 with *Close the Coalhouse Door* – and like many of the best things that have happened in my life and work, it wasn't my idea. Older people might remember 1968. Revolution was in the air in France and was generally expected to reach this country within weeks. The meek were about to inherit the earth. And the top three songs in the charts were, in reverse order, Tom Jones' *Delilah*, Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World* and, at number one, Cliff Richard's *Congratulations*. In the event the revolution didn't take place and maybe the musical taste of the nation explains why.

While all this was going on a director called Bill Hays did a production of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* at the old Jesmond Playhouse. Afterwards he had a conversation with Sid Chaplin and they agreed it was a pity that there had never been a play or a show with the same anarchic energy set in the North-East. I had worked with Bill in television in the early years of *Z Cars* and he called me with a summons to a meeting in Sid's front room – the three of us plus Alex Glasgow. We were all four natives of County Durham. Sid was from Shildon, Alex from Gateshead, Bill from Wingate and I was born in Jarrow. My family worked in ship-building and the other three were from mining stock – indeed, Sid served his time as a blacksmith down the pit. As it happens my Dad served his time as a blacksmith in the shipyard and one of my most treasured memories is of a family get-together when he and Sid talked for hours about the shades and nuances of the blacksmith trade.

I mention this because whichever way you look at it, we were from a different background from that of Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan and the West End theatre tradition on which – as theatre-goers – we had been weaned in the 1950s. That, in its turn, provokes another memory.

Most of the plays I'd seen at the old Salberg Rep at the New Theatre in Hull seemed pretty much identical. The set was a drawing-room in the Home Counties and a number of people then walked on, in various permutations, and talked to each in brittle sentences. A big moment would be when somebody walked in on the wrong couple kissing each other – though they invariably turned out to be the right couple in the end because it was all a misunderstanding, you see. Gritty social realism took the form of the daughter of the house walking in, just before the end of Act One, with the line: 'Mummy, I'm going to have a baby.' Gasps all round and the curtain would fall.

The memory is of the night I saw *Look Back in Anger* at the New. Whether it was a touring production or part of the Rep season I can't remember. I can't even remember whether the production was any good, but the play set my imagination on fire. Afterwards I met my old English teacher on the theatre steps.

'Wasn't that wonderful?' I said and he replied, 'I'm afraid I found it all rather adolescent.' The crucial point is this: I knew he was wrong but I could see why he felt the way he did. These days I feel much the same when on BBC2's *Late Review* I'm told this next item is the most important piece of music created in the last decade and we're presented with yet another guitar band complete with incomprehensible lyrics and a simple-minded harmonic structure that would have been regarded as a cliché by Cole Porter or George Gershwin.

All these anecdotes are actually a serious attempt to define the tempo of the times in the 50s and 60s – the zeitgeist, as I've been taught to call it. There was a generation of writers, the first to benefit from a free state education to advanced level, courtesy the 1945 Labour government – and Sid Chaplin was one of our pathfinders – who, in simple terms, were trying to tell stories that had something to do with their parents' generation, none of whom had ever been within a hundred miles of a drawing room in the Home Counties.

Well, *Coalhouse Door* duly opened, played to rave notices and packed houses and was eventually seen in the West End where it played to rave notices and rows of empty seats. London, it seemed, wasn't ready for a history play about a pit village in South-West Durham, even if it was gift-wrapped with Alex Glasgow's songs and some good knockabout vaudeville sequences. Our West End producer, surprising as it

may seem, was Brian Rix but less of a surprise when you know Brian had been a Bevin Boy during the war.

The consolation prize was winning the Critics' Award for the Best Musical of the Year, something I'd forgotten until I came across an old press cutting from Stage. That was it. There wasn't an award as such – no lunch at the Savoy or dinner at the Dorchester, no celebrity presenters or tear-stained acceptance speeches - just a brief announcement in Stage. They were healthier times. I realised the awards industry had gone totally out of control the year BAFTA gave an award for the best animal in a commercial and it was won by a squirrel.

