

"BAD CITY"

THE PACK

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INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SHEETER FOR THE
HOMELESS : 1987

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THE WRITER

NICK STAFFORD

SOME BACKGROUND READING:

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(acknowledgements to the "OBSERVER")

All They Want Is A Room Somewhere...
:Beverley Perry

Children at Risk: Monica Brimacombe
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THE WORKSHOP

THE ACTOR

AILSA FAIRLEY

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DEBORAH BESTWICK

WHERE WE STARTED: THE WALL DISPLAY

THE WORK PROCESS

THE WRITER : NICK STAFFORD

The project started for me when the Half Moon Young People's Theatre asked me in for an interview in May. The Company had read some of my work and had already worked on one script and presented it in a rehearsed reading and they were looking for a writer.

I went in with several ideas and we talked for a while. Finally, they did commission me and on July 1st we had a meeting to decide what the play would be about. Between the two meetings I had been thinking more about the areas we'd covered and the one sticking in my head was "homelessness". So I did some preparation, scrawled a few paragraphs on big sheets of paper and stuck them on the wall and that's what we settled on. (The material from these wall-sheets is included elsewhere in the pack.)

From then on I did more research, then, with our workshop leader, Janys Chambers, planned the two-week workshop. (The workshop plan is included in the pack, together with lists of published materials we used, the people and organisations who helped us and a list of contacts and helplines.)

The writing process started a long time ago in my head, only starting to crystallise when I was preparing for the interview. All writers have obsessions they constantly return to: mine are the ways in which we stand out from one another and the ways in which we are forced to see ourselves as different.

All of us have some things which are ours alone and I am interested in why we are often attacked for them by groups and other individuals. I look at systems we live under, and power structures. As in Britain the main system is Capitalism, I am always posing the question: "who gains financially from this situation?"

For "Bad City" I started with some quotes from books, things I'd seen and felt; smells even. I had some initial ideas about content, that is, scenes, and a strong image of what the play might look like and its atmosphere. The elements which swirl around in my head as I am working fall roughly into two groups. First: CONTENT - what is in the play and what it says. Second: STYLE or FORM - the way in which it says it. The content of the play "Bad City" will be dealt with elsewhere in the pack.

Style is what sets writers apart from each other, as do their obsessions, their vocabulary, their experience, their technique and a lot of other things. These factors are the same for anybody doing any job.

My style is to exaggerate things to try to uncover the fundamental truth of a situation. Within my style there are lots of different styles, as you will see from the play. This is because for each particular scene or incident I first know what I want to happen, then I have to find the most effective theatrical way of saying it. I consciously avoid people on stage "just talking" as they might in real life because television does this much better than live theatre. And I love the power of silence.

Scenes 5, 6 and 7 of "Bad City" show a broad range. Scene 5 is the second time we see Glad at work. The scene is based on improvisations we did in the workshop. Although there are lots of words, the scene is very active, with constant passers-by and city noises, and within Glad's speeches there are clear indications that she's very much alive and full of restless energy.

Even the length of a line and the sound of a word are clues for an actor to find what to do, and often these clues are not "planned" by the writer. This is an important part of the process because, if the script is sewn up tightly, there is nothing for director, actors, stage managers, costume designers, set designers, lighting designers and anyone else to explore, and the production has no chance to become their show and to live.

Scene 6 is very different. After the wordiness of scene 5 I wanted a bit of time for the play and the audience to sit back a bit, and I wanted to create a new atmosphere. Homeless people because of their powerlessness have a lot of waiting around. So Greta and Jeanette are seen doing this. Then Jeanette sings, largely to herself, a song which relates to the play as a whole but particularly to Greta's predicament. Then we have a bit more silence, then the space become's Greta's parental home,

(As I am writing these comments before rehearsals start, I can only imagine that the transformation will be achieved by a lighting change, the addition of a prop, but most importantly by the actors imagining themselves there. If they imagine anything strongly enough, we will believe it.)

I instinctively knew that was what I wanted, but it is difficult to explain why. I hope it will lift the scene even further out of naturalism than the stilted dialogue takes it, anyway, and that we will experience another dimension. Plus it makes demands on the actors which I hope they enjoy.

Scene 7 I like a lot. It contains the elements I've talked about in the other two scenes, and every word, dialogue or direction, is an active clue for the actors. The thing which fascinates me most about this scene is that there is no other place in the play for it. Other bits may be moved around but not this, especially for the development of relations between Glad and Greta.

Finally, a few words about what I actually do. Throughout the process there is some part of my brain working on the play. During the period for actually writing it I set aside about fourteen hours a day. Out of these, I probably force myself to sit at my desk for ten. Four pages is a good day. Some days there are none. Then I clean the house, phone people up, drink too much, wallow in self-pity. But deadlines are wonderful things, especially if your income depends on meeting them.

The scenes referred to by Nick are included in the pack. They may be photocopied should any group wish to do their own work on them or study the scenes in more detail to follow up some of the points Nick has made.

Young

people have always left home and always will leave home. It is a natural part of growing up.

Most young people leave home in a planned,organised way. But many leave or are forced to leave and this can often be unplanned.For these young people there is no clear"route" and very little help when they want it. Leaving home or being forced to leave home can come about for various reasons: a family argument,lack of privacy, overcrowding,parents split up,to find work,sexual abuse etc. There are many young people who have grown up in institutions and on reaching 18,move out. Approximately 13,500 young people leave local authority care each year and the majority become homeless at some stage after leaving.

It is important to understand that the problem is not that young people leave home;but that,when they do,there is no housing for them. In a publication of the campaigning organisation SHELTER,it reported that it was estimated that there were 80,000 homeless young people in Britain. Clearly there is a failure to meet their needs.

In those cases where a young person leaves home suddenly or on impulse when the situation there becomes intolerable and with no accommodation to go to,society's attitudes are unsympathetic. There are people who think that others become homeless because of their carelessness.

"Most people,if they find out you've left home,or in care,think you've done something wrong,or that you're bad....Yet if something was wrong,it is not necessarily your fault - it can be sometimes - but if you're getting beaten up or picked on it's not your fault. But people always think it's a problem - or see you as a problem - and don't see that girls can leave home because they want to, not because they've got problems. The time comes when you want to leave,and you just do it. Why should it have to be a problem?"

("Working with Girls Newsletter" NO.7 1982)

Just as a place to live is a basic need for everyone in the community,young people's needs should be seen as equally valid and urgent as the needs of everyone else. What everyone wants from housing is what young people want: somewhere safe and warm; dry and secure and that gives privacy. With a decent home;a secure base,young people will have a real opportunity to make their fullest contribution to the community.

More and more it is young people who bear the brunt of the housing crisis. SHELTER estimate that 80,000 young people experience homelessness in Britain every year. In London alone there are almost 300,000 young people who live with others but who need their own accommodation.

Even when housing is available at prices they can afford,there are factors which seriously affect the quality and nature of the housing young people get: are they employed? male or female? the colour of their skin? social class of their parents? married or co-habiting or single?

YOUNG PEOPLE AND HOMELESSNESS : 2

For young people who leave home without having a clear picture of where they will go, the options most commonly open to them are:

- a) staying with friends; sleeping on sofas or on the floor
- b) hostels
- c) short-life housing
- d) squats
- e) bed and breakfast
- f) sleeping rough

But none of these is a "home". They are all temporary and not what young people want or need from housing.

But there are other factors which affect the likelihood of young people gaining housing:

- a) the number of unemployed teenagers has almost trebled since 1979.
- b) state benefits available to young people have been cut 14 times since 1979.
- c) in 1988 young people (under 25) will receive a lower rate of state benefit than those who are older than 25 - irrespective of individual circumstances. This lower rate will make it even more difficult than it already is for young people to be able to live independently.

INTRODUCTION

This pack has been prepared with one main objective in mind: to be a way of helping students explore the play and to engage with the ideas in the play. We hope that the students will be helped to engage at all levels: intellectually, emotionally and - in their own theatre-making - practically.

We hope that these notes will help them to be more reflective about the play and help them to make an evaluation of the play.

The notes include a section on the "working process". The aim of this is to provide a kind of "model" which we hope will be useful to those students who want to devise and write their own plays and want to get away from "TV naturalism".

UNDER-AGE AND LEAVING HOME

In "Bad City" Greta is under 16 and she runs away from home as she refuses any longer to put up with the sexual abuse she has suffered throughout her childhood. The play presents this aspect of Greta's background very clearly.

The play is aimed at audiences of young adults (16 - 25) but it is expected that some audiences may include people younger than that. Teachers may wish to deal directly with the subject of running away from home when the young person concerned is under age. It happens and happens all too frequently. But having an under-age character in the play could be taken up by some people and misrepresented or misunderstood. Greta's story shows that she had choices - but in reality they weren't choices at all. She could have stayed at home. She could have gone to the police. She could leave home. Each choice carries with it very unpleasant implications. She has a very real dilemma and it is an appalling one. The play presents this dilemma and the choice she made. The play does not suggest there is any easy answer.

Teachers may find it useful to be reminded of these factors: it is a commonly held belief that young people may leave home with parents' consent at 16. This is not expressly stated in law. Some other facts about being under 16:

- i) legally unable to work full-time
- ii) cannot receive supplementary benefit
- iii) are supposed to be in full-time education
- iv) would have great difficulty in obtaining privately let or council accommodation
- v) as far as girls are concerned, they are below the age of sexual consent.

Any under 16 young adult who wants to leave home would be best advised to think in terms of substituting parental control with some other more acceptable adults' control e.g. a supportive relative, private fostering, local authority care or wardship.

Finally, the police have the legal power to detain anyone under 17 if they have reasonable cause to believe that the young person is in some form of physical or moral danger, or is beyond parents' control.

LIFE IN CARDBOARD CITY

By Steve Platt.

At a time when London's owner-occupiers are reaping the benefits of the post-Big Bang spiral in house prices there are more homeless people living on the capital's streets than at any time since the war. Some seek relief in alcohol, and go downhill fast; some, like Brian 'Geordie' Johnson (right), refuse to be defeated by their circumstances. With others of an independent cast of mind, Johnson has made a home for himself in a low-level housing complex at the heart of London's centre of culture at the South Bank – Cardboard City

WHEN, DURING LAST WINTER'S COLD SPELL, Edwina Currie visited some of London's homeless sleeping rough beneath the South Bank arts complex, she paused to speak with Brian Johnson, who has a bed overlooking the Thames, just below Waterloo Bridge. Brian says Mrs Currie told him she had 'every sympathy' with his plight. 'Madam,' he says he replied, 'I think you'll find sympathy comes somewhere between sex and syphilis in the dictionary – and none of them are any good to me.'

Brian – his fellow dossers know him as Geordie – has been sleeping out here for 15 months. Partially blind and confined to a wheelchair as a result of muscular dystrophy, he left his council flat in Islington when he

was told that he was too vulnerable to live on his own. Scared that he might be put in a home for the physically handicapped, he moved out and came to the South Bank. 'I want to *have* a home, not be *in* a home,' he says forcefully. 'I'd take anything, as long as I had my own front door – and my independence.'

His independence, and his refusal to submit to his disabilities, have made him a folk hero here in Cardboard City, where the casualties of London's housing crisis create makeshift homes out of the waste of their more prosperous fellow citizens. A wheelchair athlete of some renown, with numerous prizes for canoeing, basketball, archery and chess, Brian also claims to have completed 655 marathons since he began 'running' in 1981. He says he spent Christmas completing a 3,859-mile run round Britain, and much of January competing in a 1,440-mile race from Le Havre in France to Dubrovnik in Yugoslavia. A clutch of medals worn around his neck, and a series of trophies and statuettes kept safely for him by well-housed friends, prove that some of his achievements, at least, do not belong to the world of fantasy inhabited by others among London's homeless.

Cardboard boxes, a metal crowd-control barrier and sheets of hardboard make up the walls and ceilings of the 'homes' of Brian and his neighbours. His wheelchair stands in a clutter of paltry possessions – a few blankets, a tape recorder and some country and western cassettes, a spare tracksuit and running shoes, and a metal-framed bed, donated by the Salvation Army. On the roof of the improvised shelter next door, a daffodil and a rose poke their heads out of a Woodpecker cider bottle. A beer glass contains another bunch of flowers.

There are four makeshift homes in this, the most desirable suburb of Cardboard City. Round the corner – but without the view over the Thames – there are 30 or so more. Numbers are low at the moment: in the past there have been up to a hundred people sleeping rough here. But the current residents are keen to discourage what Brian's neighbour, Fran, describes as 'winos and weirdos'. They protect their patch with a series of self-enforced ground rules – no fires, no noise late at night, no violence or threatening behaviour, and no mess that you don't clean up yourself.

'Over there,' says Fran, pointing to the Embankment across the river, 'some of them are disgusting.' Just 34 years old, but with 14 years of sleeping rough on and off behind her, she used to sleep on the Embankment

herself, but moved because of the violence. 'There were fights almost every night,' she says. 'And one woman used to run around naked, and have sex in front of everyone. It was terrible. The minority make us all look bad, so we don't want any riff-raff here.' This is the dispossessed looking down on the dispossessed: the division between the two banks of the Thames brings a new dimension to the 'north-south divide'.

