

NOTES

HISTORY PAMPHLETS

John Attfield writes: Tommy Jackson, who died in 1955, was among the best-loved of Communist Party publicists, and was a leading Marxist activist long before its foundation in 1920. His *Ireland Her Own* is still in print after 33 years. He was born in 1879, and *Our History 73*, T A Jackson—A Centenary Appreciation, just published, contains two essays in his memory. The first, by his daughter Vivien Morton, provides an intimate account of 'TAJ's' life, political work and writings. The second, by Stuart Macintyre, shows his place in a remarkable line of self-taught working-class intellectuals associated with the Marxist movement, now largely disappeared. It points to the frequent isolation of Marxist theoretical work from actual working-class activity as a problem for today for which Jackson's life story holds lessons.

Our History 72, 'The People's Theatre in Bristol, 1930-45', published at the same time, is an account by Angela Tuckett of the work of the Bristol Unity Players and its precursor the Workers' Theatre Movement. The history of left theatre has remained largely unexplored until recently (articles on WTM in *History Workshop Journal* 4, and on Unity Theatre in the recent book on *Culture and Crisis in the 30s**). This study sheds important light on the movement, the technical and artistic innovation it represented, and its contribution to the struggles for popular unity in the 1930s and 40s.

Both pamphlets cost 45p (plus 1p postage) from the Communist Party History Group, 16 King Street, London WC2E 8HY. Membership of the Group is £3.50 per year (£2.00 for OAPs and students), including receipt of *Our History* and the Group's discussion journal *Our History Journal*.

*Edited by Jon Clark and others, Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, £7.50.

Buzz Goodbody

Colin Chambers writes: In a survey of the 70s, *The Times* drama critic Irving Wardle described a production of 'Hamlet' as 'an astounding revelation of the most excavated play in the world, ranking with Peter Brook's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as the key classical production of the decade'. He was referring to the work of director Buzz Goodbody, a Communist and feminist, who killed herself five years ago this month before seeing the tremendous critical and audience reaction to 'Hamlet' of which Wardle's tribute is just one of the latest.

Educated at Roedean and Sussex University, Buzz Goodbody rebelled against her background like many of her generation in the 60s, but saw the need to link her

personal radicalism to a wider political process and became a revolutionary. She was offered several jobs in the theatre when her production of her own adaptation of Dostoevsky's 'Notes From Underground' came to the West End having won a prize at the National Student Drama Festival. The offer she accepted was to be the 'Girl Friday'



of a leading Royal Shakespeare Company director in Stratford-upon-Avon, and, despite the chores, this gave her the opening into the world in which she felt most at home — the theatre.

She became an assistant director, worked on the RSC's mobile 'guerilla' unit Theatregoround, and directed six main productions for the Company, gradually finding a style that developed out of the satire and subversive showbiz of the early days into a hard-edged realism that has its roots in English radical dissent. After staging a much maligned but hugely entertaining 'King John', which drew on a Marxist view of political power and the images of the nursery, and presenting a gripping production of Trevor Griffiths' play 'Occupations' about Gramsci and the Turin car workers, her main contribution was to fight for and open the small theatre in Stratford called The Other Place, and to establish it as a serious, challenging venue.

It was here that she directed 'Lear' and 'Hamlet' with a new stress on the domestic side of the plays, showing the connection between family and power structure by understanding the class basis of the societies that were being written about. Politics came alive as relationships between real people, and, in making the characters believable in the close-up conditions of the tiny theatre, started a tradition of imaginative Shakespeare production that continued with Trevor Nunn's 'Macbeth' with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench that was seen on television, and John Barton's re-appraisal of 'The Merchant of Venice'.

In opening up a classical company such as the RSC to the influence of the fringe, Buzz Goodbody paved the way for future productions like David Edgar's anti-fascist

play 'Destiny', which was also eventually televised, Pam Gems' 'Piaf', which is now in the West End and going soon to Broadway, and Peter Whelan's 'Captain Swing', which tells of the fight waged by agricultural labourers in the 1830s. She also helped prepare the ground for the opening of The Warehouse, the companion small theatre to The Other Place in London, at which plays such as Edward Bond's 'The Bundle' originated.

She researched her productions scrupulously and worked tremendously hard during rehearsals to the point of exhaustion. Her rare ability to create a volatile rehearsal situation in which actors could explore for themselves but on equal terms with each other and with the director has been acknowledged by many leading players, including Sheila Allen, Ben Kingsley, Patrick Stewart, George Baker and Tony Church. She bridged the classical and the modern, heightening a tradition rather than breaking it, and above all, she wanted to tell exciting stories in a simple, direct way to a wider audience than was usually the case with the RSC.

Buzz Goodbody believed in cheap seats and gearing the RSC's work to the community and school students but understood that her attempts to close the culture gap were modest. She did not reject theatre as middle class. She recognised the role culture played in forming values, and the special role theatre had within that culture. She wanted to resolve its contradictions from a progressive standpoint, believing that to abandon the dominant national companies would be to leave them more at the mercy of ruling ideology. However, the RSC was a man's world unused to a woman director (two women have directed for the Company since, but only one show each). Buzz Goodbody was determined to make it in that competitive set-up, drawing a lot of strength from the Women's Movement and the Women's Street Theatre Group of which she was a founder member. But she paid a high price at the age of 28. Her work, though, lives on in the many actors, designers and directors whom she influenced and who influenced her, and particularly in the survival of The Other Place as one of the liveliest theatres in the country. An annual award was instituted after her death for a Director at the National Union of Students Drama Festival.

[A book by Colin Chambers about Buzz Goodbody entitled *Other Spaces: New Theatre and the RSC* will be published shortly].

Contributions to *Notes* (brief please) are welcome. We need copy before the 1st of the month preceding publication.