Another odd, but revealing, anecdote. My sister, who was a teacher before she retired, called round one day in the 70s with a GCSE English paper. The GCSE was a slightly lesser form of GCE for what we were still allowed to call Secondary Modern kids. The examination paper included a passage from *Coalhouse Door* and some comprehension questions including the classic: 'What were the author's intentions in this scene?' Hand on heart, I couldn't have answered the question beyond, maybe, 'The quest for a couple of cheap laughs.'

When I looked more closely at the examination paper I discovered that the other writers the kids were expected to know about and had, presumably, been studying, included Sid Chaplin, Stan Barstow and Barry Hines – our gang, no less. Obviously we weren't yet ready for the major league of grammar school GCE alongside Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, but, comrades, we were on our way. It's also worth noting that *A Kestrel for a Knave*, the Barry Hines novel that later became the movie *Kes*, probably started more young people reading than any other book of the period. In much the same way Roger McGough, Brian Patten and the Liverpool school persuaded thousands of kids that poetry wasn't for wimps. These are phenomena that worry the hell out of the Oxbridge academics and London-based media commentators who seek to define the cultural parameters of our nation.

After *Coalhouse* there was a sixteen year gap in my Tyneside work, though it was nothing personal. It was the result of a car accident. I had started my professional career in the theatre in Stoke-on-Trent – mainly because that was the first theatre to show any interest in my work – and while driving back to Hull one day in 1965 the car skidded off the road and had a brief but firm encounter with a dry stone wall somewhere in Derbyshire. I was unharmed but the incident provoked a simple idea. If

we had a producing theatre in Hull I could do my plays there and that would minimise the risk of colliding with dry stone walls, of which there were very few in Hull.

A bunch of us formed a committee and five years later we opened what is now the Hull Truck Theatre in an old church hall round the back of the bus station. At the time it was also handy for the city morgue and the abattoir so we calculated we might pick up an interesting variety of passing trade. From 1970 onwards I wrote a series of plays trying, in various ways, to define the curious essence of the city of Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Thirty seven years later the theatre is to get a new, purpose-made building and it's likely that my forty-first play will be yet another attempt to define the curious essence of Hull and the East Riding. I don't give up easily.

The consequence was a big gap between *Coalhouse Door* and *A Foot on the Earth*, my next Tyneside play in 1984. In the intervening period a group of actors had launched the Live Theatre company and started doing remarkable work, much of it focused on the plays of the great Cecil Taylor. The then director of Live, Teddy Kiendl, had worked in Hull on a Christmas show – actually one of the worst Christmas shows anyone had ever seen though it wasn't Teddy's fault – but he figured we might find a little joint redemption up here on Tyneside.

*A Foot on the Earth* was actually a cheat, in that the story was inspired by a real event in Hull, or strictly speaking, a non-event. In a bleak expanse of undeveloped land close to the city centre – a combination of bomb damage and slum clearance – there stood a barber's shop. It was a shabby, single storey building and it survived, in the middle of a flat plain of urban nothingness, for years. To this day I have no idea what the reasons were. It seemed like more fun to invent some. What I invented was a barber who is refusing to move out and is thereby blocking the town planners' dreams of building a new Jerusalem. He was the good guy. The planners were the bad guys. In the end he loses. That was the play.

It almost worked and bits of it were, as they say in Hull, quite good. But it didn't truly cohere partly, I suspect, because the big ideas – about planning and redevelopment and historical roots – dragged the characters around instead of vice versa.

Not for the first time it was Sid Chaplin who put my head back on the lines, though it happened a year after his death. Sid died in 1986 and the following year Live Theatre, now under the artistic direction of Max Roberts, invited me to dramatise

some of Sid's short stories under the overall title, *In Blackberry Time*, as a tribute and a celebration. In the event I shared the task with Sid's son, Michael. We dramatised three stories each and Michael wrote the links, based on Sid's journals and essays.

One of the themes that run through this talk – and trust me, there are some linking themes and ideas buried in the anecdotes – is the idea of inheritance and the batons that we pick up and hand on. Here comes an example.

Sid's stories are beautiful and simple, in the best sense. But there is one that is, by his standards, enigmatic. It's called *Where is my old friend Bing Crosby tonight?* and it's about an encounter down on the quayside between a stranger in town and a young man who might, or might not, throw himself in the river. It's a strange, haunting piece and I said: 'This one's impossible. Let's have a whack at it.'

