**Colluding to Protect the State?**

**The Case of the Arts Council, Special Branch and Theatre Workshop**

**Philippa Burt**

In July 1945, one month after the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain was announced, John Maynard Keynes set out its policy. At its centre was the need to ‘improve the standard of execution’ and to increase accessibility to the ‘serious and fine entertainment’. [[1]](#footnote-1) In its promise to provide a respite from the pressures of the competitive commercial theatre, the Council also sought to protect the artist, who had to be ‘individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled’.[[2]](#footnote-2) To this end, Keynes insisted that, despite being a government-funded body, the Council would not try to influence or censor the artists it supported but, rather, would ‘give courage, confidence and opportunity’.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, certain parameters were placed on this apparent freedom, with the Council declaring that it would only support theatre work that was ‘done in the interest of the nation.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Using the latter declaration as it starting point, this paper examines how the Arts Council worked to protect the interests of the State and to defend the artistic, social and political status quo through the way in which it distributed funds. As the only State-sponsored funding body for the arts, the Council had the power to determine a particular company’s survival in the field. It used this power to coerce groups desperate for funding into adhering to and reproducing its own policy – and, to an extent, that of Whitehall – by rewarding publicly those who toed the line and excluding any who did not. Since rejection by the Arts Council was tantamount to expulsion from the field, the Council here acted as a censor, controlling artistic output in a more covert and insidious – although no less effective – way than the Lord Chamberlain’s Office. It was thus a far cry from Keynes’s stated aim to allow the ‘artist [to] walk where the breath of the spirit blows him.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop is a case in point. The group had a notoriously tempestuous relationship with the Arts Council, which largely disapproved of its artistic policy and its approach to theatre making. For years the Council ignored the company’s pleas for help and, when financial relief was provided, it was kept to a minimum. While there are many reasons for this reluctance on the part of the Council, of central interest here is the impact of the group’s political position and how its open support of Communism made it a threat to the British establishment that needed to be contained and neutralised.

As will be shown, this was a conclusion shared by those at the heart of the British Secret Service, with MI5 and, in particular, Special Branch subjecting the group to an intensive and systematic programme of surveillance. This paper thus questions the influence that the Secret Service’s suspicion of Theatre Workshop had on the Arts Council’s treatment of the group, and whether they worked together to exclude it.

**The Arts Council and the State**

The question of the relationship between the Arts Council and the State is a complex one. In its first Annual Report, the Council insisted that, although ultimately answerable to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it was a ‘permanent body, independent in constitution [and] free from red tape’ and so was free to determine its own policy.[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘The arts’, Keynes informed readers, ‘owe no vow of obedience.’[[7]](#footnote-7) However, in questioning the supposed ‘arms length principle’ of State intervention, Robert Hutchison argues that while, on the surface, there was little evidence of directly traceable control by the government, it continued to influence the practice of the Arts Council by striking various bargains. In short, money was given, but on the understanding that any artistic decisions made would fall in line and support the Government’s own policy. ‘Though not in the pocket of Government,’ Hutchison explains, ‘the Arts Council is a creature of Government, a partner with Government.’ [[8]](#footnote-8)

A similar lack of objectivity underscored the relationship between the Council’s Drama Panel and the established and commercial theatres in Britain.[[9]](#footnote-9) Not only did it fail to challenge the monopolies of Prince Littler and the infamous Hugh ‘Binkie’ Beaumont so as to provide space for smaller groups, but it actively helped them to retain their dominance.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Council was, itself, very much a part of the British theatre establishment, where a ‘select group of mice were given a lot of responsibility for distributing the cheese. Vested interests were fully involved in the Arts Council’s decision making from the outset’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Similarly, the Drama Panel was dominated by figures from prominent arts institutions and the commercial West End, who were almost exclusively middle-aged men and middle class or above. The homogeneity of its members meant that the Panel embodied the established way of making and perceiving theatre, leaving little room for anything else. The criterion of what constituted a legitimate artistic practice reflected this socially and culturally determined taste and, therefore, ensured a level of self-preservation, where those organisations that perpetuated the values of the Establishment were rewarded with grants and subsidies. This was thus a climate that encouraged artists to excel in already established practices rather than create new ones, and to focus on maintaining ‘the standard and national tradition’ of the arts.[[12]](#footnote-12)