Fran, whose one-year-old daughter is currently being adopted back in her home town of Leicester, shares her pitch with her boyfriend, Sid, a 22-year-old biker from Glasgow. 'All we want is a peaceful life and somewhere to live,' she says. 'But if you haven't got a home, you can't get a job – and if you haven't got a job, you can't get a flat. What are we supposed to do – disappear?'

Like the last occupants of their space under the Royal Festival Hall – Ernie and Sue, a young couple who moved out two weeks previously – Fran and Sid expect they'll eventually get a squat. But Fran says she won't move until she's sure that Brian Johnson is being properly looked after.

While we talk, Brian is visited by a steady stream of friends and well-wishers. 'Blind Billy', who lost an eye when he was mugged for 70p three years ago, brings him a meal of pie and chips, and chats idly about the time they spent together when they lived in neighbouring blocks in Islington. Billy has his own flat, and a job with British Telecom. 'This is it, innit? You gotta look after each other, aintya? No one else will, will they?' he says, in his jerky, staccato style, every sentence finishing with a question that requires no answer.

Willy McGee – 'the resident intellectual', according to Brian: he has an Open University degree – calls on him after a spell out begging, to see if he needs anything. Brian asks for a can of Coke (he doesn't drink alcohol), and they discuss the best methods of collecting cash from passers-by. Willy elaborates on the 'semantics' of different begging notices – he and his friends have several, each using a slightly different form of words – and he tells me that the most effective are those which say that 1987 is the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and ask people to 'give direct to the homeless, not the sham organisations that help themselves'.

Begging is a sophisticated operation here. Willy, an articulate and well-spoken young man, slips easily into the well-rehearsed role of a plaintive, helpless victim of society when he is canvassing donations. The spring goes out of his step as he shuffles slowly towards a prospective donor, and his voice croaks an appeal that most ignore but some find irresistible: 'Excuse me, sir, madam, can you spare a few pence for the homeless?'

The best begging pitches – such as at the foot of the escalators in Waterloo Station, or at the end of the pedestrian footbridge over the Thames from Charing Cross – are organised on an informal rota. Outsiders are discouraged, and usually people will agree to move after an hour or so if someone else is waiting to have a go. The money collected is often shared: Fran, for instance, makes sure that Brian has everything he needs before spending any on herself.

One woman tells Willy that she won't give him any money because 'people like you just spend it on drink'. 'Madam,' he replies, with impeccable courtesy, 'if you

had to sleep outside every night, you might want something to help you sleep too.' She walks away, disgust dripping from every pore on her middle-class face.

The next day, I watch Micky – 'Mr Bell', they call him, because of his consumption of whisky – scrounging a few coppers for the weekend. 'I'm off to work,' he announces as he sets off with his plastic collecting bucket. 'Want to come?' Micky lacks Willy's finesse, and gets mainly pennies in his bucket. Even so, I see him give some of his hard-earned cash to an old man from across the river, and later he says he must sort out his blankets tonight because he's got more than he needs and someone else might need them more than him.

Micky has slept on the South Bank since he was last released from prison five and a half years ago, and he expects to do so for the rest of his life. 'I'll be here till that pillar falls down,' he says, pointing to a vast stanchion supporting the Festival Hall. His biggest complaint is not that he is homeless but that 'people come over here from hostels and flats to get whatever's going. There's 37 of us sleeping here now, but on Sunday nights, when they serve up the meals, there must be about a hundred turn up. They're ponces, that lot.'

One of the people who comes purely for the Sunday evening meals is Alice – 'Dr Wena Wilcox' she calls herself – and her dog, Bela. Formerly a matron, she served in the Royal Army Medical Corps during the war, but has slept rough or in hostels for many years now.

Other casual visitors include 'Belfast Billy' and 'Big Joe', who also call themselves 'El Gringo' and 'Apache' and a wide range of other pseudonyms as the fancy takes them. Billy and Joe (who is now in prison) normally sleep under the arches at Waterloo Station, where they build a fire every night. Joe – 'a really violent bastard', according to one of his mates – recently hit Billy in the face with an iron bar in an argument over a can of Special Brew, but the two were soon friends again. 'I don't bear it against him,' says Billy. 'But I'm glad he's out of the way at the moment.'

Round the corner from the Waterloo Station arches I meet 'Cowboy' – his real name is John McCormack – a stocky man in a battered raincoat and trilby hat. A cold sore virtually covers his unshaven chin, and on his calloused hands the skin has been torn from the knuckles. Septic flesh oozes clear liquid in the wounds – caused, he says, by a policeman who caught him begging on the Station forecourt, kicked him down the stairs and stamped on his hands as

he lay on the ground. 'It was "Kicker" from Victoria,' he tells me. 'They've sent him here to get rid of the dossers.'

Cowboy has been sleeping rough in London for 14 years. Although he was brought up in a Belfast orphanage, raped at the age of nine, and suffered a nervous breakdown when he was 10, he then lived an entirely ordinary and respectable life until the death of his wife in 1973. The letters of her name – Joan – are tattooed on his left hand, one on each finger, and as he recalls that distant time when he had a wife, family, job and home, Cowboy's eyes betray the lingering pain, now dulled and deadened by drink alone.

When Joan died, Cowboy says he put on his suit, packed his case, and walked out of his job as a stationmaster in Kent. 'I stuck out my thumb and came to London, and I've been here ever since,' he says, pressing his face close to mine, so that the stench of alcohol and tobacco reinforces his tale of decline.

As we talk, a man approaches. Cleanly dressed, youthful and well-spoken, he toys with Cowboy's request for a drink. Touching his grime-stained hands, unbuttoning his shirt and fondling his hirsute chest in a camp display of outrageous disrespect, he tries to persuade Cowboy to go into the pub with him. Cowboy – against his better judgement – does so, and is immediately thrown out again. I want to ask the stranger what perverse pleasure he gets from humiliating someone in this way, but Cowboy tells me not to bother. 'I'm an alcoholic,' he announces. 'I follow the drink. I don't care how I get it.'

Later, though, when the man has gone, Cowboy calls him a 'poof' and begins to get angry. 'I might be a dosser,' he says. 'But I don't like people taking the piss.' He tells me of his past jobs – as a soldier in the Royal Ulster Rifles, as a security guard, and finally as a stationmaster. 'I've not always been like this,' he says, 'I'm as good as him or anyone else.'

More typical of the new wave in London's burgeoning homeless population, however, is Dave, a 22-year-old from Anfield, in Liverpool. His parents died during his teens, and though he has an older sister in London, he doesn't know where she lives. Dave used to live in Ruislip, but because of DHSS board and lodging regulations he was forced to move after eight weeks and came to London.

He stayed under the Festival Hall from October until March, living on handouts from voluntary organisations and £29 a week social security, which he spent mainly on tea and biscuits in South Bank cafeterias, so that he could keep warm during the day. After failing

to find a job - 'No one will employ you if you're sleeping down here,' he says - he temporarily returned to Liverpool, but expects to come back to London soon. His ambition, like so many of his fellow dossers, is modest: 'To have my own flat with a telly and a video.'

Upstairs from Cardboard City is the wholly different world of the South Bank culture complex - the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Hayward Gallery and - across the road - the National Theatre. Richard Pulford, the South Bank centre's general director of administration, and Frank Forino, the director of operational services, have the difficult task of reconciling the two worlds.

There were fears among those sleeping rough that, after the abolition of the GLC which used to own the site and gave them permission to stay there, they would be ejected. But Richard Pulford has fought off pressure from concert-goers and arts patrons to get rid of them. Complaints - which Pulford says vary from 'reasonable ones about people defecating on the stairs to the sort that say concert-goers shouldn't have to see the homeless' - have declined substantially. The reason, he says, is that the South Bank management has worked with those sleeping rough to sort out the problems.

'Unlike the GLC, we don't have a wider social brief,' Pulford tells me. 'Our first responsibility is to our patrons. But we have sought not to make wretched lives more wretched, and by consultation and discussion we have managed to improve things for both our patrons and the people sleeping out.'

Regular meetings are held at the nearby North Lambeth day centre to talk over difficulties, and Frank Forino visits the Cardboard City residents daily to chat informally and check that there are no problems. The South Bank centre's external security guards have also been encouraged to develop a rapport with the homeless, protect them from petty thefts and assaults, and keep an eye on their belongings when they are away from the site; a special store has even been set up for this purpose.

In addition, the South Bank centre employs six of the people sleeping rough as cleaners, four of them in the site's toilets, which are now open 24 hours a day. 'It's the cleanest public lavatory in London,' says Richard Pulford. A system has also been worked out for cleaning the areas used by the homeless. 'The people sleeping out do it on a day-to-day basis,' says Frank Forino. 'And we send in contractors every so often to do a major cleaning.'

The system works. Cardboard City is cleaner, and suffers from less vandalism. Even the police are satisfied.

'The most important thing is that we treat the homeless as people with problems,' says Richard Pulford, 'not as a problem in themselves. You also have to recognise that, despite what a lot of people think, drink is not the problem for most of them. Housing is.'

And there is no doubt that the housing problem is growing. A few years ago, most of those sleeping rough in London were middle-aged or old men, many of whom did indeed have severe drink problems. Today, according to organisations concerned with the homeless, an increasing number are young people, who have come to the capital in search of a job or a better life and who - like Dave - have been forced to move on every two months as a result of DHSS board and lodging regulations.

Estimates of the numbers sleeping rough in London vary from 2,000 to 10,000. In addition, there are perhaps 40,000 people squatting and several times as many living in wholly inadequate or substandard temporary accommodation. Councils - which had to deal with almost 30,000 homeless families in London last year - can't help those without children. And, despite recent Government attempts to reverse the decline, the private rented sector continues to lose up to 100,000 homes a year. Those who find themselves on the streets are more numerous - and likely to remain in that position for longer - than at any time since the war. According to researchers on the single homeless, no other city in Western Europe has problems on the same scale as London.

Brian Johnson says that on 14 May he hopes to embark on his latest ultra-marathon - a round-the-world wheelchair run in the world record-breaking time of 256 days. He will do so in aid of charity, to publicise the problem of homelessness, and on a shoestring budget raised by well-wishers and friends (he says he lost his sponsorship from the TSB when they discovered he was homeless - 'they didn't want to be associated with a dossier').

How on earth can a partially blind, disabled and homeless man of 52 tackle such a feat, I ask him sceptically. Won't it be horrendously difficult? 'Not half as difficult as finding somewhere to live in London,' he replies. ●

According to research on the single homeless, no other city in Western Europe has problems on the same scale as London

If you haven't got a home, you can't get a job - and if you haven't got a job, you can't get a flat. What are we supposed to do - disappear?

ALL THEY WANT IS A ROOM SOMEWHERE...

the desperate plight of the homeless young

There's a tattered old lady who tramps the streets of London's Waterloo. Her matted, filthy hair is caught up in what passes for a headscarf. She drags two laundry bags along, which contain all she possesses in the world. For her and her companions - those who doss out in cardboard boxes under Charing Cross arches - there's no hope of their home being anything more than the cold pavements or a darkened doorway.

These people are the perfect subjects for TV shock reports on homelessness - the old, the senile, the insane who live on the streets, eat at soup runs and often end up dead from exposure. It's not surprising, then, that the public often think of 'homeless people' as vagrants. Today, however, the 'average' homeless person is no longer a vagrant. Those without a home are more likely to be the young and single, childless couples, families, the elderly - in fact, a cross section spanning all ages, backgrounds and levels of education. And, in the 'Eighties, the housing crisis is at its worst since just after World War I. But who or what is to blame for the problem? Government policies, the recession, social trends - they all play their part in the worsening situation. Families, single people with children, the old and the sick who are homeless are all suffering. But, although their prospects aren't good, society feels some obligation towards them. For the single homeless without dependants, however, the outlook is bleak. Government Acts work against them, and the 'caring society' turns them away. Yet young people are heading for the capital and other big cities in droves, looking for work and with dreams of the 'good life'. In the light of recent reports, *Beverley Perry* looks at the future of the young, single homeless and their prospects...

THE VULNERABLE YOUNG

Given that there are as many as 30,000 homeless young people in London alone, and that every other city in the country is suffering similar problems, it's not difficult to imagine the degree of despair and suffering many have to face. Some, certainly, may have created their own problems, but others (looking



As many as 30,000 young people are homeless in London alone - and their numbers are on the increase

for work in big cities, dismissed from care and left to fend for themselves, those homeless because of family overcrowding) are virtually blameless.

In 1976, the TV documentary *Johnny Go Home* caused a stir in high circles and prompted some action towards housing young singles. In 1984, with spiralling unemployment taking precedence over other main issues, housing has conveniently been swept under the carpet.

Pressure groups such as Shelter (the National Campaign for the Homeless) have probably never been more important than now. Shelter operate throughout the UK (not London), and among their main concerns are the singles seeking accommodation - those without children who'll get blunt refusals from the authorities, and many of whom end up on the streets.