Well, we did, and it was beautiful and we still weren't quite sure what it was about. The young man was played, fearlessly, by a nineteen-year-old actor called Robson Green. It did involve him taking off most of clothes which turns out to have been a sign of things to come but honestly, guv, it wasn't our fault.

The show overall was a joy – credit to the actors and to Max Roberts – and every word spoken onstage was taken from Sid's original texts.

There's an odd, but significant, little sidelight on *In Blackberry Time*. One day Shirley and I were taken out to lunch in London by my then agent, Peggy Ramsay, who also invited a fine director and lovely human being called Ronald Eyre. Ronald was in the process of adapting and directing a parallel exercise based on the short stories of Anton Chekov – arguably the daddy of them all.

'How's it going?' we asked.

'It's difficult finding ways of blending them together,' said Ronald.

Here's the dilemma. Should we have said: 'Get yourself on a train and come up to Tyneside and you'll see how it's done.'? Probably yes, but we didn't. It was one of several occasions when I have witnessed London theatre people – both in the West End and in the major subsidised sector – struggling to do things that we've been doing for years with a minimum of fuss in various parts of the country well outside the sacred orbit of the M25. There are times when we're too modest, though whether that's a blessing or a curse is an open question and I'm supposed to be talking about the inheritance factor.

As a reward for doing good work on the Quayside, Max Roberts and the Live Theatre gang were offered a slot at the Playhouse and in 1990 I wrote *Going Home*.

The story concerns a Geordie coming back to Tyneside after some years spent in Australia.

I had spent three months in Australia in 1988 as writer-in-residence at the Film School and, I suppose I wanted to use up some of the material I'd accumulated. But the key scene in the play is a slightly mysterious, enigmatic encounter on the Quayside. Thank you, Sid.

One of the other key elements in the play was the music. Again it wasn't my idea but Max Roberts'. His idea was simple: let's have live music throughout and let's ask the great Ian Carr – jazz trumpet player and composer in the Miles Davis tradition – to write it and perform it, which he did, with an onstage quintet, every night. Ian and I had been students here at the university back in the 50s though as far as we recall, we never exchanged a single word. It's a good basis for a creative partnership.

Jazz musicians do things, as matter of course, that conventional musicians would consider impossible. For example. During the scene on the quayside – the one I stole from Sid - one of the characters, a tenor saxophone player on his way home after a gig, refers from time to time to various of his heroes like Duke Ellington and Coleman Hawkins. At each of these moments, Ian would play an appropriate quote from the work of the musician in question. Since, by definition, these moments would occur at a different time at each performance, Ian had to listen and respond, which he did faultlessly. I'm not sure you'd get this degree of skill and sensitivity from the average Kaiser Chief or Arctic Monkey.

Let me offer a couple of observations about music and drama. The first is very simple and professional. If the audience sees musical instruments lying around on the stage at the start of the play that audience gets a message: we're probably going to have a good time. Sometimes they're wrong, of course, but it certainly gives the show a head start.

Second observation. There's nothing radical about integrating music within the action of a play. Shakespeare – our greatest mentor of them all – does it all the time. At the end of *Twelfth Night* when Malvolio has been locked away, and the various couples have gone off to live happily ever after, Feste sings the blues and breaks our hearts. Even more astonishingly, in *Othello*, Desdemona sings a song prior to her murder. Conclusion? It doesn't matter how clever we think we are, a regional writer

from Stratford-on-Avon did it all first. And he may have been a Warwickshire man but I wouldn't mind betting he had an Auntie Bella in South Shields.

It was, I guess, through the 90s that I began to understand what was happening with these plays. *Coalhouse Door* was rooted in what tended to be lumped under the heading gritty Northern social realism. It wasn't but that's where it got dumped by the opinion-formers and guardians of the higher thought-flow. But what began to emerge was the notion of stories existing in a kind of Tyneside landscape of the imagination – a dreamtime, if you like, which proves I didn't waste all my three months in Australia – second cousin to Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon or Gwyn Thomas' Meadow Prospect in the Welsh valleys.

