Half Moon Memories – by Murray Edmond (excerpt from Memoir in progress)

But how to live? Even paying £1.50 per week, money was not going to last. In *Time Out* I read an advertisement for the position of Community Theatre Worker at the Half Moon Theatre in Aldgate. I went along to see them and they must have liked me because they gave me the job at £9.00 a week – and they also liked another applicant, Peter Conway, because they also gave him a job, and together as two Community Theatre Workers we set about initiating the Half Moon Youth Theatre Workshops. And there I was, back working in the theatre!

Serious theatre work had begun for me with the Living Theatre Troupe in Auckland. The Troupe started life as a group called Guerilla Theatre, which numbered Tim Shadbolt, Miriam Cameron, and Farrell Cleary among others and set out to perform agitprop political street theatre (closely involved with protest against New Zealand’s involvement in the Vietnam War) and also to enliven the street in a spirit of anarchistic cheekiness; then, with the advent of Ken Rea, the Troupe segued into a grouping that was dedicatedly theatrical in its aims, without losing its determination to take theatre to places it wasn’t usually seen. I first saw the Troupe perform on the back of a truck in Parnell in early 1971. Sally Rodwell was amongst the performers that afternoon. The Troupe moved on from Parnell to the Museum in the Domain, but the performance there was stopped by the Museum authorities, who pronounced: “This is a War Memorial Museum, not a madhouse!” The Troupe’s aim was to let loose an entertaining madhouse in streets and parks and beaches as well as to protest the state of society. I stayed with the Troupe through 1971 and 1972, abandoning my postgraduate university study for the romance of the travelling player. The Troupe bought itself a bus and painted it in the spirit of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters and toured the North Island in the summer of 1971-72. The Troupe did stage existing plays (Rochelle Owens’ drama *Futz*, about a sexual relationship between a farmer and his pig, caused a stir) but the heart of the work was the creation of new work, the staging of our own original creations, and I contributed to the life of the troupe as a writer and as an actor until, prior to the 1972 national tour in the bus, four members (Sally Rodwell, Paul Carew, Mary Paul and myself) took our leave in one of those internal fights that belong to the nature of such work, and formed our own theatre group, known as Beggar’s Bag. The Half Moon and I would have recognized each other, when I turned up for my interview with Director Guy Sprung (a Canadian). The origins of the Half Moon Theatre, founded in in 1972 in a small, probably nineteenth century, synagogue in Alie St, E1 (a Half Moon Lane and a Half Moon pub were close by), lay in a desire, Wikipedia tells us, “to create a cheap rehearsal space with living accommodation inspired by the sixties alternative society.” The Living Theatre Troupe in Auckland had a big house in Sentinel Road, Herne Bay, where many Troupies lived (not yours truly) in honour of the communal ideal. By mid-1974 the Half Moon had had some success, it was about to receive its first substantial Arts Council funding (hence perhaps my new job, I now realize), and was setting up a Management Council (of which I would become a member). The founders had been Guy Sprung, who was artistic director, Maurice Colbourne, an actor, and Michael Irving. I never met Michael Irving, but he was living in the theatre building with his wife and dog and new-born baby most of the time that I was working there. As with Living Theatre and Beggar’s Bag, there had been a dispute amongst the founders, and Michael Irving had been the one occupying the accommodation. He refused to move out. It was a kind of a squat and protest at the same time. The accommodation was the boxed-in balcony on one side of the little synagogue. So during any performance there was a family housed inside the theatre. One waited with trepidation for the baby to start crying. One of the pre-show duties was for someone to make sure there was no dog poo in the foyer (was Michael Irving telling Guy and Maurice something?)