Claire Booker from Shelter told us: "Basically, the young, single homeless person doesn't get a look in. Young people are very vulnerable in this situation - but they're the country's future. If you leave them open to depression, bad health (both mental and physical), crime will inevitably go up. Homeless people are more vulnerable to drugs rings, to prostitution and other crimes. Faced with being homeless,

you get desperate. If someone can provide you with accommodation, you can't afford to be choosy."

The stories of young girls being picked up by pimps as a last, desperate resort are indeed true. And Claire cites the deaths of those young single men who took up the offer of shelter from convicted murderer Dennis Nilson: "They died, and there was just a general lack of caring amongst the authorities. Their attitude seems to be: 'If you're single, fend for yourself!'" Whilst Shelter provide housing support through their nationwide aid centres, initiate ideas and projects (like Homebase, to help young people dismissed from care) and are pressing for law changes, they are a charitable campaign and their funds are limited.

Claire speaks despondently of the experiences of those people they come into contact with: "You'll get some kids staying on the streets, whilst others are forced to return home, often to an unhappy situation. A lot will shack up with their friends, sleeping rough on the floor. We even know of someone who slept for six months in a corridor."

"Getting pregnant to obtain a council property is one option. Oh, the councils haven't actually been saying, 'Go off and get pregnant,' as such - but they have been saying,

'If you were pregnant, then it would be all right.'"

But if you're desperate and the council is your only hope, what is their minimum obligation towards you? "They may put you on the waiting list and you should get advice," Claire replies. "So really, there is very little help. The single homeless are *not* a priority group."

WHY THE PROBLEM'S GETTING WORSE

How can there be enough homes to go round if they're not building any new ones? With house building (both public and private) at its lowest level for 60 years, the result has been a severe lack of decent housing. The main reasons for this are economic ones - the recession and Government cuts.

As for council housing, this Government's policy of selling off council stock to tenants has made it harder for those who can't afford to buy; the availability lessens and the choice and chance of transfers get smaller.

Another big factor aggravating the problem, sad though it is, is the fact that families are splitting up at a faster rate than ever before. Divorce, now a fact of everyday life,

produces two households where, before, there was only one: both need to be rehoused, but building isn't veering towards one-bedroom properties.

And, for young single people, the outlook's particularly depressing. More people are leaving home at a younger age - the main reasons being that their families are splitting up, or arguments with their parents. Also, young people are more independent today and, instead of staying at home with Mum and Dad until they're married, or just putting up with an unhappy home life because they have nowhere else to go, they're leaving home in droves. But what effect does being homeless have? The results of a recent Department of the Environment study are grim, revealing facts like: the longer a person's been without a home and living in hostels, reception centres and sleeping rough, the more likely they are to get into heavy drinking, drug-taking and crime; unemployment among the homeless leaps from a normal 12 per cent to a staggering 51 per cent - ironic, as looking for work is the very reason why many young people leave for the big cities. As for how being homeless affects relationships, the results aren't so easy to measure. One person described it as, "Probably much worse, in emotional terms, than being sent to prison. But at least prisoners have a roof over their heads and know when their sentence will end."

THE COUNCILS' 'PUNITIVE' MEASURES

Not all councils can be accused of negligence in helping the single homeless. Some councils (like Southwark and Lewisham, both in London) have policies and schemes specially geared towards the problem. Others (like Hackney) are facing such appalling difficulties, with acute shortages and a high percentage of decrepit property, that they can only help the most desperate of cases.

All councils, in 1984, have been affected by Government cuts. However, some councils are definitely unsympathetic in their attitude. It's these councils, Claire Booker claims, who, if they can find any reason for getting out of housing you, will do so.

Also, the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act of 1977 blatantly excludes single people from the list of those who must be given housing aid (eg, families, pregnant women, the elderly).

Loopholes in the Act have made the young person's lot even harder. One of these concerns making yourself 'intentionally homeless'. So anyone who leaves a council property of their own accord (ie, they were not evicted or forced to leave because of fire, flood or some other disaster) will be classed as 'intentionally homeless' and will be excluded from council responsibility. Many young



"Grim, regimented and frightening" - one description of hostel life

people who have left their families' council homes in search of work have unknowingly been affected by this loophole. One family who left Northern Ireland because they were subjected to political harassment, and asked for council assistance in England, were turned away.

Claire Booker comments: "Technically, this family had made themselves 'intentionally homeless' - but do you decide to stay on and have your kneecaps shot off?"

Families that are on the priority list must be put up by the council. This means that they may face long stays in regimented hostels (where they may be split up if the accommodation isn't large enough), bed-and-breakfast establishments, and accommodation that other people do not want to live in. They could be in these temporary places for six months, a year, before permanent housing is offered to them.

Many families have reported these experiences as "humiliating and unsettling". There's also been a lot of criticism of this practice. The cost of accommodating families in bed-and-breakfast establishments can, over a long period, be many times that of, say, repairing a council property which has lain empty for months. And who's footing the bill for bed-and-breakfast establishments and hostels? Ultimately, it's the ratepayer.

"Housing families like this is a bit of a punitive measure," says Claire. "It's as if the councils are saying, 'We don't want people coming to us unless they've really suffered - then we'll know that they're genuinely homeless.' It's the workhouse mentality."

However, Claire is careful to state that, in the same situation, a single person who applies to the council for aid wouldn't even get this.

IT HAPPENED TO US...

BEKI'S STORY

Beki is 21. She was very unhappy at home and first left five years ago, to come to London. Beki admits she had very naive ideas about the 'good life' in the capital: finding a place to live, landing a good job and making true friends. She's achieved none of these.

Instead, like many fresh-faced and gullible teenagers who flock to the big cities, her story is a tragic one. Perhaps more so because the good old-fashioned morals she was brought up with seem to have slowly been eroded by her experiences of being homeless.

When Beki first arrived, her vulnerability made her easy prey for those who make their living out of the 'West End scene' - drug dealers, pimps and perverts. Her loneliness led her into the company of those who support their 'habits' by getting others onto drugs.

Beki is now off the 'West End scene' and is living in a long-stay, charity-run hostel in the King's Cross area. This is her story . . .

"I come from Southwest England, from a town which seems quiet and sleepy compared to London.

"There's always been conflict between me and Mum. We had many bitter arguments, mainly about silly things. We both have the same stubbornness, plus there's a big age gap - she's 63. I never knew my dad - he left when I was a baby.

"When I first came to London, when I was 17, I just thought, 'I'll get a job and a flat. It will be wonderful. I had a lot of pipe dreams then. So I left home and took the train up. I wasn't nervous about coming up, but I was frightened when I arrived here. London was so much bigger than I'd imagined. On my first night here, I had no idea what accommodation was available. I had about £3 in my pocket after I'd paid for my train fare. Of course, as I'd just left school, I didn't even know what social security was, let alone how to go about claiming it. That first night, I ended up sleeping rough in St James's Park, on a wooden bench.

"On the second night I was walking

around the West End, wondering where to go. Because I didn't look my age, a policeman stopped me. He checked my identity and then took me to Centreport. It's a charity-run hostel; there are a lot of young people there, but the accommodation isn't brilliant. The DHSS paid my rent direct to Centreport and I was provided with breakfast, dinner, and luncheon vouchers. Depending on the hostel you're in, they'll use this system (which means you get about £8 pocket money) or, when you sign on at the DHSS, you're given supplementary benefit and you pay your own rent and food out of it.

"I stayed at Centreport for a few weeks. During the five years I've been homeless, I've stayed in perhaps seven or eight long-stay hostels (some have been Salvation Army run, others DHSS), also bed-and-breakfast places and a couple of squats. Depending on the hostel you're staying in, the DHSS will give you accommodation vouchers or, less often, will give you the money for hostel rents in your hand. "From then on, I ended up spending my days hanging around the West End - around Trafalgar Square, Leicester Square. On this scene you don't make true friends. The people you meet are more 'acquaintances' - others who are homeless.

"I can see now that I was led astray by these people. I was green, I didn't know London and what sort of things went on. The people on the West End scene are so willing to talk to you and make friends. They say, 'I'll look after you' - and you very easily believe them.

"I got involved with these people and the drugs they push. Those were the times when I've had to sleep out. Whenever I've been forced to sleep rough in the past it's because I've got myself messed up. . . I slept out under Embankment station for a whole month, once.

"It's not too awful in the summer, but in the winter you literally freeze. When the weather's cold, you feel it more because you're probably not looking after yourself properly anyway and, at the least, you end up with chest infections. I've known myself wake up and be blue from the cold. If you are sleeping under the arches, they wake you at four in the morning to wash down the pavements. You have from the time when the trains stop overhead until 4am to get your kip.

"When I first came to London, I was advised to apply to the council for a place. They told me I had four or five years to wait before I could be considered. I thought this was too long, so I didn't put my name down, expecting something to turn up. I regret this now.

"Then I tried for a place advertised as a 'star-quality' bedsit. It turned out to be a horrible little room with a sink, one cooking ring, a bed and a table - that was it. They wanted £100 deposit, plus two months' rent in advance. I just didn't have that sort of money.

◀ "I've applied for full-time jobs in the past, but I have never been successful. The only work I've managed to find has been short-term work, like packing in a factory and sewing labels onto garments.

"When I first arrived, I was introduced to someone who offered me work as a club barmaid with live-in accommodation, but I had to have sex with my employer in return. Of course, I turned down the offer. I remember, the club manager sent two blokes to follow me, but I managed to escape them.

"I've had some lucky escapes, I think, because I've usually managed to tell who the pimps were. But there was one time I took an offer I've bitterly regretted ever since. There was a man I'd met when I was hanging around the West End. We'd chatted before and he'd bought me cups of tea when I'd been broke. I trusted him. At the time, the weather was bitter and I dreaded the thought of another night sleeping in the open. So, when he said I could sleep on the floor of his flat, I thought, *How kind*, and I went back with him that night. He waited until we were alone there, when I was least suspecting, to take advantage of me. He pulled out a knife which he held to my throat, and then he forced me to have sex with him. I couldn't fight him off and he threatened to cut my throat if I struggled. When he'd finished, he let me go. I was in a terrible state. I went straight to the police to report the rape - but I was told it was my own fault and that I shouldn't have gone back with a stranger.

"I'm obviously bitter and angry about it. Okay, I know I'd met the man around the King's Cross area, with its reputation for prostitution, but at the time I didn't know what the area was like. And the police just assume everyone should know not to talk to strangers.

"Before I came to the capital I hadn't even tried drugs. I met a girl in Leicester Square who was already on drugs and she gave me some barbiturates. Unfortunately, I got into the drug scene because it was an easy way of escaping - you didn't have to think about the sort of life you were living, or how you were fast going downhill.

"Being on drugs was my worst time. I've overdosed in the past, in Leicester Square, and had my boots, my jacket and all my money taken. I came to in hospital, and they told me I'd had my stomach pumped. I asked, 'Where are my boots?' They said I'd come in with bare feet.

"I was paying for drugs by begging, after I'd spent that week's dole money. I met someone who'd done it before and he taught me to beg.

"Last year I decided I had to get away from this scene. I decided to wean myself off drugs and to do it on my own. I still visit friends there, but I hope the drugs and the way of life are in my past now.

"Most of the hostels I've stayed in have been grotty. The one I'm at now is quite lenient, but not too



Homeless families often face "humiliating and unsettling" experiences

lenient. The workers offer support and advice, and there are things to keep you occupied during the day, which I like. The worst hostel I've stayed in was a DHSS one. A lot of the residents there were ex-psychiatric patients and many hadn't fully recovered from breakdowns. They could be frightening. DHSS hostels are very regimented - as soon as you arrive there, the rules are that you have to have a shower. Then the attendants wash your hair for you, to delouse you. You may be clean but you end up feeling kousy! "I've stayed at a squat in Euston and one in South London. The latter was a basement flat with no electricity or water supply. Obviously, that didn't last. It's got to the point, many times, when I've been totally fed up with everything - with the people I've met and with the unstable life. Whenever it's got too much to bear, I've returned home to Mum. But there would be clashes, with both of us being unhappy. Then I'd miss some of the nicer people I'd met in London and would return rather than both of us being miserable.

"Of course, you neglect yourself if you're homeless for a long time. Food? I used to eat at chippies and at soup kitchens. However, food is not a priority. The main priority is survival - just living from day to day. And you do get severely depressed living on the streets. You end up believing you're a total shit. You feel degraded. But then, on a good day, you remember your dreams and carry on hoping for that place to live and a secure job to come your way.

"Since I've been at this hostel, though, my chances of a decent future are better. I hope to be able to get onto a housing association's books, with help from the hostel

workers, and eventually to share a house with other young people.

"I've been at this hostel since last February, and my nomination for a place will come up soon. But, even after that, there may be nowhere for me to go to. Long-stay hostels are not the stepping stones to your own place people make them out to be. I've done the circuit before. It's very easy to get to a certain point and make a mistake - taking you back to square one: the squats, the reception centres, sleeping rough.

"Eventually I'd love to work with kids. I want to work with people, not in a factory or shop. I've already done some voluntary work with toddlers, which was really good. I got a lot of satisfaction from that and I feel it's something I could put much more into.