At any rate, when, with Max Roberts and the gang, we were invited into the sacred vaults of the Theatre Royal in 1995 I went full-blooded into a dreamtime landscape with *Shooting the Legend* which is set in an old-fashioned working men's club centred around the imaginary Bedewell Colliery. What emerges pretty soon is that the colliery closed over a hundred years ago and the working men in the play are all unemployed and haven't worked for years. The women in the play are the only ones with jobs. They are all casualties of Margaret Thatcher, a former prime minister some of you may remember. The club is the only residual shred of the old industrial traditions that the men have left and they cling to it as the final fragment of their dignity.

We now took it for granted that any Live Theatre production would have music in it and without too much effort we managed to integrate Tim Healy doing a stand-out version of *Mustang Sally*, a Tamla Motown medley and an audience singalong to the great old music-hall classic by Tommy Armstrong, *Wor Nanny's a Mazer*. The story I like to tell is of an old friend on the Tyneside theatre scene who said to me one night: 'Well, nobody's going to confuse you with Ibsen or Strindberg, bonny lad.'

To help the fun, we scattered song sheets across the auditorium with the words of *Wor Nanny* but I lost count of the number of people who said to me that the minute the music started they realised they'd always known it, even though they didn't remember ever learning it. It seemed to me that maybe there was a useful truth lying



inside this phenomenon: that one of the jobs of drama is to remind us of a hidden music we once knew and thought we had forgotten.

Something we found easy to remember was the millennium. Who can forget the Dome and the Prime Minister singing Auld Lang Syne with the Queen? And heaven knows we've tried. My contribution was *Tales from the Backyard* – the story of the century viewed from my grandparents' backyard in York Street, Jarrow, the street where I was born and spent formative times in early childhood. For the only time in my life I put myself in a play as a character and commentator. I was played by the great John Woodvine, who was in the original production of *Coalhouse Door*. When he read *Backyard* he said: 'Well logically I should play your grandfather but if I play you, I do get to sit down a good deal.' As I pointed out at the time, John is taller than I am, better looking, with a full head of hair and a wonderful speaking and singing voice but sometimes you have to compromise.

Though on the face of it you couldn't have a more grittily realistic setting than a backyard in Jarrow, my *Tales* were as fanciful as anything I've ever written. I placed all kinds of events there that actually happened elsewhere and embroidered them into the bargain. To be sure my Auntie Lil did plant an orange pip in their little bit of garden and it did produce a little green shoot or two – but in the play it bears fruit in the middle of an air-raid. Again, I wasn't writing the facts – I was writing the legend. Facts and figures are all very well but the truth goes deeper. Ask any football supporter – the league tables never tell the truth. Your team – whether it's the Toon or Darlington or Blyth Spartans – is the only true centre of the universe.

The changes taking place in the North-East in the almost forty years since *Coalhouse Door* are staggering. My grandfather, who presided over the backyard and over much of my early childhood, was of Irish stock and spent his early days in Gateshead. If you had told him that one day the town would have a major art gallery, a concert hall and an iconic piece of sculpture he would have laughed in your face. It also occurs to me that not so long ago I might have invented the Gateshead Hilton as a good gag.

Either way, it all felt like good potential source material. The wonderful anarchic playwright and a fine friend, Henry Livings, once said to me: 'Your

method's dead simple. You take deeply serious ideas and kick them about the stage until the stuffing drops out.'

In or around 2003 I wrote an article for *The Guardian* in which I commented on the irony that there were now more art galleries than shipyards on the Tyne. The idea took root and that's how *Charlie's Trousers* came about at Live in 2004. The old paint-shop of a long-forgotten Tyneside shipyard has been transformed into a gallery displaying modern art. There was a story of sorts – about the theft of a bronze cast of a pair of trousers – but the play's true purpose was to have a Geordie view on the idea of modern art as the solution to the problems of an area in a post-industrial, leisure-based economy.

An example. One of the exhibits is an abstract made of sand and coal dust collected on the beach at Blyth. It's called Blyth Spirit and, like many of exhibits, is intended to make the viewer think about the subject in a totally new way, to which one of our characters replies: 'But I've never been to Blyth so how can I think about Blyth in a new way if I've never thought about it in an old way?'