The Half Moon had consciously placed itself amongst the working class of the East End. There was a strong sense of identification with those East Enders, who, in 1936, had stopped Oswald Mosely and his British Fascists from marching through their part of the city in the confrontation that came to be called The Battle of Cable Street (a little further east of the Half Moon). The East End in the nineteenth century had been the place in London to which a sizeable Jewish population had immigrated after five centuries of ethnically cleansed absence. The theatre had two early successes with Brecht plays: Guy Sprung directed a production of Brecht’s early and rather impenetrable drama *In the Jungle of the Cities*, which had been disrupted by the new Nazi Party at its 1923 premier, and Pam Brighton directed *St Joan of the Stockyards.* Guy and Pam were a couple at that time and she had left the Royal Court ‘up West’ to come and join the Half Moon. In his obituary for Pam Brighton in 2015, Michael Coveney, in *The Guardian*, described her as, “an old-fashioned Marxian class warrior, combining a big heart and astute intelligence with an energy and a stubbornness” (25 Feb 2015). The Half Moon was the London home for the company called 7:84 (= 7% of the population owns 84% of the wealth), which staged the plays of John McGrath. While I was working at The Half Moon, Pam directed both McGrath’s *Fish in the Sea* and *Soft or a Girl?* I might walk up the narrow stairs to the other side of the synagogue balcony where the theatre office was chaotically located and find Brighton and McGrath in earnest conversation. The actor Colm Meaney, later better known for his roles in *Star Trek* and *The Commitments*, among a large amount of film work, was in *Fish in the Sea.* One day in the office Meaney was sitting there, about to depart for a trip home to Ireland, and I glanced down into his open satchel to see that it was loaded full with condoms, no doubt for distribution in the land where they were forbid. At that time Pam, though really a director and not an actor, was playing one of the leads in Ken Loach’s four part, seven hour epic *Days of Hope* that was broadcast on the BBC in 1975. The Half Moon was a hub of energies - and of anxieties too. The most spectacular moment of psycho-political anxiety was the Saturday afternoon that the actors went on strike and picketed the theatre. Wages were distressingly meagre. But the actors mainly belonged to the WRP (Workers Revolutionary Party) Trotskyist faction, whereas Guy and Pam (and therefore management) belonged to the IMG (the International Marxist Group), so there was an element of tactical jockeying amongst the Trots. I did not mention my SHC affiliations for fear IS (International Socialists) might be beyond the pale. But, as part of the Management Council, that Saturday afternoon I huddled inside in the narrow, cramped office space, shaking my head along with the others, wondering how we might redeem ourselves from this embarrassing political quandary. The only blessing was that it was a Saturday afternoon and there was virtually nobody in Aldgate on a Saturday afternoon, so I believe the angel of history passed over the house and did not mention the events taking place below.

Peter Conway and I were employed to set up the Half Moon Youth Theatre Workshops. The report I wrote before I left the job described the aims of the Workshops: to work with young people in the clubs and estates of the East End; to base all work on the ideas of the young people themselves; to stage productions that were developed and created from their stories and ideas; and also to teach theatre. We worked in six youth clubs from Tower Hamlets to Hackney to the Isle of Dogs. A vital ingredient was finding a local Community Worker who had positive contacts with the community. Otherwise it was daunting to go to a club where there might be games, television, music, hanging out, dancing and so on, and try to start a theatre class. Most of our contact work was in the evenings, travelling by bus and foot round the streets. One night I had taken the youth group from Hackney to the Half Moon to see a show and was riding home with them, but as I tried to follow the children down the aisle of the double-decker, I found myself unable to move. Looking down I saw a man had his large hand held firmly against my chest. “Let me go,” I said. “You’re following them,” he said. The children were already down the stairs and getting off the bus. I had to move fast. Noticing that his grip was really on my army surplus shoulder bag, I heaved the bag over my head and flung it straight in his face. This freed me for a moment and I tumbled to the end of the aisle and rolled down the stairs before the bus started up. Unfortunately, the man came with me, but fortunately brought my bag with him. We ended up lying on the pavement in the cold and dark, with the children gazing in some amazement at the human heap we had created. “Please tell him I’m with you,” I begged the children. “He’s with us, he’s with us” they chorused. Then he was furious, of course. The bus had gone. He was wrong. One has to placate the righteous – and so we did, telling him that, yes, he had done the right thing, and so, mercifully, he did not punch me in the face. On 19 December I was up in Hackney, walking down a street by myself, when the bomb the IRA had planted in Selfridges in Oxford Street exploded. It shook all the houses in the street, though the street must have been at least five miles from Oxford Street.

The majority of the young people Peter and I worked with were aged between 10 and 16. It was important to the Half Moon that we tried to find a vehicle for working class voices, ie. that we create dramas that talked about the lives of the young people in the East End. The group at the Isle of Dogs succeeded in developing and writing an original play, ‘They’re Driving Us Up the Wall,’ about being caught stealing a forklift truck in the dock area of the Isle and the consequences of this. It was a ‘normal’ experience to turn up at a club in the evening for a workshop session and, upon asking “Where’s Micky tonight?” to be told the lead actor had in fact been arrested that morning. ‘They’re Driving Us Up the Wall’ was staged at the Half Moon itself, with a cast of 15 kids. The play certainly spoke in the local dialect and had a nice line in satirical humour towards authority, which was part of the East End spirit. The group at Dalston Estate in Hackney also produced a play, but here the group was younger and the material the children chose was Disney fantasia. I was criticized for allowing work like this to be produced, in that it did not represent the aims of the Half Moon, but I had calculated, in my irrepressible liberalism, that keeping the working relationship going was better than losing it altogether. I remember well that Peter, working at the Wapping Youth Club, struggled valiantly to make that relationship work, but in the end it had to be abandoned. Peter stayed on after I left the job in May 1975, and he must have done a wonderful job after my departure, because the extraordinary thing is that the Half Moon Young People’s Theatre still runs today, at White Horse Road, in Limehouse, E1, more than 40 years later. Now, of course, it stages shows for children and tours them nationally, as well as running classes. And Peter Conway manages his own music promotion business in south-east London. The Half Moon itself, as an adult theatre, folded in 1990, not long after it had moved into a purpose-built flexible theatre space of its own a little further east in Stepney. Often ‘success’ seems to be the prelude to the end, whereas an old synagogue with a baby and a dog inspires feats that transcend obstacles.