"I think the authorities don't want to acknowledge people like me - as long as they can leave it to the voluntary hostels and help agencies, they can pretend there aren't thousands of single homeless people, many living on the streets.

"With the job situation as it is, there are going to be many more teenagers saying, 'I'll go to London and get everything I want there.' I would advise these people not to just leave and take off for the big cities. If they have relations to stay with, money in their pockets, stability, that's fine. But if not, and they're still determined to come, they should be aware that they'll need hundreds of pounds to get a flat. They should also be told what can happen to them at King's Cross or Euston stations - how the pimps wait around there and can spot a new, naive face a mile off.

"I expected to come here and live it up. That was a dream. You soon discover it doesn't always work out as you've planned . . ."

London is, of course, the worst-hit area where the young homeless are concerned. However, every other major city in Britain is affected. When I met David and Tony (17 and 18) they were staying at a hostel run by Shelter in Leicester.

David had been forced onto the streets at 16, when his mother relinquished their council flat. Tony left because of the strained relationship with his adoptive parents.

The two boys became friends after meeting up at the local YWCA (a mixed hostel). Ironically, they both had jobs when they left home and both are now unemployed, through no fault of their own.

David and Tony both cite their homelessness as being a major disadvantage in getting a job.

They were clearly bitter about their experiences (although, having been through the strict procedure of being put on the list by a social worker, their chances of eventually obtaining a council place are much better than most).

Their present accommodation, despite being rather tatty and spartanly furnished, is far better (in terms of freedom) than the hostels and night shelters they've drifted through in their time.

Both boys professed to still loving their families but, inevitably, a certain resentment and frustration showed - for both the problems they've faced and their treatment by the authorities . . .

DAVID'S STORY

"My parents split up when I was 16. Mum left the council flat that me, my brother and Dad had shared, and went to live with her boyfriend. Not long after that, Dad died.

"We later found out that Mum had relinquished the tenancy of our council flat. We got a letter from the council saying we'd got two weeks to get out. Mum hadn't told us she was going to give the keys in. I think that, as she had a place of her own, she wasn't bothered about us. My brother went to stay with our gran.

She couldn't put us both up, so I took the offer of staying at a friend's house. After a few weeks, though, I realised I had to move on from there - I felt I was getting under the family's feet. When I left there, I didn't know what to do or who to turn to. Everything was happening so quickly, and at the time I didn't know about the housing-aid centres or advisory bureaux.

"I ended up at the night shelter in Leicester, the emergency hostel. But the rules there are terrible. You get kicked out of your dormitory at 10 in the morning and are not allowed back until six. I didn't have a job to go to then, so I used to hang around town all day. I felt like a tramp, walking the streets. That was very depressing.

"The night shelter was a rough place, full of winsos. One bloke would sit there and stare at you for ages, jabbering on. It was mad.

"As the night shelter's for short-term stays, I had to move on to the

YWCA mixed hostel. But they've got a load of rules there, too. And if you do something the supervisor doesn't like, she'll make up a rule on the spot. I got kicked out of there for making a noise, and I was referred to the hostel I'm in now. Between being evicted and coming here, I felt really bad. I never thought I'd be in that position. When you're on your own, life can be hard.

"What depressed me most was that I was always ending up in strange places, not knowing anyone. I didn't know where Mum was living, at that time, either.

"I've had one job since leaving school, but I had to leave when the YOP scheme ended. I'm convinced that not having a proper home has affected my work prospects. Employers always want an address and, when you can't give a normal one, they think you're a layabout. If I do get a place of my own, I know I'll get a job too.

"My main worry is where I will go if the council flat doesn't come up after I've been here a year. What if I get very run down, with tattered clothes and ripped-up shoes?

"If I had a home, I'm sure things would be better.

"But, at the moment, I don't see much for my future. Sometimes it seems pointless even getting up in the morning. I might see a tramp and think, *Once, they were like me. Will I end up like that?* I worry about that possibility a lot . . ."

TONY'S STORY

"I got thrown out by my parents when I was 17. One of my friends threw a brick through a window, you see, and I got arrested for it. The police phoned my dad at 3am. He had to come down and get me out of the nick because I was under 18. Dad told me, 'I don't want you back now.' The policeman said it wasn't my fault, I was just standing by, but he wouldn't believe him.

"Round where I used to live, the people are very posh. I was looked on as a bit of a rebel up there, which my parents didn't like. I think it was a case of what the neighbours thought, really.

"I never did get on with my dad anyway. I was adopted when I was about 10, and I haven't been able to get on with him since we met.

"So, the night I was arrested, my dad packed my bags for me and dumped me at the local bus station. He left me on the street in Leicester town centre at four o'clock in the morning.

"I was working at that time, as a rep in the wine business. I'd been looking to leave home before I got chucked out, and had phoned round a couple of hostels and lodging houses. That's how I heard about the YWCA, where I went to stay after being chucked out. I stayed there for seven months, but finally left because the supervisor was pressurising me all the time.

"After that I was desperate. A friend called John, who had a bed-sit, said I could sleep on the floor.

But it was very cramped and John is an alcoholic. We used to fight quite a bit when he came back from the pub. There was a bath at the bedsit, but I couldn't use it because the landlord didn't know I was there.

"If I didn't go to the pub with John, I had to catch him when he came out at closing time. Whenever I missed him, I had to sleep in the park. We were working together in the wine-selling business and, when I was staying with him, I used to drink a lot - spent most of my money on it. I didn't tell my workmates what I was going through - I wasn't sure whether being homeless might put my job at risk.

"I did try for private accommodation but, when I phoned up any of the adverts in the local paper, the bedsits had either gone or they were out of my price range. The most I could afford was £15.

"After disagreements at work, I had to resign so, of course, I couldn't claim any dole money for a while. I was insecure and depressed a lot of the time. I didn't turn to drugs and I've found out, from my time with John, that drink doesn't solve anything. So I tried going back home for a while. Mum wanted me back then - she said she didn't want

me sleeping rough. But Dad was totally against it and he didn't speak to me for a week. He was always arguing with Mum about me, and I felt I was just causing problems between them. So I thought it best if I left again.

"I'd met David at the Y; he'd moved on from there to a DHSS-run hostel and I went to stay there for a while. When his social worker moved him to this hostel, I came too, and slept on his floor, although the authorities didn't know about this. David bought my food until I was able to claim social security. When they eventually found out I was living there, Jean, a social worker, put my case to Jackie (a Shelter worker who helps at this hostel). Jean said I was a desperate case, and I was allowed to stay - they didn't turn me out on the streets. I've been here, legally, for a week now.

"While I'm staying here I get £97 a fortnight from social security. I pay Shelter £44 per fortnight (for my rent, electricity and gas) leaving me about £25 a week for food and clothes.

"I didn't like school much. If I'd stayed at home, I would have been forced to stay on. My parents had

high expectations of me. Dad's a bank manager and he wanted me to go to public school. I couldn't get on with the public schoolboys round our way, to be honest. They treat State schoolkids as if they're dirt.

"My mum doesn't want me back now, but she worries about me a lot. I was adopted but I wasn't what they wanted. 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,' they used to say. They told me I was a 'nasty little lad' as I grew up. Mum thinks that, whenever I'm out of her sight, I'm on the streets getting into trouble. It's not true - I wouldn't go looking for trouble.

"Being homeless alters your relationship with people, especially girls. If any girl ever asked where I lived, I'd keep quiet about it and wouldn't go into details.

"Ideally, I'd like a flat of my own - that's my aim in life. But, living in hostels, there's no point in even thinking about the future. You do face hardships and money problems when you leave your parents' protection. Having no-one to rely on isn't easy. Being out on the streets, with no-one to turn to, does make you appreciate the home comforts you left behind. But that's all in the past now . . ."

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Good private accommodation at affordable rents is becoming like that elusive butterfly - a miracle if you can find it. One youth worker described it as a "complete rip-off" while a council-housing employee insisted that, "The only option for the single without a home is to buy privately."

When 18-year-old Linda's family moved to the coast she opted to remain in London, chancing her luck on finding private accommodation at a reasonable rent.

After months of shacking up with friends, she found somewhere within her price range: one room with shared cooking/bathroom facilities. It wasn't until she'd moved in her belongings that she discovered why the rent seemed 'reasonable': "The musty smell I'd first noticed turned out to be rising damp. After a week, my clothes smelt and my shoes started rotting and turning green with mildew."

Linda shared the floor with a couple who had two babies.

"The kitchen was supposed to be shared, but I couldn't use it during normal times as the wife was always in there cooking. It was really too cramped for all of us."

The bath, which had been covered with hardboard, was often full of stinking nappies. "I ended up using friends' bathrooms, but in the end I felt I was just being a nuisance to them."

The landlord provided 'breakfast'. This meant he could class the property as a 'lodging house', so preventing her having security of tenure. "The 'breakfast' was often the leftovers from their meals the previous night," she says. "He'd bring down a piece of dry bread and some cold meat, and I was supposed to eat that."

The landlord ignored Linda's complaints about the damp and the bath full of dirty washing. Instead of checking her rights with the Citizens Advice Bureau, she gave it up as a bad job and left.

LONDON CALLING . . . ?

Anyone thinking of coming to London, without fixing up accommodation and work first, would be wise to read *Finding A Place To Live In London* (for your free copy, see below). Compiled by the Housing Advice Switchboard (an advice service for people without children who are looking for somewhere to live or who have housing problems), it offers sensible and realistic advice on the whole subject. Besides information on where to find emergency accommodation, its guidelines on going to the council and your chances of getting housed are based on a wealth of experience. It also contains: everything you should know about your rights as a private tenant; practical advice on squatting; dealing with housing associations and co-ops; short-life housing; buying your own place; and other aspects of finding a home.

You can get your free copy by contacting the Housing Advice Switchboard, 47 Charing Cross Road, London WC2 0AL (01-434 2522).

HOUSING IMPROVEMENTS

The Housing Minister, Mr Ian Gow, and local councils might like to consider the following:

- The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act needs amending, with loopholes being closed and the 'intentional homelessness' clause being repealed.

- Single people and childless couples who are homeless must be recognised within the 'priority' groups defined by the Act.

- There should be a minimum level of help offered to homeless people, to which councils must adhere.

- House building (especially one-bedroom properties) should be increased and cuts on housing eased.

- Better management of council property is needed, with more spent on repairs and hard-to-let housing.

- As a preventative measure, voluntary services should do more to dissuade young people unaware of the problems they'll face from coming to London and other cities.

HELPLINES

- Advisory Service for Squatters: 01-359 8814.
- CHAR (campaign for the single homeless): 01-839 6185.
- Housing Advice Switchboard (24 hours): 01-434 2522.
- National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux: 01-836 9226.
- Piccadilly Advice Centre: 01-930 0066.
- SHAC (London Housing Aid Centre): 01-373 7276.
- Shelter (National Campaign for the Homeless): 01-633 9377.

CHILDREN AT RISK

16

"Roof"
is the
HOUSING MAGAZINE
published by SHELTER

Steven Aziz of Middlesbrough, Cleveland, believes his child is at risk. He lives in 'bandit country' — the notorious Netherfield estate, where unemployment, vandalism and harassment of tenants mean that many are scared to go outdoors. There is no safe place for children to play within walking distance of the estate and the level of stress on parents makes housing workers fearful of placing them on the estate. Many young mothers are interned in their flats. This is the real scandal in Cleveland.



Homelessness and poor housing put unnecessary stress on parents, resulting in thousands of children being placed 'in care'. Other loving but impoverished families face a daily struggle to sustain family life. Present housing policies merely exacerbate the problem. MONICA BRIMACOMBE reports.

WHILE THE Cleveland child sex abuse saga continues, a little school in Bayswater, London, is home to one of the most shameful — and least publicised — child abuse scandals in Britain: 105 of the 150 pupils at St James and St Michael's primary school are homeless. They live in cramped, often insanitary, and sometimes dangerous bed and breakfast hotels — sometimes six to a room — where they can be forced to remain for two years, waiting to be housed.

These children are lucky. A further 600 homeless children in the city of Westminster get

no respite at all from overcrowding and misery since they cannot get into a nearby school: for them, being denied a home also means being denied their statutory right to education.

Parents of homeless children struggle with the stress of child rearing in these intolerable conditions which themselves often follow a series of crises — family break-up, unemployment or domestic violence — culminating in the loss of their homes. June Barry, headmistress at St James and St Michael's, reckons that bad housing policies are responsible for the exasperating and unnecessary

stress suffered by the parents of her pupils. 'I have parents coming in crying — almost at the end of their tether. For some of them suicide seems the only way out. The children suffer too. Just when they have settled in a school they can be asked to leave a hotel, sometimes with only 24 hours notice. This can happen just as children are about to take exams,' she says.

Indeed, where housing authorities fail to provide decent homes for children, the education and social services are forced to pick up the tab. Such is the pressure created by government disinvestment in housing in the inner cities, however, that thousands of

children are now falling through the net, many of them ending up 'in care' or 'at risk'. In 1982, 500 children were voluntarily placed in care due solely to homelessness. By 1984 that figure had risen to 1,100.