From the outset, the Council was explicit in its celebration of ‘excellence’ in the arts and of professional, building-based theatres situated within metropolitan centres, signifying a clear departure from the policy of its predecessor – the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (or CEMA) – to support amateur and touring companies so as to increase access to the arts. Keynes’s Arts Council, by contrast, centred on improving the health of the professional arts, arguing: ‘It was standards that mattered, and the preservation of serious professional enterprise, not obscure concerts in village halls.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

The policy of funding established, professional groups continued after Keynes’s death, with the Council arguing that it was more beneficial for it to ‘devote itself to the support of two or three exemplary theatres which might re-affirm the supremacy of standards in our national theatre.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, it adopted a policy of ‘few, but roses’, whereby the distribution of funding was centred on a small handful of leading cultural institutions. In doing this, the Council sought to establish a select number of cultural powerhouses that embodied what was thought to be the best of British theatre and use them to restore national pride in the wake of World War Two and the ever-shrinking Empire.

**Enter Theatre Workshop**

Perhaps ironically, the work of Theatre Workshop aligned closely with the original principles of CEMA, which is why the group welcomed news of the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain and was, perhaps naively, confident that it would receive financial support. While a detailed taxonomy of the company’s work is not necessary, some key pointers are useful in establishing more clearly its position in the field of theatre in Britain.

Theatre Workshop was founded in April 1945 as a continuation of the experiments its founders Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl started in Manchester before the outbreak of war. Their aim was to create a theatre that was social relevant and commented ‘fearlessly on Society’, reflecting the harsh realities of the period.[[15]](#footnote-15) It would counter the West End’s isolation from the ‘real’ world, its genteel conservatism and its near-exclusive representation of the upper-middle-class experience at the expense of the working class. To this end, the group began as a touring company, taking productions like *Landscape with Chimneys* to remote communities such as the mining town of Spennymoor, before settling at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1953.

Hand in glove with the need to create a theatre whose content was for, by, and about the working classes, Theatre Workshop challenged the tendency to treat the production as a static entity, simply to be regurgitated on a nightly basis. Its work, by contrast, was alive and organic, with performances that evolved continually in response to the reactions of the audience. The artistic success of this work brought recognition from the continent, including an invitation to perform at the prestigious Théâtre des Nations in Paris in 1955, the first to be issued to a British company.

However, despite such recognition, Theatre Workshop was repeatedly overlooked by the Arts Council. The latter’s archives reveal a clear reluctance to support the group, as its Drama Panel turned down the numerous applications for financial support that it submitted during its first nine years.[[16]](#footnote-16) When the group finally received aid in 1954, its annual subsidy was kept at a minimum: its first grant, a £150 bus subsidy, was raised to £500 in 1955, and then increased by only £1,500 over the course of the next six years. By comparison, between the years 1958 and 1962 alone, the English Stage Company’s annual grant increased by £14,500.

Further, in order to receive these grants, Theatre Workshop were forced to jump through various hoops, including the need for local councils to double any subsidy provided by the Arts Council. Given the fact that no other theatre was compelled to meet such ‘impossible’ and ‘unrealistic’ conditions, this is a clear demonstration of how the Arts Council treated the group differently.

**The Threat of Politics**

So why was Theatre Workshop singled out in this way? Well, exchanges between the company and the Arts Council demonstrate a clear sense of animosity on both sides. Successive Drama Directors treated the group with a heavy air of paternalism and condescension, while Littlewood was downright abusive, refusing to call the body anything other than the ‘fucking Arts Council’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

But this was more than simply a matter of conflicting personalities. Rather, it was indicative of the many ways in which Theatre Workshop positioned itself at odds with the Arts Council and the British theatre in general. The very fact that Littlewood led the group following the departure of MacColl in 1953 set the company apart in a field that was almost exclusively male. Likewise, its explicit commitment to the principles of Communism distinguished it in a field awash with fears of the ‘Red Peril’ and saw it challenge the very ideological assumptions upon which the Arts Council was founded.

Both Littlewood and MacColl were, at times, card-carrying members of the Communist Party and wanted to create a ‘theatre which consciously made itself *useful* in the class struggle’.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the 1930s and ‘40s they performed in agit-prop work that exposed the destructive and oppressively unequal capitalist system and staged productions like *Last Edition* (1940), a living newspaper piece that critiqued the politics of appeasement in the run up to the Second World War.