It was all good knockabout stuff but again it contained an observable truth: that notwithstanding the usual philistine moans about ratepayers' money being wasted, the people of the area have taken on the idea and given it the benefit of the doubt – witness the Alan Shearer shirt that appeared on the Angel of the North soon after she arrived on the scene. It's pertinent to note that Anthony Gormley's standing figures on the beach at Formby were similarly approved by the folk of Liverpool and its hinterland, but equally pertinent that the Geordies beat the Scousers to the punch. Did somebody mention European capital of culture?

My most treasured memory of *Charlie's Trousers* is highly personal but I think it's legitimate to share it. One night in the bar after the show – and by the way it's crucial that the play-makers should drink in the same place as the audience, which is one of things that's wrong with the National Theatre – a woman came up to me and said, very quietly: 'My husband died a year ago. He used to make me laugh. Tonight is the first time I've laughed for a year.' I wouldn't trade that moment for all the five-star reviews in the posh papers and all the awards the theatre establishment has on offer.

Now for a sneak preview. During the last few years I've been writing song lyrics with a jazz musician called Alan Barnes. We've produced two CDs and The Observer, no less, called us 'the Gilbert and Sullivan of modern jazz.'

Max Roberts, reckless as ever, has commissioned us to write a musical and I've written, in non-technical terms, half of it. The central character is a struggling architect – which I was once and briefly, half a century ago – with an office in Milburn House, the first multi-storey office block in Europe but beautiful with it and overlooking the river. The man's name is Phil and this is how he starts the story:

'I was in my office. It's in a tall tower on a high hill. The gospel according to Raymond Chandler recommends that as a good place to be buried. A tall tower on a high hill. And as sure as God made Granny Smiths I was feeling buried. I looked out across the River Tyne. Giant cranes stalked across the horizon like triffids invading from an alien planet. Or maybe from Gateshead. Sometimes it's hard to spot the difference. Symbols, according to the Journal, of a new-found prosperity in the golden age of the post-industrial, leisure-based society that would lead all the sons and daughters of miners and shipbuilders into the promised land. Well, sure as hell, the prosperity hadn't found its way into my office. Maybe the triffids couldn't make it up the stairs. It felt like...it felt like Monday.'

He then sings a song called *It Feels like Monday* which, confession time, was the title of my very first unproduced and unproduceable play. I do try to re-cycle things, in the interests of saving the planet. You'll also have noticed the obligatory cheap gag about Gateshead. I'm slightly ashamed but I have to report that it always works.

That's pretty well the laundry list of what I've done up here over the last forty years. Let me try to relate it to some of the wider issues and implications. Along with the physical transformation of the area there's also been a huge cultural transformation. When we first tried to cast *Coalhouse Door* we had great difficulty finding actors who could handle the accent. The function of the drama schools in those days was to hammer all that out of the students as quickly as possible. The great Bryan Pringle, born in Bolton, Lancashire, qualified on the basis of his wife Annie coming from South Shield and an Auntie Bella in Gateshead, though he might have been lying about Auntie Bella. Then, over the years, and thanks in some measure

to television – shows like *When the Boat Comes In*, *Auf Weidersehn Pet* and *The Likely Lads* – it emerged that audiences could actually understand what was being said by folk from this area.

But theatre is the sharp end of the business and the number, range and quality of actors to emerge from Live Theatre during the last thirty years or so is astonishing. Tim Healy and Robson Green have the highest profile of a remarkable extended rep company – I rarely contemplate writing anything about the area without the comfort of knowing that Trevor Fox, Joe Caffrey, Donald McBride, Judy Earl, Charlie Hardwicke, Libby Davison and the rest of the gang are on hand. Indeed, Trevor and Joe have almost become my security blankets during these escapades – and I shall have to buy drinks for those I haven't mentioned by name.

Having paid due credit to the actors it's also crucial to remember that Live is essentially a writers' theatre. Starting with Cecil Taylor, the litany stands comparison with any theatre in the country, and I happily include the National and the Royal Court in that assertion. Tom Hadaway, Leonard Barrass, Peter Flannery, Julia Darling, Lee Hall, Peter Straughan, Phil Woods, Michael Chaplin, Steve Chambers and Sean O'Brien – there's a first team squad to make any artistic director drool – short on women, to be sure, but we're working on that and the age spread is impressive in a yoof oriented age.