At present in Westminster, it is the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) not the council, which is stretching its already diminishing budget to adapt to the housing crisis. Officers have been trying to accommodate 800 homeless children from Bayswater in nearby schools. On the brink of doing so, the ILEA hears that Westminster council now plans to turf the homeless out

of hotels in its area, claiming that others, much further away, are cheaper. Though hotel residents have been complaining for years about the condition of their accommodation (of the 137 hotels used to house the homeless in the area, 81 have been found guilty of various infringements of the health and housing acts), the planned expulsion of the homeless from Westminster is not a response to calls for improved accommodation. Rather, it is seen by sceptics as Westminster council's attempt to shunt the existing homeless into other areas to make way for an anticipated increase in numbers when the council sells off most of the borough's housing. The hotels will not be empty for long.

Families in the hotels depend on their local contacts and the social services for what little support they get. For many, yet another move to an unfamiliar and possibly hostile environment could break the already fragile family bonds which keep families in one piece. Social services departments throughout Britain bear the brunt of ill-considered housing policies and are not credited with the extra burden they undertake because of homelessness and bad housing. Some of them are already so stretched they admit they may no longer be able to provide a service for even those families most at risk. Westminster social services is no exception.

In a report on child care referrals received by Roof, written in November 1984 by the area manager of Westminster social services office 4 (whose patch covers hotel-land), he says: 'Because of the massive increase in referrals from hotels we began making a separate note of these at the beginning of July 1984. Between that date and 31 October, we received 109 referrals, only 23 of which came from families placed by other authorities. . . . As recently as December 1983 it was said that there were 400 such (homeless) families in the hotels. About six weeks ago the information was that that figure had topped 700. . . . The increased work from the homeless families is reflected in our child care referral rates. For the period 1 January to 15 June 1982, we

had 290 child care referrals. The same period in 1983 had 376, and in 1984 we had 430 referrals. In the period July to September 1984 (the school holidays) there were 230 referrals.

'This rapid and alarming build-up of childcare work for the area shows no sign of diminishing, and, if it does not, it is hard to see how the area can provide a service to even those most at risk.'

One Westminster social worker expounds on the disproportionate number of hotel children placed on the borough's 'at risk' register: 'It is clear that hotel families represent a large proportion of the "heavy" child care work in this area.' Though the social worker accepts it is



A homeless family in a Bayswater hotel room in Westminster, the richest borough in Britain.

difficult to argue that unsatisfactory accommodation 'in itself' is a factor, and says 'there does have to be very substantial concern about a child's welfare for it to be placed on the register, and the level of stress that we have come to accept as "normal" in homeless families would not be sufficient for this,' he does accept that hotel accommodation can push already stressed parents over the edge. 'My gut feeling is that this has to be the case,' says the social worker.

But it is not only hotel accommodation which pushes parents over the brink: the link between unsatisfactory housing and social and economic disadvantage, with the referral of children to the social services and their subsequent reception into 'care', was well documented before this new — and growing — generation of poorly-housed children was ever born. DHSS statistics show that children in 'care'

come disproportionately from geographical areas of social deprivation. Those inner London boroughs with extensive poverty, overcrowding and poor housing conditions have more than three times the national average of children in 'care'. A similar picture emerges in the depressed urban areas outside London.

A RECENT STUDY, *In care in north Battersea**, noted an increase in child care admissions in that area — despite a decline in the child population. Single parents and black families were quite disproportionately represented, due largely to the social and economic deprivation of these groups.

Battersea is in the London borough of Wandsworth which, like Tory-controlled Westminster, is disposing of estates and other public housing, leaving social workers with few options if a transfer is required.

Social workers' perceptions of the problems of families with children in 'care' differ somewhat from the families' own perception of their problems. While 16 out of 29 parents of children in 'care' interviewed for the study expressed negative feelings about where they lived, few social workers felt the environment was unsatisfactory. Parents cited bad estates, a lack of amenities and isolation as a problem but 'lack of access to resources' is more often translated in social work terms to 'inadequate parenting' or 'inability to provide a satisfactory home.' When one mother was interviewed and asked why her child was in 'care', she

said she had nowhere to live and no family to turn to: social workers simply reported the woman's 'inability to care for her child'.

Wandsworth social worker, John Kemmis, co-author of *In care in north Battersea*, stresses that most child care admissions are a result of multiple deprivation rather than parental abuse: 'They come from high density council housing where the options for social workers are reduced. Reception into care is normally a result of a combination of problems but bad housing and bad housing policies have the greatest impact on the reception of children into care in the inner cities. Social workers do notice bad housing but feel they can do nothing to alter housing policies.'

Other reports concur with the study's findings, suggesting that social and economic factors — and in particular, bad housing — can place critical constraints on parents' abilities to care for their children. Indeed, with sufficient resources, many of the 90,000 children in 'care' need not be there. A 1981 study of Lambeth families with children in 'care' found that nearly all lived on run-down, inter-war council estates, with overcrowded flats where one in five children shared a bed. Over half lived at first floor level or above, and when families were asked which service they most wished the council to provide, the most common response was rehousing: one in eight believed that rehousing alone would have prevented their children going into 'care'.

THESE PROBLEMS are not confined to London. In Bradford, West Yorkshire, where council policy facilitates exhaustive preventative measures before admitting children into care, health visitors report being 'crippled with work' and confined to providing less than ideal conditions for families with children 'at risk'. One health visitor told Roof of a woman with three children, all on the 'at risk' register, who had to walk up or down 34 steps with a baby in a buggy and two toddlers, if she wanted to go out of her cramped and damp flat. 'It's

things like this that can push some parents over the brink,' she says. Though Bradford will give priority on the transfer list to parents with children 'at risk', the extra stress of inadequate housing is rarely diminished. 'So much of the good housing has been sold off under the "right to buy" that all you've got left, if you get a transfer, is the grot,' says the health visitor.

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IN FACT, well over 50 per cent of children in 'care' come from one parent families who are often marginalised, given the worst housing and have to subsist on supplementary benefits. Maggie Smith of Bradford, child care officer with Gingerbread, the organisation for lone parents, recalls a typical scenario preceding a child care admission. 'I watched one woman being worn down. She lived in a high-rise flat with three small children, she was in debt, isolated and at the end of her tether. When one day, her son put his knee through his trousers for the fourth time that week, she cracked and asked for the kids to be put in 'care'. With the right support, decent housing, and priority treatment *before* children go on the 'at risk' register, the loss of children from loving but impoverished families could be avoided,' says Maggie Smith.

Gingerbread's own research highlights the relationship between lone parenting, bad housing and stress:

- Mary's husband deserted her while she was in hospital having their second baby. He owed £3,000 to the building society and now the house is likely to be repossessed and Mary and her children will be homeless, or, if they're lucky, will be rehoused on a 'sink' estate.
- David, a victim of hidden homelessness who shares a 10 foot by 11 foot room with his three children in his parents' house. He has been told that he must wait for three years before he will be rehoused.
- Sheila, a youngster with a one-year-old baby, whose parents told her to leave home. For nine months she has lived in bed and breakfast where she is forced out — whatever the weather — between 10am and 4pm every day. With no spare money, where are she and the baby to



Sloan Square, Bradford, West Yorkshire: a child runs through a former council property, now sold to developers because the council cannot afford to renovate it.

go during that time?

Bradford's Child Protection Unit has successfully intervened in many cases where children are at risk of being placed in 'care', providing support and services through extra funding for the under-10 age group. However, there is still a great disparity between what needs to be done and what councils can provide given central government constraints on spending. 'We suffer the same as every other local authority. There are not enough resources and the present tension between central and local government doesn't help,' says Mike Grady, who runs the Child Protection Unit. Indeed, if Bradford were to follow DHSS graph guidelines on child abuse and child protection, it would need the funding for at least a further 28 social worker posts. Cuts in housing investment and the massive level of unemployment in the city are already stretching their resources to the limit.

BACK IN CLEVELAND, where denials of sex abuse abound, and the sanctity of

the family is being courted in a national media campaign, the picture is little better. Housing workers there report a 'desperate' housing shortage alongside unemployment, an increase in domestic violence, and a level of stress on some estates which even exceeds that of parents waiting to be reunited with their kids at Middlesbrough General Hospital.

One large estate, Netherfield in Middlesbrough, has been nicknamed 'bandit country' locally, due to the constant harassment of tenants by groups of vandals — not all of them young — who gather with nothing else to do all day. 'It's really bad. People are scared to come out of their flats. I really worry about young mums with kids who are put on these "sink" estates. They're vandalised, there's lots of racial abuse and harassment, and people are scared to go outdoors,' says a housing worker. One Cleveland psychologist describes conditions in Middlesbrough as 'Dickensian', a comment echoed by housing workers

who note the massive level of unemployment, the subsequent mortgage arrears, and the increasing numbers of evictions and repossessions in the area. Indeed, the future doesn't augur well for many of Cleveland's children. 'We'll never have enough houses for all those who need them,' says a housing worker, and, while we have become inured somewhat to adult homelessness, the day when children of the inner city will be wandering the streets alone may not be far off.

THE IRONY in all this is that while inner cities are starved of the resources to uphold family life, over £371 million is spent keeping children in 'care' — around £140 per week, per child. Preventative measures are funded with a mere £76.1 million, while housing authorities are forbidden from using £7 billion from council house sales to replenish and repair their stock.

Twenty five years ago, the Seebohm Report stressed the importance of decent housing in maintaining healthy familial relationships: 'The maintenance of family life, and the care of children, are dependent upon a decent home . . . (The lack of) a decent home places families in jeopardy. Therefore, adequate housing is one of the most important foundations on which social services need to build, and without which, their contribution is often severely limited. In our view, the preventative function of decent housing cannot be overestimated.' And that report could never have been more relevant than it is today.

So, while Fleet Street stagers under the weight of its own self-righteous support of parents trying to extricate their children from 'care' in Cleveland, a far less equivocal scandal is ignored: that of the thousands of children in local authority care placed there simply because their families lacked the material wealth and support to keep them. They, like the children squashed into Bayswater hotels, would much rather be at home. ■

* *In Care in North Battersley*, Peter Beresford, John Kemmis and Jane Tunstall. (Dept. of Sociology, University of Surrey. £5.95).

THE WORK PROCESS : THE WORKSHOP

Once Nick Stafford had been invited to write a play and we had all agreed that the general subject area of the play would be homelessness, Nick prepared an introductory session when he presented a number of quotations and his ideas about a possible play. These stimulated a wide-ranging discussion around the whole subject. (The quotations are shown later.)

Following this, we were later joined by Janys Chambers who had prepared a workshop for the entire company, not only the actors, which took place over two weeks.

The aim of this workshop was to learn about aspects of homelessness in general and how it affected young people in particular. We had to remind ourselves that we were no longer homeless and for some of us it would have been many years since we had known at first hand what it was like to search for somewhere to live.

We had to bring out into the open our own preconceptions about homelessness, about homeless people, about beggars, tramps, bag-ladies, dossers, squatters, cardboard-city etc. What prejudices did we have? What were the myths we accepted? We were made to question and challenge our assumptions.

Each session was always preceded by a limber. In planning these, the "leader" was asked to include elements which related to the central theme. For example, songs were chosen with lyrics which connected.

1st Session: HOME: brainstorming "What does "home" mean to you? (Everything was recorded on large sheets of paper around the room.)

b) making an aspect of home you remember, using one medium only (e.g. dance, mime, monologue, poem). Sharing it; everyone making a response to it, asking the "maker" of it to expand and develop it etc.

c) your home now: 1 minute to think of a description, then honing it down to a few key words. Say the words to the group who form pictures to represent the words.

HOMELESSNESS: brainstorming. Again, everything is recorded.

e) in groups of 3: each to think of a moment in their lives when they were homeless, marginalised or felt dispossessed. The group to choose one story and as a trio to work each story into a presentation as a film genre (a list of 12 genres was given). By using heightening techniques, the group had to get to the core of the actual "moment". Then the presentation was shared and the original story was told.

2nd Session: a) In the same 3's as yesterday, taking a second story and presenting it as a foreign film without sub-titles.

b) Six ways to pass a beggar: the company played both beggars and passers-by. One beggar at a time, the rest in role as different types of passers-by, showing as many different responses and attitudes as they could think of to the many different kinds of approaches from the "beggars". Discussion.

3rd Session: A visit to a short-stay hostel in Central London: meeting the staff and talking to some of the young people who use it.
Walking the area.
Private reading and research.

Session 4: a) Feedback from session 3 and the reading
b) Fieldwork: choosing sites to visit either individually or in small groups and to observe, aiming to find three characters each. (West End, other hostels, Waterloo area, Embankment & Cardboard City -night and early morning.)

Session 5: a) to show the characters: freeze/bring to life
b) select one character each to do more in-depth work on and prepare a story
c) tell the stories and work on them

Session 6: A design day : concentrating on colours and images: everyone had one sheet of paper + felt-tips.