This interrelation of theatre and politics continued in Theatre Workshop, manifesting itself in a number of important ways. Again, its pro-Communist values were clearly identifiable in works that challenged the dominant narratives and presented the working class experience on the stage, including *Uranium 235* (1946), *The Long Shift* (1951), and *Oh What A Lovely War* (1963), the latter being the apotheosis of the group’s anti-war sensibility.

Likewise, the initial decision to operate as a touring company and to take work into the heart of remote communities – performing in village halls, community centres and even holiday camps – was rooted in the group’s desire to create a direct line of communication between it and the working-class population, as well as to increase accessibility to the arts and break the middle-class’s stranglehold of the theatre. This was, of course, in direct contrast to the Arts Council’s policy of only funding theatres working in the metropolitan centres with a single, fixed address. When it finally succumbed to the pressure of needing a permanent base, the choice of East London’s Stratford was significant: not only was it much cheaper, but it allowed the group to remain located within a working-class community. It thus tried to meet the requirements of the Arts Council while maintaining its own values.

The collectivist set up of Theatre Workshop was also confusing for the Arts Council. Littlewood’s leftist disapproval of the rigid class hierarchy in Britain saw her shun the role of director-dictator and, instead, run the company on a democratic and egalitarian basis. Unlike the West End’s ‘star’ system, Theatre Workshop operated as a co-operative, with economic parity between the members and where each person had a role to play, whether on the stage, in rehearsals or in the daily working of the group. The group also lived together for periods of time, including at the Theatre Royal Stratford East immediately after the move there. Since a requirement for Arts Council funding was the demonstration of a sound business structure, Theatre Workshop’s collectivist approach was a point of consternation and was interpreted as being chaotic, *ad hoc* and ‘administratively irresponsible’. As Nadine Holdsworth has shown, the group was punished and all but written off for its lack of administrative skills and its attempt to present an alternative to the hierarchical model of the business world.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Finally, Theatre Workshop rejected the ‘professionalism’ that was so revered at the Arts Council, along with the established schools of training in Britain. Instead, its actors were largely amateurs, including friends of existing members, passers-by, inspired audience members and local art students, the majority of whom were working class. They were thus a far cry from the acting dynasties that dominated the British theatre, with their RP accents, genteel manners, and the sense that acting was somehow ‘in their blood’. In their use of amateurs, then, Littlewood and MacColl again challenged the elitism of the British theatre and the sense that it was somehow removed and above the majority of the population. They showed instead that the theatre could be for everyone.

The Arts Council was explicit in its disapproval of Theatre Workshop’s use of amateurs and warned Littlewood that, to receive funding, ‘some of our actors would have to be replaced while the rest underwent a lengthy period of retraining’ to bring them into line with the established way of acting.[[20]](#footnote-20) In this threat, the Arts Council sent a clear message that it would not support a company whose actors failed to slot into the British system as is. Of course, Littlewood had no interest in producing actors to simply repeat the same, tired conventions and, rather, wanted to revolutionise the theatre and create something entirely new. To this end she developed her own rigorous training programme undertaken by all members of the company on a daily basis. The development of a new style of acting – and its success on the continent – posed a major threat to the Council and had the potential to expose the outmoded conventions and make the individuals and institutions that represented them appear obsolete.

**Watching from the Wings**

Theatre Workshop’s training of amateurs and young students was also a matter of particular concern for the Special Branch officers that surveilled its movements and reported them to MI5. Recently declassified MI5 files reveal that it began monitoring the company in 1951 and spent a number of years building a substantial file that was supplemented by information already gathered on Littlewood and MacColl in the 1930s. Various methods were used to gather material, including intercepting letters, collating reports on particular productions, tapping phone conversations, gaining intelligence from informants within the British theatre and stationing officers outside company members’ homes.

There is not enough time to give an exhaustive account of the information included in the files, which ranges from rather mundane events such as the sale of the company van to the more explosive presence of Littlewood and MacColl in bugged conversations at British Communist Party’s Headquarters.[[21]](#footnote-21) But a common thread running throughout is the suspicion that Theatre Workshop worked in cahoots with suspected Soviet-front organisations such as the Society for Cultural Relations and the British Youth Festival Committee to target impressionable young working-class students, encouraging them to rise up against the government and bring about a Communist revolution.