Naturally there's an element of North-East chauvinism in this and oddly enough I've become much more aggressively Northern during the twenty-three years I've lived in London. I've discovered at first hand that where the arts are concerned, London is the most parochial place in the country and it isn't just Tyneside that ends up disenfranchised when the baubles are handed out. I've seen wonderful work in theatres in the North-West – in Bolton, Manchester and Liverpool for example – on my old patch in Hull where John Godber, Gill Adams and Richard Bean sing vigorous songs of Humberside – across the border, Scottish playwrights like Liz Lochhead and David Greig are a match for any in the business – and most of the time the Irish lead the way, as they have since the days of Sheridan.

There's another mischievous comment I'd like to offer. I read a piece not so long ago about the Royal Court Theatre in London and their writers. It went to some length to emphasize how competitive they all were and, for all I know, still are. I

found that extraordinary and frankly a bit depressing. The writers I've mentioned are only competitive with themselves but otherwise there's always been a tradition of mutual support – going back, I guess, to when Cecil Taylor, patiently and wisely, encouraged Tom Hadaway to turn his natural story-telling gifts into dramatic form.

I also recall in 1974 when I was asked by the *New Statesman* to write an obituary for Walter Greenwood, author of *Love on the Dole* and much else besides, I ran out of things to say after the first paragraph and telephoned Sid Chaplin for help. He talked about Greenwood for half-an-hour or so, I thanked him and duly turned in my eight hundred words, under my own name – but at least half of them were Sid's.

A couple of more recent examples of what I mean. Live has twice put together anthology programmes – *Twelve Tales of Tyneside*, a dozen one-act plays presented over two nights and written by playwrights associated with the theatre – and *NEI* – a series of monologues set in the North-East.

For the sake of completeness I should mention that my contribution to *NEI* was *Wor Tony and the Great White Shark*, about a dedicated fantasist who pretends he's seen a basking shark in Tyne, up around Dunston, and played brilliantly by Trevor Fox. I didn't contribute to *Twelve Tales* though I had half-an-idea about a man who comes home from a car boot sale having bought the Venerable Bede's Chair. But that's where it stayed – as half an idea, and probably the best place for it.

But the lovely part is that all the writers turned up for both shows and we cheered each other on. It was a beautiful thing to be part of.

It's also striking to consider the diversity of the writers mentioned – not a gritty social realist in sight. From the Wallsend surrealism of Leonard Barras to the poetic insights of Tom Hadaway, the painful tenderness of Julia Darling – oh how we miss that wondrous talent – the full-blooded passionate verse dramas of Sean O'Brien, the brilliant black comedies of Lee Hall and Peter Straughan – and so on.

There is, I suppose, a vague political agenda linking much of the work, but it isn't the sort intended to send people out to vote for anyone – probably the reverse, if anything. These are plays about, and for, the common people, most of whom – though not all by any means – speak in the rich and diverse accents of the North-East. It's an accent that sings and struts its stuff and sometimes weeps.

Here is Tom Hadaway on the subject:

‘...if our betters shame us out of our phrases and pronunciation, we shall be without resource. From a shared history, dialect is the enabling power of the commoner.’

And again:

‘Comic dialect! Is it not the inheritance? The sacred grove wherein imagination fruits. The rich vein, the knot, and bond, and bringing together of the tribe. The liberation of their wit for the consolation of dark days, or the lustre and increase of their hopes and dreams.’

Not bad for a man who used to catch fish for a living. In the days when we still had proper plays on television, Tom wrote one set on the North Shields fish quay and, when questioned whether the workers on the quay actually talked like that, said: ‘Of course they don’t – but that’s what they’d like to say – and it’s my job to say it for them.’

As often, Tom spoke for us all. This has been, for me, a forty-year voyage of discovery into the secret music of the North-East – the music we thought we’d forgotten - and it isn’t over yet. There are many more songs to be sung and a ready supply of singers.

You are all invited to join in the chorus.

Thank you for listening to me.