- a) what is your colour of homeless? (a doodle/shape)
- b) max. of 3 colours only: where your character comes from/ where your character is now/where your character is going to
- c) one colour: draw a garment for your character
- d) draw 3 possessions
- e) draw a garment your character would like to have
- f) draw 3 possessions your character would like to have
- g) draw the place your character would most like to go to.

Discussion. Building: using a "scrap collection" and the surroundings build your character's home. Do so in character.
Relate (or not) to others in character.
"incidents" were created by the workshop facilitators (e.g. stealing from one home and placing item in another character's home.
Characters use the "area" : begging (approaching anyone who happened by); arguing (with other characters or others in the vicinity etc.)

Everyone to visit, as "ordinary public" each character's home; inviting the character to talk about their home and themselves (or not!)

Sessions 7 to 10: All-day improvisations:

- a) the estate agents
- b) This is Your Life
- c) visits from the media (reporters, photographers, tv cameras etc.)
- d) police checks
- e) dogs
- f) the soup-run

In groups of three: one to direct the other two in a scene from one of the characters' lives: minimum use of language

An extended improvisation: 4 characters, sleeping rough, experiencing different forms of harassment and weather conditions throughout the improvisation. Time: evening, night, early morning. The workshop facilitators provided a variety of external "events", stimuli, confrontations etc. throughout the improvisation, which was very intense.

After the two week workshop (which is described elsewhere in the pack) the actors had a break whilst Nick Stafford worked on his first draft of "Bad City". We all did various things over the short break including running a drama summer school, waitressing and moving flats - but the subject of homelessness and young people was in our minds; the workshop period had been so productive and stimulating.

After the break we came back to the first draft. It didn't take much arithmetic to realise that there were 24 parts to be played by 4 actors. This would mean a lot of careful character building, not to mention the costume changes.

Each actor has her own way of finding the key to a character and developing it and it is difficult to write how I go about it. There were, however, several things we did as a company during the first week of rehearsal as part of our explorations of the script.

Firstly, with script in hand, we did a ten minute synopsis of the play. The narration of the action of the play was passed on from actor to actor as each character entered and exited. This was useful as it defined the track each character took through the play and the different events. It also defined each individual actor's track through the play.

We did simple question and answer games where a particular character would be asked, for example, "What is your favourite colour?" "What was the last film you saw?" "The last book you read?" etc.

Each actor was also asked what she would give a particular character for Christmas. I said that I would give Glad a toothbrush, Jeanette a good diary and Anna a bubblebath. Then, as these characters, we were asked what we would give the others. As Anna, I gave Glad, Jeanette and Greta each a bottle of perfume.

Each actor was also set the task to present the day spent by her individual character in the play. We had to do this in a way that was not a characterisation. The finished result was very abstract and presentations included the use of poetry, mime, dance, prose etc. This exercise was then extended to present another day in the life of our own particular character; one which is not shown in the play. We were specifically asked to develop a happy event.

Once rehearsals were underway and we had blocked the play and were working on scenes in detail, we still continued to improvise around the characters. One improvisation centred around Glad at work in the library. Another was Greta's feelings when left alone when Glad and Jeanette went to find Prince Charles. Another was Greta, her mum and a friend making pancakes. We also looked at the circumstances surrounding Jo's disappearance.

As well as the input coming from the improvisations and the different exercises, there were also various technical things to get right, such as the singing and accents. The MD would come in for half-days and leave us with songs and harmonies to learn. Of course, the inevitable happened - working on a four-part harmony which was eventually cut completely!

A sort of routine did set in over the rehearsal period, but no two days or weeks were ever the same. Of course there were the boring moments, but also the inspiring moments. Each actor will have a different tale to tell of their own journey through the script and the rehearsal process.

THE WORKING PROCESS: THE DIRECTOR: Deborah Bestwick

Every director has a different theory and practice, and every director will vary it for different plays. Some gather the cast together on day one with their scripts and sharp pencils and with a plan of the set on the wall. Then, rather like plotting a military campaign, they issue instructions as to exactly when and where each actor should move. This is "practised" for two weeks and the actors add bits of acting which they feel will help the audience understand their characters. Many pantomimes are rehearsed like this.

Other directors work entirely through improvisation and each actor develops a character from scratch. This is often used as a method of developing and devising the story itself, where the outcome has not been pre-determined by a script. Most productions, probably, include aspects of both these types of processes.

"Bad City" makes a variety of different demands on the whole production team. Some scenes are very naturalistic and depend entirely on a real and thorough understanding of the characters and their relationships to each other, and are presented "for real" - many of the scenes between Greta and Jeanette work like this. For example, when Jeanette returns from the council having found an old door and she and Greta discuss life on the streets. It is often helpful for actors to improvise through situations which do not actually appear in the script, so that they can "get to know" their character under different circumstances and in different situations, and bring a fuller sense of a real individual into scenes like this.

"Behind the scenes" improvisations for "Bad City" have covered Greta watching her dad play "Tarzan" games on the beach; Greta taking a friend home to toss pancakes with her mum when dad was away; Jeanette and Glad as "stowaways" on a tourist sight-seeing boat, and Glad, Jeanette and Anna on the day Jo disappeared.

Other scenes require the same degree of underlying knowledge about character and situation, but these are staged non-naturalistically so that a theatrical effect says, in itself, something about what is going on in that scene. The scene which tells us why Greta left home - where she tries to confront her mother with the fact that she is being sexually abused by her father** - is an example of this. The dialogue confines itself to a very minimal vocabulary in one-word exchanges between daughter and mother. This allows a very rapid access to the experiences of closeness, disturbance, confrontation and betrayal which the characters go through in this scene.

The short clipped dialogue illustrates the tension running through Greta's home life, and allows the actors to play the rhythm of the emotion ITSELF, rather than the rhythm of the words usually used to describe the particular emotion. The scene was rehearsed by getting the actors to explore the daughter/mother relationship by expressing the emotion in terms of the amount of space they kept between themselves - rather like the children's game "Grandmother's Footsteps".

Other scenes are non-naturalistic, too. But instead of dealing with characters who represent the personal complexities of an individual, these scenes have to deal with all the qualities of that character's function. The Landlord character is an example of this. We know what he DOES, not WHO he is. The effect on the audience in this case is that they should judge the system within which he operates, not him as an individual. To create this character we brainstormed words we felt described exploitative landlords. Ailsa (who plays the landlord) then tried to "wear" these descriptions by

**this scene (scene 6) is included in the pack.

making some of the words "physical", words such as: "groping", "grasping", "hyena", "nylon shirts"....and some more unpleasant ones!

These are just some of the specific demands for which the director has to find a rehearsal process, and these were fitted into a rehearsal plan, which was divided roughly into 4 sections:

- i) getting to know the play: what happens; what your character does within the narrative, what information is potentially available to the audience
- ii) getting to know your character, style and putting this together in scenes
- iii) meanwhile, meetings are happening with the Designer, the Musical Director, the Lighting Designer, the Stage Manager and the Education Worker
- iv) In the end that is the Director's job: finding a way to make the input of so many different people work in the most effective and entertaining way.

DOSSER....VAGRANT....TRAMP
DRIFTER....BUM....HOBO....
BEGGAR....SCROUNGER....
PARASITE....SPONGER.....

WORDS full of emotional
meaning & significance;
emotional ciphers; a bar
to thought....WORDS whose
main function is to
recognise (and increase)
the distance between
speaker and object.

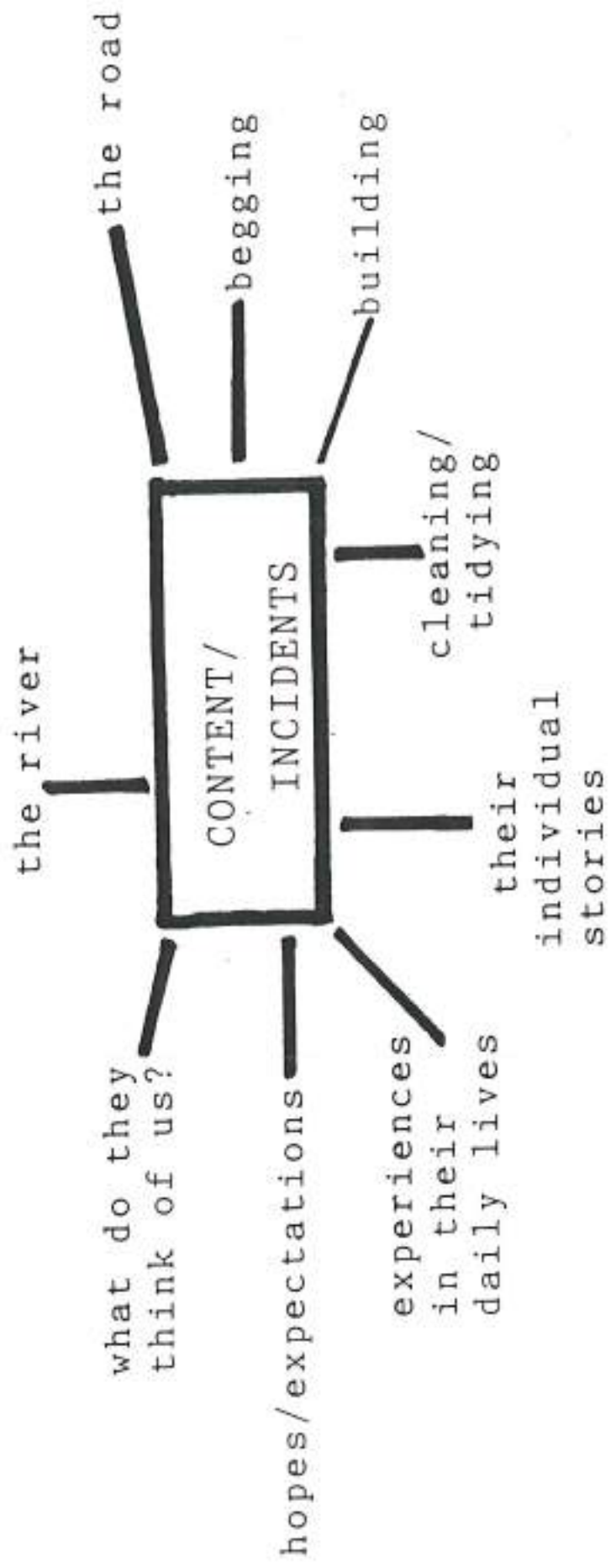
The lack of a secure home is perhaps the greatest obstacle to participating in our society.

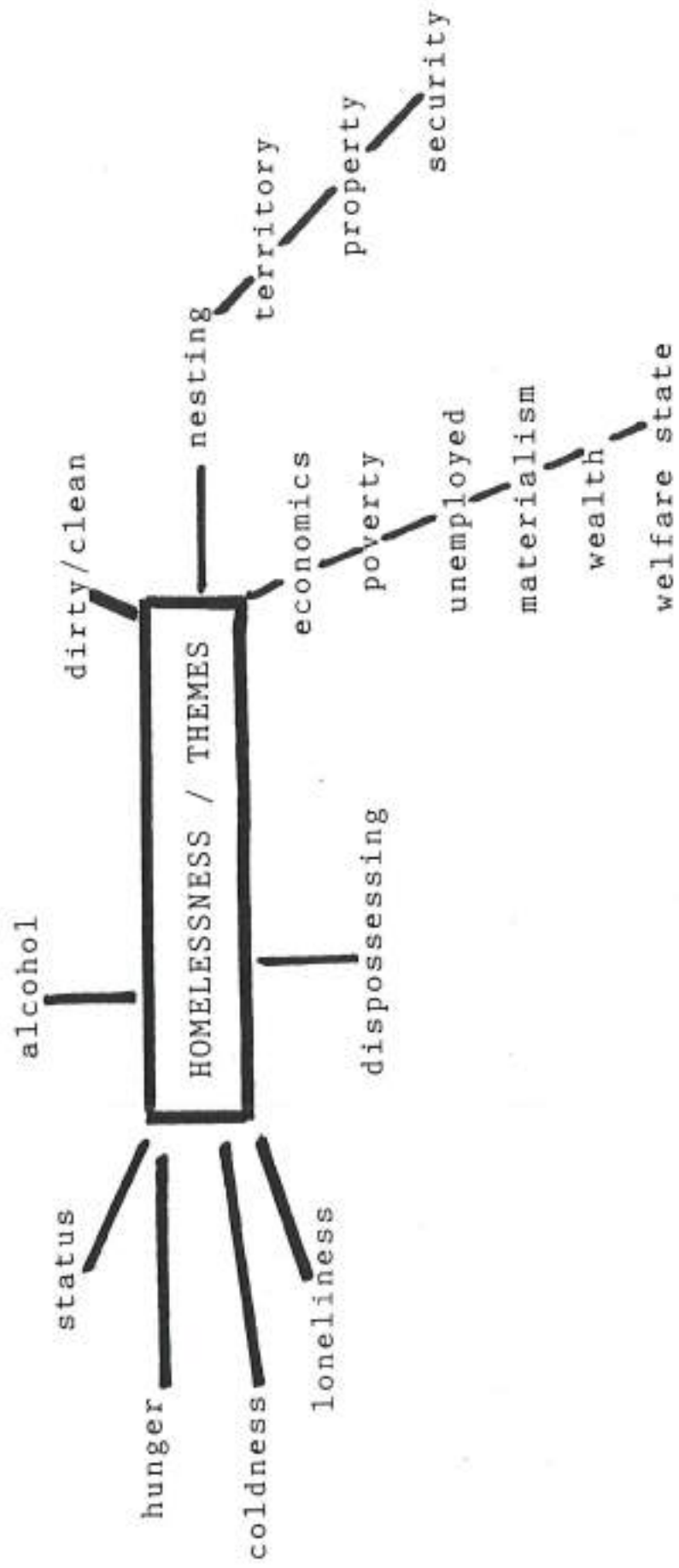
- Neil McIntosh: SHELTER

Each of us has a precise sense of locality. For some it is acute; for others it is no more than the occasional nagging sense of unease. There is one place one landscape we recognise as home.

