

# People's power

The People's Theatre, Newcastle, one of the best-known amateur theatre companies in the country, was founded 80 years ago. To mark the anniversary, People's member Chris Goulding has written an entertaining history of the company which George Bernard Shaw took under his wing. **DAVID WHETSTONE** delves into its pages.

**N**ORMAN Veitch, credited with sowing the seed of the People's Theatre in 1911, was a man with a commendably robust approach to drama. "If we are going to murder plays, let us — for glory's sake — murder the best!" he declared. And so they went for George Bernard Shaw.

A ban had recently been placed on public performances of Shaw's *Theowering-Up of Blanco Posnet* but Veitch reckoned he could get away with a private performance for members with a deflection in the interval.

He was right. The playlet's first performance on mainland Britain



■ The People's birthplace in Percy Street, Newcastle.

took place on September 23, 1911, and gave the infant company the confidence to tackle its first full-length play.

In those days the company was known as the Clarion Dramatic Society and it used its existence to politics more than the theatre.

The Newcastle branch of the British Socialist Party — based in upstairs rooms at the corner of Leazes Park Road and Percy Street, Newcastle, where the "Pick Tock" shop now stands — was tapped for cash. Regular dances were held but the members, with their strong urban outlook, weren't happy about them.

Then Mr Veitch thought of drama, but more educational means of fundraising could there possibly be?

That pioneering company could not draw on a large pool of players. Norman, Colin, Minnie and Edith Veitch were all roped in. Colin at least had experience of performing in public having captained Newcastle United to the league championship and,

in 1911, the FA Cup Final against Bradford City.

The very first performance — which did not merit a review in the local press — comprised an excerpt from *Les Miserables* and *Pot Luck* by Gertrude Jennings. It took place on July 11, 1911.

Years later, a correspondent was to write to *The Journal* about those days, describing how he had spent Saturday afternoons watching Colin Veitch at St James's Park, and later that evening would see the same man, scrubbed clean and with thick make-up, playing in a different manner before a smaller but just as noisy audience.

Politics and drama went hand in hand in other parts of the region at this time. Over the river, the Gateshead Independent Labour Party was developing a dramatic group which was to evolve into what is now Gateshead's Little Theatre.

In the case of the Newcastle enterprise, however, the relationship was short-lived. In 1915, after some socialists complained that "the red herring of play-acting had led a false trail which led away from the narrow path", the drama lovers went their own way and set up in Newcastle's Royal Arcade.

In 1921, after strenuous efforts, the amateur actors managed to persuade GB Shaw — their great hero — to visit their theatre to see a performance of *Man and Superman*. He had dismissed their proposal of a train trip to Newcastle in February as "a barbarous proposal" and an "attempt on my life".

In April Shaw agreed to make the trip. He deemed the production "infamous" and refused to bow to audience pressure to make a speech. He did, however, spend over an hour talking to the actors and praised Colin Veitch for his portrayal of Old Malone.

February 1, 1930, was another landmark in the history of the People's. On this day the company presented its first play at a new theatre, a converted chapel at Rye Hill, Newcastle.

In June 1936, Shaw visited again to mark the company's silver jubilee and remarked that the floor was certainly cleaner than it had been at the old premises.

He subsequently enjoyed the production of his *Candida*.

The People's Theatre company moved into its current home — the former Lyric Cinema in Heaton — in 1962 after extensive building work. On the opening night, September 24, audiences sat down once more to the genius of GB Shaw. *Man and Superman* yet again.

■ George Bernard Shaw speaks to the cast of *Candida* backstage in 1936 at Rye Hill, Newcastle.



In his highly entertaining book, which is packed with anecdotes, Chris Goulding takes us from those early beginnings right up to the present day and judges that "the spirit that has kept us going is strong

enough to carry us through to the next century". I'll applaud that.

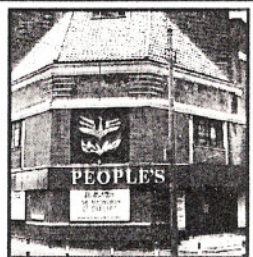
■ *The Story of the People's*. By Chris Goulding. Newcastle City Libraries & Arts. £5.95.



■ Making up backstage at Rye Hill. James Garbutt, centre with beard and, right the late Alan Browning, later a *Coronation Street* star.



■ *The Boy Friend*, December 1971, with a very young Kevin Whately, standing, right of centre.



■ The People's Theatre — glittering gem.

NO-ONE with a love of drama would deny that The People's Theatre is a glittering little gem in the cultural crown of the North-East.

George Bernard Shaw told People's members in 1936 that "it is in performances of this kind — by people who are doing the thing for the love of it, work hard at it, and are not paid for it — that you can get a quality of performance that you cannot get from even the most highly skilled professional actors".

The context suggests that this was, indeed, a compliment — although you often couldn't be sure with Shaw.

In the nine years I have lived in the region, I have seen and reviewed many of the company's productions. I have seen good, bad and excellent but the good nights far outnumber the bad.

There have been times when I thought the audience was asleep — and some even less inspiring occasions when I thought the cast was asleep.

Mostly, though, I have been given cause to marvel at the talent and dedication on display. And — perhaps the best tribute I can pay to the venue on Stephenson Road, Newcastle — I always look forward to taking my place among the rows of venerable red seats.