Of course, this was a climate in which Communism was looked on with suspicion, fostered by the increasingly frosty Anglo-Russian relations and the drawing of the Iron curtain, the return of the Russophobic Winston Churchill as Prime Minister and the McCarthyism that gripped the United States. Christopher Andrew’s comprehensive history of the MI5 details the intensity with which its attention turned to identifying and removing potential Kremlin spies and anti-establishment forces seeking to undermine the political order. At the same time, emerging scandals like the discovery of the Cambridge Five created a sense of suspicion in the public mindset, particularly with regards left-wing intellectuals. The fear was that forces were at work to indoctrinate and radicalise the young.

Such accusations were levelled at Littlewood and MacColl, who, as working-class intellectuals, were deemed to be a particular threat. One disgruntled father reported to the Home Office that his

boy of 18, who last Autumn was a fine specimen of English boyhood with good morals and ideals and a brilliant future, fell into the clutches of these people. They have induced him to leave his home, and we do not know where he is living.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Special Branch was suspicious of any interactions the pair had with students, and, in 1952, Director of MI5 Peter Sillitoe intervened in their plans to work at schools in Glasgow.[[23]](#footnote-23) Added to this was evidence that suggested the company received financial and administrative support from the Communist Party itself, especially when undertaking its numerous tours to Eastern Europe, and that, further, it played a role in vetting potential company members. By 1953, MI5 concluded that Theatre Workshop was a ‘Communist controlled theatre company’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**A Case of Collusion?**

As we have seen, both the Arts Council and Special Branch had serious concerns about the attitudes and behaviour of Theatre Workshop, but to what extent can they be said to have colluded with each other to neutralise the perceived threat it posed? Although there is little in the way of explicit evidence to prove a direct collusion between the two organisations, there is much to suggest that the Arts Council would have known about Special Branch’s close surveillance and it would have informed its own funding decisions and so limit Theatre Workshop’s movements in the field.

First, as James Smith rightly notes, Special Branch relied on its extensive and well-placed network of informants from within the British theatre, painting the picture of a field gripped by anti-Communist fear and suspicion of Theatre Workshop.[[25]](#footnote-25) The Arts Council would have been aware of the notoriety surrounding the company and its alleged Communist ties given the fact that its members were drawn from those same theatre circles and may have included informants themselves. There were also various personal links between it and the Security Service: for example, Drama Panellist Lord Esher’s father played a role in the early days of MI5, while his brother Maurice Brett was an important figure in MI6. The Council’s evident concern saw it commission a report into Theatre Workshop’s political associations in April 1947, although this is now missing from the archives.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Second, part of MI5’s role as an advisory agency was to share its findings on particular individuals so as to ‘inform the activity of a range of other governmental agencies’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Famously, this included the BBC, where MI5 advised the Corporation on its decision to blacklist Littlewood, MacColl and many other communists during the war, and continued to advise it afterwards. Similarly, when Littlewood applied to work for the Entertainments National Service Association in 1944, MI5 advised that ‘it would be unwise to employ her in any production capacity’ given her Communist associations.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is difficult to believe that it would not have played a similar advisory role for the Arts Council, even if only in an indirect way.

Another indicator of some sort of communication between the two organisations is the behaviour of the Arts Council itself. Suspicion of Theatre Workshop was extended to any individual or organisation that agreed to support it. A Special Branch report in 1953 noted that the company had received a loan of £450 from West Ham Borough Council at the behest of Councillor W.C. Kuhn. ‘According to my information,’ the report continued, ‘[Kuhn] was aware that the company had communist connections and his action in granting this loan has led reliable members of the Council to suspect that he is a communist sympathiser’.[[29]](#footnote-29) If a previously trusted Councillor came under suspicion of being a communist sympathiser then it follows that the Arts Council would have faced similar suspicions. Elsewhere, an informant concluded that, by inviting Theatre Workshop to perform, the Théâtre des Nations proved itself to be a ‘communist-backed set up’.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Thus, the Arts Council’s commitment to support work ‘done in the interest of the nation’ and the need for it to fall in line with the policy of the government underscored its decision to not provide substantial funding to Theatre Workshop. To do so would have thrown it into the light of suspicion and raised difficult questions about its role and behaviour. Proof of this came in 1960, when questions were raised in Parliament after Communist propaganda material was found on display at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. The Chancellor was asked whether he ‘will make it a condition of his grant to the Council that its sponsorship be withdrawn from all productions in conjunction with which the sale of Communist publications are displayed for sale’.[[31]](#footnote-31) One can only imagine the questions raised had it provided substantial support to the group at the height of the Cold War.