-Sandy Craig: "Down & Out in Paris & London Revisited"

Some beggars produce in passers-by a sense of shock....they reveal themselves as defenceless before the world....In the face of this,one feels a mixture of physical revulsion,pity,guilt and helplessness....It may produce an immediate refusal to recognise what is happening as a part of one's world.





"BAD CITY" - the element of information

"Bad City" could be said to be a play which tells the stories of four homeless people whose lives cross as they share the experience of homelessness - of sleeping rough.

But the play has other content, which the writer says is "what is in the play and what it says". Much of this content deals with information. But this information is not just "dropped in"; it arises quite naturally out of the experiences of the characters. Some of the information areas deal with other options that homeless people consider in their search for a home - the experience which is described by Jeanette as being like "a ball in a pinball machine, all these different things pinging me about, spinning me round and round" .

Bed & Breakfast: Jeanette had "a nice b+b once, but had to move on after eight weeks". When Jeanette first meets Greta she asks Greta if she'd "run out of time in your board and lodging?" These remarks reflect the problem homeless people now have because of government regulations affecting the length of time young people can claim benefit from the DHSS. As well as that, the maximum benefit that could be paid for board and lodging was also cut and following these cuts room charges were increased: in 1984 the average single room charge was £71.17 per week. In 1985 it had risen 20% to £85.44. The DHSS payments were cut for some claimants by up to £40 per week. A survey carried out by the DHSS showed that 60,000 claimants were being forced to pay more than the DHSS limit. The survey also showed that fewer than 1 in 20 of the claimants in B & B had a permanent home to which they could return if they were forced to leave B&B.

Council Waiting List: Jeanette speaks about being on a council waiting list. What she thought was to have been a two-year wait is more than likely going to turn out to be five years. She reports that a clerk at the housing office had made a very pointed comment that it might be easier for her if she were to become pregnant. This one reference to waiting lists is just a hint to the frustration and desperation experienced by the single homeless person. "Priority need" is one of the criteria housing authorities have to follow when allocating housing and in general this has meant that most homeless single people are excluded from a right to be housed. It is even harder for young homeless people to register to be placed on a waiting list. In a report by CHAR (1985) it states that only 5% (12) of local authorities allowed 16 year olds to register; 2% (4) allowed 17 year olds to do so; 25% (59) stated they allowed 18 year olds to do so.

Hostels & squats: "Squattings getting out of the question cos the councils are getting heavy and the neighbours....no one likes to see people getting for nothing what they're paying for, don't want to know why you're having to squat in the first place; hostels can't let you stay for ever....." Jeanette advises Greta to look for a hostel: "If you hang on there, you might get someplace." Hostels can be a starting-point to look for something more permanent. But some have a minimum age requirement - Greta is under 16; it is unlikely that anyone would knowingly let her a room. Hostels also vary in quality. Many are very good, but often have waiting lists. Others can be very unpleasant.

Squatting: this can only be short-life housing and squatters occupy empty premises, but the owners have not given permission for them to be there. Squatting is very hard: the state of the

property is generally poor. It can be very difficult getting gas and electricity supplied. Squatters don't pay rent, but are liable for rates. Court proceedings can be brought to evict squatters and in some cases squatters can be charged with criminal offences.

Intentionally homeless: in her story Glad tells how she became homeless; she was being physically and violently abused in her own home and leaves. To her local council she had made herself intentionally homeless, so they had no responsibility for her. Under the Homeless Persons Act, if a council housing department decides a person has become homeless intentionally, the council does not have to secure permanent accommodation for her or him.

The play makes references to a number of other factors which affect the lives of the homeless: the DHSS regulations and attitudes shown by some DHSS personnel. Glad mentions the difficulty of registering for dental care.

Another important focus is on the various ways homeless people, especially those who are very poor, try to earn money. The vast majority of homeless people are not in regular full-time work. Jeanette has her idea of collecting saleable stuff from skips. Greta thinks she might be able to get work as a messenger on her skates or could work in fast-food places. All the characters show ingenuity and a readiness to respond to any opportunity. It could be a subject for discussion whether Anna really is going to sing in a club. No one gets involved in "fiddling" or prostitution. (Greta is quick to see what is happening when she is harassed in this way and will have nothing to do with it. Jeanette also refers to that experience.) The play deals in a very open way with the subject of begging. This is Glad's main work. Begging is not easy to deal with in an objective way. Most people, asked what they thought of begging, would say they disliked it; thought it didn't happen much; would try to avoid meeting a beggar. Glad confronts us with the experience; forces us to think about it, to have a response. We see examples of the responses Glad gets from passers-by. Under an Act of 1824 it is an offence to beg in public, but so many people are on the poverty line and below it that begging is something many are forced to do. There are state benefits and "no fixed abode" allowances which some homeless people can claim. But there is strong evidence that many people do NOT claim any benefit or allowance. Various reasons are given for this, and some are given in the play. A report called "Sleeping Out in Central London" gives other reasons: "I want nothing to do with the State"; "It is charity"; "Too much hassle" and people speak of poor, insensitive treatments by officials.

Greta's story raises perhaps the most difficult "content" of all: child sexual abuse. It is this that finally forces her to leave home. Two scenes show Greta's experiences: one where she desperately tries to tell her mother about it, but her mum, fearful and angry, won't listen and rejects what Greta tries to say. The second scene is again with her mother.

Her mother has finally found Greta and wants her to come home. She believes what Greta had been trying to say and she tells her that she is planning to make her dad leave home. It is left for us to think about whether this is likely to happen and whether Greta will go back.

The subject of child sexual abuse has received a great deal of press and media attention over the past six months, but it would be very wrong to think it is something new. It is a subject surrounded by myths, lies and taboos. This has meant that sufferers of

abuse can be very isolated and frightened. There can be a conspiracy of silence which is very hard to break. The recent publicity about child sexual abuse has highlighted that it is widespread and that the organisations for dealing with the problems experienced by children and young people are inadequate. A child under 16 (as Greta is) will be taken into care - and this is often seen as a punishment; that she (or he) is being taken away for doing something wrong. The young person is already very vulnerable and putting into care can be more damaging. Greta has run away, but the sort of place she needs are few and far between. What are needed are refuges where young people like Greta can discuss their feelings and where their special needs are recognised and understood and where she can get the right kind of support and help.

As well as these information "items" - what is "in the play", the content of the play is also "what it says".

Thinking about what a play says is the bit that makes us, the audience, work. "Bad City" says many things about homelessness. There are characters who make us challenge our prejudices about homeless people. We may make assumptions about them and perhaps the play makes us question these assumptions.

The widely-held belief - a belief constantly put out by the press and by current Government ministers - that homeless people have only themselves to blame; that they are "scroungers", "parasites"; "too dependent on the state" is a belief held up in the play to be challenged. The play "says" something about this in many different ways, through different characters: through the stories of Greta, Jeanette, Glad and Anna and through the characters of the landlord and Melony and Janice.

The landlord represents the abuse of the DHSS housing benefit system by landlords. The homeless are vulnerable and easy targets for greedy, unscrupulous landlords who can manipulate the system to their very profitable advantage. There have been many disturbing reports of such landlords in recent months.

Melony and Janice represent the numerous individuals who volunteer to "minister" to the homeless but who in no way question WHY there are homeless people at all. It is clear that Charity organisations do much good work but that there have to be so many charities helping meet the needs of the homeless should be seen as a comment on the enormous problem. "Bad City" encourages us to think about this. Is ours a "caring" society? If it was, then society wouldn't put so much of the "caring" onto the shoulders of charities. Any charity helping the homeless can only touch the surface of the suffering in an uncaring society and uncaring government policies create. The charities have to deal with the results of that. Charities cannot campaign for change: to change attitudes, to change policies. All a charity can do is campaign for money in order to keep going as a charity in order to keep on dealing with the results of an uncaring society.

Another area that the play speaks about is the idea of self-help. There probably is little argument that most people, including young people, would like to be able to do things for themselves. But being able to help yourself if you are homeless or poor is quite different from helping yourself if you are secure and wealthy. If you are wealthy, you can help yourself in ways which bring positive gains and improvements, and quickly when you want them. If you are poor, helping yourself can often mean damaging your life; losing even more of the little you have; causing yourself more pain.

Some of these actions are truly desperate. Jeanette becomes homeless from the time she "disappeared" from the family home "because we were all unemployed and they couldn't afford me". Glad has a unbearable toothache, but she can't just go to a dentist. It can be a major problem to try to register for NHS treatment if you are homeless, and she certainly couldn't afford to pay for treatment. So she turns to "self-help" - a form of self-mutilation - when the pain can't be taken any more. This is one of those scenes where we can find ourselves laughing, but the scene does not allow us to forget what is actually being said.

Scenes like this may be called exaggerated. They are "heightened". Nonetheless, they represent what the reality is for many homeless people.

Does the play come up with some answers? There is no neat package of answers provided, but "Bad City" focuses on the areas where change can and should be made.

Everyone, including young people and single people, should be protected from homelessness; legislation should be improved to bring this about.

Attitudes towards homeless people should be changed.

More homes should be built, improved or renovated and local authorities should be allowed to spend more of the money they get from selling properties in order to increase publicly-owned housing.

The housing benefit system needs to be improved.

Tighter regulation of private bed and breakfast hotels and tougher penalties for landlords guilty of exploiting or endangering health and lives of tenants.

Improve the training of staff who deal with the homeless in the various government offices.

Increase resources to be able to employ more staff to help quickly those people in emergency situations.

Make it easier to talk about the reasons people become homeless.

EVALUATION

Having seen a play and, hopefully, having enjoyed it and, perhaps, having had a lively discussion about it soon afterwards, it can be a bit of an anti-climax to have to sit down and write an evaluation of the play.

Evaluating the play means that you will think about what you saw and what you heard in the performance. You will have to think about what the play set out to say and whether you think the play succeeded or not in its aims.

To help you with evaluating the play, here is a checklist with suggestions that you could include in your evaluation.

INFORMATION

TITLE

PLAYWRIGHT

PERFORMING COMPANY

DATE AND PLACE OF THE PERFORMANCE

SYNOPSIS

A brief account of what the play is about.

CHECKLIST

Your evaluation may take account of all or some of the following:

styles and techniques used in the play

the characters: naturalistic: Greta, Jeanette, Glad & Anna
non-naturalistic: landlord, Eamona, Melony & Janice, the passers-by

the acting

the setting: the stage-design
costumes
lighting

sound & music: the songs in the play
incidental music
sounds

In your evaluation, rather than comment on every scene in the play, it would be better to select scenes which best give examples of the points you wish to make,

Throughout the pack there is material which we hope will be useful to you as you think about your evaluation. There is a section on "Information: what is in the play and what the play says". We hope this section will help you to recall parts of the play you want to comment on in your evaluation.

OPINION

Finally, the evaluation is the place where you give your opinion of the play and the performance.

Here are some questions which we hope will help you focus your thoughts and ideas.

The questions don't have to be taken in this order. They are offered as a guide.

What did you think about how the play dealt with the issue of homelessness?

If you had not thought about the issue before, did the play start you thinking about it?

Did the play make you change any assumptions you may have had about homeless people and homelessness?

Do you think that the play will succeed in making other people think about the issue?

Was there anything in the play you didn't understand? (Why do you think this was so?)

What did you enjoy? Explain what it was that made it enjoyable and why it was enjoyable for you.

Were there any weaknesses in the play? What were they? Why do you think they were weaknesses?

What aspects of the play's style, direction, performances and design interested you? Why was that?

Was there anything in the play new to you? (subject-matter? techniques?) What did you think about this? Did the new things work for you? Did they create a problem for you?