In January 1975 I attended The Association of Community Theatres conference in Swiss Cottage as the Half Moon representative. Lest this sound too grand, I recall us all sitting in a room on the floor, leaning our backs against the wall; it was a humble gathering. In New Zealand, the word ‘community’ had been appropriated by those theatres receiving Arts Council subsidies to describe themselves. I had titled my article published in *Islands* magazine at the end of 1972 ‘Group Theatre.’ This was the term I used to describe the work of Amamus and Theatre Action and the Living Theatre Troupe. The TACT conference agenda included a item called ‘Internal Relationships’ which proposed discussion of “collective play-making and the division of labour with group practice.” The New Zealand companies I had written about would all have recognized the importance of this item, whereas it wouldn’t have turned the head of the Mercury Theatre in Auckland. Another English company of the time with similar aims and commitments and working in London was Common Stock, two of the founders of which were New Zealanders: Frank Whitten and Andrew McAlpine. Common Stock also went to youth clubs to develop script with and from young people. However their practice was to make the script with the young people, but then to perform the show themselves.

In both New Zealand and in England there was a strong sense of a theatre that had a different kind of existence from ‘normal’ theatre. In a way, Michael, at Central School, despite its fine history from Elsie Fogarty onwards, was being trained as an actor for the normal theatre. The other theatre thought about itself in two ways that were different. Firstly, it thought theatre had a job to do eg. to enable working class voices to be heard or to protest the injustice of the war being waged in Vietnam. It wasn’t simply a matter of performing plays about certain subjects, rather of taking the theatre itself into contexts in which what it had to say was the reason it existed. This leads to the second way in which this ‘other’ theatre was different. It wanted to change/destroy/remake the art form itself. There were inner tensions between these two aims. The second could be critiqued as being too ‘formalist’ and the first as being to ‘coercive.’ In England the heart of the movement was located in the job theatre had to do. The Half Moon had gone to the East End for a purpose (not because the rent was cheap) – to speak for and with the voiceless, to put it in its most rhetorical form. I was struck by how little the formalist aim impacted on English theatre at that time in 1974. In New Zealand the advent of Theatre Action in 1971 had brought a whole new way of doing. Francis Batten had gone from New Zealand to study not in RADA or in the Actor’s Studio, but at Jacques Lecoq’s school in Paris, from 1969 to 1971. When he returned to New Zealand he brought with him four other recent graduates of Lecoq’s (Katie Couzinet, Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Glenys McQueen, and Serge Martin) and from this grouping, known as Theatre Action (1971-1977) many of us, such as the members of the Living Theatre Troupe, received a comprehensive workshop training in the period between 1971 to 1974. There was a company in London at the time I was working for the Half Moon called Red Ladder. Red Ladder were conscientiously agitprop, closer to Living Theatre than Half Moon. I remember one day at the Half Moon someone said to me, with some amazement and amusement, that Red Ladder were using juggling in their work. I had already begun to learn juggling with Theatre Action. With Lecoq juggling was not seen simply as a skill (like tap-dancing, for example), but as a means to talk about the world. The San Francisco Mime Troupe had used juggling to portray assembly line workers in a factory. In England it was not until Simon McBurney and Theatre de Complicite in the 1980s that Lecoq’s teaching achieved an acknowledged life in theatre. There was almost a suspicion of such work as ‘bourgeois.’ So, when I announced I was leaving the Half Moon and heading for Oxford to earn some money so that I could go to Poland and undertake workshops at Jerzy Grotowski’s Theatre Laboratory in Wroclaw, my intentions were greeted with some skepticism. Grotowski was seen as formalist, workshops undertaken for their own sake were bordering on indulgent, and the level of state support that people thought Grotowski’s theatre received (in fact it received the lowest level of state subsidy) was seen as an antipathetic to those struggling for subsidy. The same attitude can be found in Mervyn Thompson’s solo autobiographical drama *Passing Through*; speaking of the seminar Grotowski held in Wellington during his 1973 brief visit to New Zealand, Thompson questions “the relevance of his heavily-subsidised theories to an emerging colonial culture.”