Yet, the Council was tactical in how it handled this. It could not afford to refuse the group funding altogether, as became evident in 1955 when its attempt to remove funding was met by a lengthy and public campaign of protest. Instead, it kept Theatre Workshop’s funding at a minimum, meaning that Littlewood did not have the grounds to make public accusations of bias, yet it was not enough money for her to pose a serious threat to the status quo. Furthermore, she had to work under the constant threat that the Council could remove it altogether, which would be justified by the group’s inevitable failure to meet its tough standards.

Such tactics paid off: to secure the money needed for survival, Littlewood had to fall in line with the rules of the field, namely, by transferring successful productions to the West End, which ultimately led to the break up of the group in all but name. Frustrated, broken and exhausted, she turned her back on the theatre. Once again, the status quo of the British theatre had been protected, as had the interests of the political hegemony.

1. Royal Charter of the Arts Council of Great Britain (1946) cited in Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council*, London: Little, Brown and Company, p. 151; John Maynard Keynes, ‘The Arts Council: Its Policy and Its Hopes’, *Annual Report. The Arts Council of Great Britain,* London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1945-46, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arts Council of Great Britain, *First Annual Report*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1946-47, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Keynes, The Arts Council’, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Keynes, ‘The Arts Council’, p. 20. The Council was also keen to point out the fact that the members of its various panels and committees were chosen as individuals and were not civil servants. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Arts Council of Great Britain, *First Annual Report*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Hutchison, *The Politics of the Arts Council*, London: Sinclair Browne, 1982, pp. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain*, London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1987, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Witts, *Artist Unknown*, pp. 99-103; Dan Rebellato, *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Theatre*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 53-4; Michael Billington, *The State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945*, London: Faber and Faber, pp. 32-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hutchison, *The Politics of the Arts Council*, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The Scotsman*, 13 June 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mary Glasgow cited in Rebellato, *1956 And All That*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Arts Council of Great Britain, *Sixth Annual Report*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1946-47, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1981, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Arts Council of Great Britain, Drama Panel: Minutes, 1946-1955, ACGB/43/5 [Victoria and Albert Archive, London]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Arts Council of Great Britain, London: Theatre Royal Stratford East/Theatre Workshop Company Files, Folder 3, ACGB/34/68 [Victoria and Albert Archive, London]. The ACGB Drama Directors during this period were Michael MacOwan (1945-1947), Llewellyn Rees (1947-1949) and John Moody (1949-1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Robert Leach in Jonathan Pitches, ed., *Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012,p. 113; original emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nadine Holdsworth, ‘‘They’d Have Pissed On My Grave’: the Arts Council and Theatre Workshop’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (February 1999), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Joan Littlewood, *Joan’s Book: Joan Littlewood’s Peculiar History as She Tells It*, London: Methuen, 1994, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Manchester Constabulary Report, 16 July 1952 in Records of the Security Service, Personal File: Theatre Workshop, 1951-60, KV 2/3178-80 [The National Archives, Kew]; Recorded Telephone Conversation, 21 August 1947 in Records of the Security Service, Personal File: James Miller/Ewan MacColl, KV/2/2175 [The National Archives, Kew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Letter to H.O. from S.R. Banks, 24 May 1940 in Records of the Security Service, KV/2/2175. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Letter to MI5 from Glasgow CID, 9 December 1952 in Records of the Security Service, K/2/3178. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. MI5 Report, 5 December 1953 in Records of the Security Service, KV/2/3178. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Arts Council, Theatre Workshop Company Files, ACGB34/68 Folder 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Smith, *British Writers*, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Letter to Major AW Turner, 9 March 1944 in Records of the Security Service, KV/2/2175. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Special Branch Report, 10 October 1953, Records of the Security Service, KV/2/3178. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Smith, *British Writers*, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Arts Council, Theatre Royal Papers [ACGB34/68 Folder 3]. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)