BIBLIOGRAPHY & OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Down & Out in Paris & London Revisited: Sandy Craig/Chris Schwarz
(Penguin)
- Second Class Citizen: Buchi Emecheta
- Poor Law (an investigation into the mass arrest of homeless claimants in Oxford, Sept. 1982) : Ros Franey (Published by CHAR and Four other Campaign Groups)
- No More Walls: James Nelson (Nelson Column Intercontinental Publ. 1984)
- Publications by The Housing Campaign for Single People (CHAR):
 Singled Out; Sheila Venn (1985)
- In On The Act: The Homeless Persons Act: A Guide for Single Homeless People (1983)
- It's the Limit: Pricing in London's B & B Land (1986)
- Conference Report: Single Women & Homelessness (1986)
- Hidden & Homeless: Housing, Single People & the Council
- Survival Guide: For Young Homeless People in London: Centrepoint, Soho.
- Campaign Pack: Housing Rights Campaign
- Sleeping Out in Central London: Report by The Central London Outreach Team (GLC) 1984
- The School Leavers' Handbook: Ann Jones (National Extension College)
- Youth Month Resource Pack: IYSH.
- Roof: the Journal published by SHELTER
- Childright: the Bulletin published by the Children's Legal Centre
- Material published by The Salvation Army
- Organisation: CHAR: 5-15 Cromer St., WC1H 8LS (833-2071)
- IYSH (International Year of Shelter for the Homeless)
 57 Chalton St., NW1 1HU (387-7559)
- SHELTER: 88 Old St., EC1V 9HU (252-0202)
- Housing Rights Campaign: 5 Cromer St., WC1H 8LS
- The Salvation Army (HQ) 101 Queen Victoria St., EC4P 4EP.
- Centrepoint Soho: 57 Dean St., W1 (434-2861)
- Children's Legal Centre: 20 Compton Terr., N1 2UN (359-6251) Helps under 18 year olds
- First Key: Hartley House, Green Walk, SE1 (378-7441) For those leaving care

HELPLINES

- Children's Legal Centre (helps under 18's) 359-6251
- Release (legal & drug advice) 24 hr. emergency helpline 603-8654
- Samaritans " " " 282-3400
- Rape Crisis " " " 837-1600
- Gay & Lesbian Switchboard " " " 837-7324
- Lesbian Line 251-6911
- Alone in London Service (9 am to 4 pm) Inform. Service 387-3020
- First Key (helps those leaving care) 378-7441
- Housing Advisory Switchboard (advice about hostels etc.)
- Black Women's Centre 274-9220

Women's Aid London 252-3033
Homeless Action 251-6783
London Housing Aid Centre 373-7276
London Gay Teenage Group (Sun. 3 - 7 pm/ Wed 7 to 10 pm) 272-5741
Advisory Service for Squatters 359-8814
Black & In Care (selfhelp group for young black people in or
leaving care) 226-7102
Picadilly Advice Centre: 100 Shaftesbury Av., W1. 434-3773
(for information & advice for young homeless or new to London
Mon-Th. 10 am to 9 pm; Frid. 2 - 9 pm; Sat./Sun. 1 to 9 pm)

The Half Moon YPT is grateful to many organisations and individuals who have supported and helped us in this project. The above list is just a selection of the many books, reports, pamphlets and articles we read during our research for the play and in compiling this pack. The Helplines are included because they could prove excellent first contacts for young people needing information and advice.

What has happened since we started the project?

It is true to say that there has hardly been a day when we have not read, heard or seen something about homeless people and homelessness. And every reference seems to emphasise the seriousness of the crisis for homeless people. We include just a small selection:

Camden Council: April 1987, forced to close its homeless persons unit. The borough has to provide bed & breakfast places for about 30 families a week. B & B will cost the borough over £20 million this year. (In 1981 it cost less than £1 million.)

Hackney Council: recently a spokesperson was reported as saying that "we can no longer guarantee the health and safety of our homeless families in b & B hotels".

President of IYSH, Lord Scarman, said in September that he feared a "major epidemic or tragedy in our capital city before too long.... We are seeing, in our cities, the growth of new slums which defy public health regulations, fire regulations, safety regulations."

A London B & B hotel, charging £150 per room per week, has 50 families and single people sharing three gas rings for cooking; a shower and toilet without lights, without flushes, blocked drains, vermin, infrequent hot water....

Tower Hamlets Council: have plans to close a hostel for the homeless. It is predicted that this will leave many of the residents out on the streets. Councillor Sue Carlyle: "There's still a desperate need for adequate provision for the homeless, which has always been lacking. Especially vulnerable are the rising number of young people on the streets and the long-term hostel residents".

Covent Garden area: an estate, originally planned by the former GLC to provide decent, affordable homes for local people, is now to be sold by the London Residuary Body (who replaced the GLC) rather than allow the flats to be rented to the people for whom the homes were originally intended.

Westminster Council: as flats become vacant, they are boarded up and eventually, when the whole block of flats is empty, the block will be sold to private developers. To date at least 40% of council homes have been sold.

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS 1987

The United Nations designated 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless to draw attention to the millions of people who are homeless worldwide. IYSH 1987 is intended as the start of a long-term process that will produce a commitment to decent housing from governments around the world. The IYSH Trust was set up to co-ordinate activities in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The international focus will be on the 100 million women, men and children throughout the world who are without homes. 35 million of these are young people. The crisis is not only in the developing world - the housing crisis is a crisis here, too.

Official government statistics show clearly that there is a crisis:

1979: 57,200 homeless households were re-housed
1986: 102,000

Notice the word "households". Government figures do not count people. So these figures do not show the true size of the problem. Many more homeless households go to their councils for help than are rehoused. But there are many people who DO NOT go to their councils either because they do not know what rights they have to housing or because they know that there is little councils can or will do to help them.

British Government policies have steadily made it increasingly more difficult for local councils to come any where near meeting the demands for housing. Government investment in housing has dropped greatly. For every £100 spent on housing 10 years ago, just £30 is spent today.

1975: 175,000 new council houses were built
1985: 40,000

The Government introduced legislation to allow tenants to buy their council flat/house - but councils are allowed to use only 20% of the capital gained from these sales to put back into building. Public housing stock is becoming less and less because councils cannot replace the stock being sold. There are some councils who are selling whole estates and blocks of flats to private developers. These developers carry out renovations and then put the flats on the market at greatly inflated prices, which certainly cannot be afforded by the original council tenants or young people.

The Government plans a new Housing Bill and it is expected to include even more cuts in council house building (already cut by 30% over the past 5 years); large increases in council rents, encouragement to private landlords (allowing them to increase rent levels). Also, from April 1988, changes in the Supplementary Benefit regulations will further discriminate against young people and the homeless. It is estimated that new government legislation can only lead to a vast increase in the estimated 30,000 people now forced into cramped bread and break-accommodation. (This figure does not take into account the single homeless and families in hostels, short-life housing, private rented rooms etc. It is estimated there will be approximately 200,000 by Sept. 1988. And, again, these figures omit those homeless people who sleep rough.)

"B A D C I T Y"

by

N i c k S t a f f o r d

Three scenes from the play

Comments on the scenes and
ideas for improvisations..

SCENES

SCENE 5

This scene is a return to Glad at work. We have already seen her at work and heard her views about begging, and seen some of the reactions of passers-by she confronts. Scene 5 takes this a bit further. This scene and the earlier one came out of a series of improvisations: "Six Ways to Pass a Beggar". The improvisations were introduced in order to try to uncover our own experiences, our own prejudices and assumptions. We set out the exercise here as it might be one drama students would find interesting to do.

SIX WAYS TO PASS A BEGGAR

1. The group can be about 10.
2. One becomes a beggar. The rest individually pass by the beggar who attempts to beg.

The progress across the space should be continuous and fairly rapid. The passers-by should approach from the same side and walk off and then back to the start again. To help the beggar become established, it might be necessary to repeat the "procession" - and this will give "passers-by" the opportunity to change their characters.

The beggar: decide on type of character, type of approach behaviour if rejected/if helped; method of begging; demeanour, movement, clean, dirty, male, female, young, old, ill, drugged/drunk, confident, unconfident, embarrassed, rude, polite etc....

The passers-by: try to discover the widest range of human response: caring, cold, callous, sympathetic, avoiding meeting, patronising, genuine, embarrassed, aggressive, style of movement, pace of movement, to look or not to look at beggar, eye contact or not, Some may pause longer than others - who may rush on.

3. The exercise may be done with words, without words, with "nonsense" sounds etc.
4. After a sufficient time with one beggar, the exercise should be repeated with a change of beggar.
5. Aim for as wide a range of characters, approaches and responses as possible. If a sameness creeps, the observer could make quiet suggestions to individuals to introduce new ideas.
6. After the group have spent a reasonable amount of time on this - and it must be long enough to move away from the obvious stereotypes to more carefully observed characters - the group should sit down in a circle and talk about what they experienced in both roles: their thoughts, their feelings and reactions. What experiences have they had of seeing beggars? Of being approached themselves? What assumptions did they hold about begging and beggars? Has the exercise led to them thinking differently?

Scene 5 also introduces the Landlord. There is a major difference between the way the landlord is presented and the way we have seen Glad presented. Glad's character is presented naturalistically. We see her as "real"; we learn about her: her past, her feelings, her thoughts. We see her in a "real" relationship with other characters.

The landlord is presented non-naturalistically. He is not meant to be seen as one particular individual character (as Glad is and Jeanette and Greta). The landlord represents a type and he is shown in exaggerated form. He stands for all unscrupulous, manipulative landlords. But we don't know anything about him as a full, "rounded" character. His speeches are quite different from Glad's; he uses quite different vocabulary and he uses irony throughout.

The group might be asked to experiment with directing this scene and especially with how to present the landlord.

Scene 6 This is very different. Nick Stafford has said elsewhere in the pack that he wanted this scene to get away from the wordiness of scene 5. He has also written a scene which gets away from the naturalism of Glad's scene, to a non-naturalistic scene between Greta and her Mum; it is also a form of "flashback". This scene also came out of a workshop improvisation.

1. Make a group of three.
2. 1 director and 2 actors
3. (i) create a scene from Greta's childhood - but with the limitation that a maximum of 10 words only are used. (These may be separate words or short phrases and they can be repeated.)
- (ii) create a scene from one of the group's own childhood - again with the limitation of 10 words.

Scene 7 This scene links back to the scene where Glad was offered an apple. The scene is naturalistic but because it is the episode where Glad wants to pull out her aching tooth, it is important not to lose the under-lying point of this episode by falling into farce or coarse comedy. To many in an audience it may appear comic, but it is a "real" and desperate situation for Glad and also for Greta, as it is a totally new and awful experience for her. The scene also gives us Glad's story and explains why she is so obsessive about that 1st moment in the library. It is important for her to hang on to it; it is all she has. Glad telling Greta her story leads to firming their relationship.

The two parts to this scene, each with a quite different "feel", present quite different problems for actors and director. But when these are solved, the scene then has a third element - the arrival of Janice and Melony. These are not characters in the same way that Glad and Greta are; they are more in the mould of the Landlord (and Eamona, in the "This is Your Strife" scene). They are types; representatives presented non-naturalistically.

A BEGGAR'S BANQUET? An improvisation (which could be a development following on from "Six Ways to Pass a Beggar")



Beggar's banquet

FOR two consecutive evenings, my visit to the cafeteria of the Royal Festival Hall was marred by the management allowing tramps, vagrants of all ages, to approach customers sitting eating and ask them whether they have finished eating all the food they require, and then removing their plates to an empty table and proceed to "tuck in" to a free meal, scavenging drinks and desserts from other customers before they beat a hasty retreat.

The security staff came down to the cafeteria after I had complained, looked around then ran off back to their hideaway, leaving the tramps to feast the night away.

While the general upkeep of the Royal Festival Hall has greatly improved since the demise of the GLC, no other country but ours would allow these people into a public building.—G. J. Edwards, Colingham Place, London, SW5.

1. When everyone has experienced being the beggar, the group split into smaller groups and improvise scenes based on the letter which appeared in the "Evening Standard" in September. Two or three in the group role-play wealthy tourists or Londoners on a night out at the Royal Festival Hall. They order substantial meals and are unable to eat it all. Another two in the group play young homeless people trying to exist without an "official" income (maybe they fall into Greta's trap of being too young to claim social security benefit.) Another member of the group plays a Festival Hall staff member.
2. Questions to explore after the improvisation:
 - a) How do the diners feel eating their meal (i) before the homeless arrive and (ii) after they arrive?
 - b) How do they react if approached while eating? Why?
 - c) How do they react if they see their left-overs being eaten after they've moved away? Why?
 - d) How do the homeless people feel watching others eat expensive meals? How do they feel about getting other people's left-overs?
 - e) How does the staff member deal with this? How does she/he feel as an employee at the RFH? And as a human being? Is there a difference/conflict? Why?
 - f) How do the diners feel if the incident is dealt with by staff?
 - g) How do the homeless people feel about the RFH staff?
 - h) Would the diners rather give money or food?
 - i) Would the homeless people rather be given food or money?
3. In role as the character they improvised, each group member writes a short reply to the original "Evening Standard" letter. As themselves, they write another short reply. If there is a difference, what is it? why?

The lack of a secure home is perhaps the greatest obstacle to participating in our society.

- Neil McIntosh: SHELTER

Each of us has a precise sense of locality. For some it is acute; for others it is no more than the occasional nagging sense of unease. There is one place one landscape we recognise as home.

-Sandy Craig: "Down & Out in Paris & London Revisited