

**THE HISTORY OF MERSEYSIDE
UNITY THEATRE
1937-1987**

**14TH MAY -
28TH JUNE**

**MOUNT PLEASANT LIBRARY
29 MARYLAND ST
LIVERPOOL L1 9DE**

A RADICAL RE-IMAGINING



**LIVERPOOL
JOHN MOORES
UNIVERSITY**



UNITY

A Radical Re-imagining: the history of Merseyside Unity Theatre 1937 – 1987

Exhibition guide

A Radical Re-imagining: the history of Merseyside Unity Theatre 1937 – 1987 is an exhibition curated in partnership with the Unity Theatre as part of its Heritage Lottery funded project. Celebrating the theatre's political roots, the exhibition brings together archive material documenting fifty years of working-class performances and activism.

Curated by Megan Ashworth, Project Archivist at LJMU Special Collections and Archives and Ros Merkin, Associate Professor in Drama at LJMU School of Art and Creative Industries

In partnership with Unity Theatre and the Heritage Lottery Fund

Graphic Design by Abi Reynolds, LJMU Graphic Design & Illustration graduate

Exhibition guide written by Megan Ashworth and Associate Professor Ros Merkin

With special thanks to: Reyha Dickson; Arthur Wright; Eva Simmonds; Niamh Cassidy; Eli Randle; Emily Maguire; Emily Parsons; Anne Foulkes; Sally Marquiss; Christopher Olive; Susannah Waters; Maria Follet; Jonathan Hall; Harry McCart; and Ed Porter.

14 May – 28 June 2026

Ground and Lower Ground Floors

Mount Pleasant Campus Library

29 Maryland St

L1 9DE

Scan the QR code to view the
digital exhibition on our Wix site



UNITY

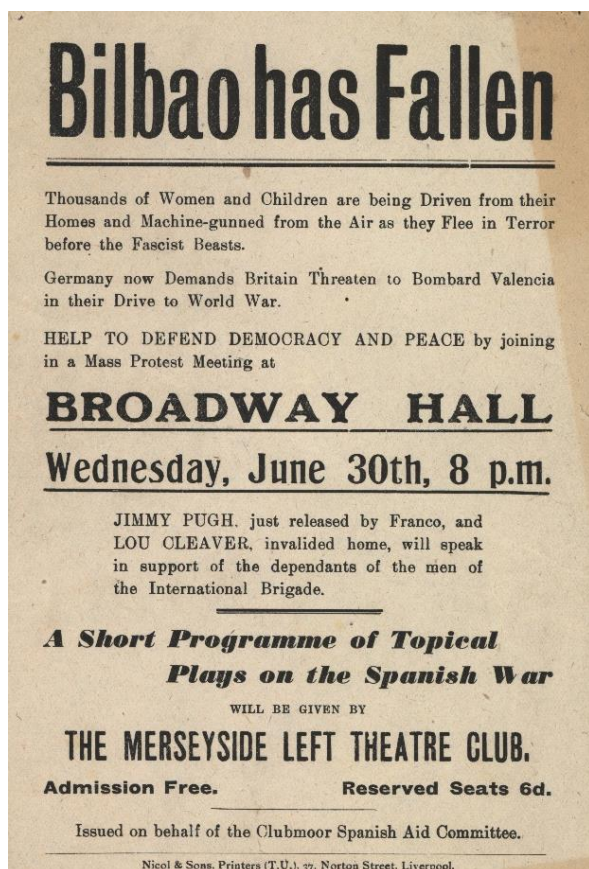


 LIVERPOOL
JOHN MOORES
UNIVERSITY

Foundation, Spanish Civil War and Original Writing

In 1937, the Merseyside Left Theatre Club was founded with the aim to present dramatic performances of social significance and educational value to progressive bodies on Merseyside. The club's earliest performances were defined by the political landscape of the 1930s – rising ideological tensions, the shadow of the economic depression, and the threat of war. No issue felt more immediate in 1937 than the unfolding crisis of the Spanish Civil War, which became the focal point of their early repertory.

The decision to form a Left Theatre in Liverpool was made following rehearsals of the dramatised poem *Spain* written by Randall Swingler and adapted for the stage by founding member Edgar Criddle. This poem was presented as the club's first mass declamation, a style of agit-prop performance involving a collective chorus of political messages about the realities of the war in Spain. This experimental method was implemented to evoke an emotional response among the audience and encourage them to take action in support of Republican Spain. Prefaced with the warning "Madrid Today – Merseyside Tomorrow", the club went on to perform *Spain* numerous times at public meetings held by local Spanish Medical Aid Committees and raised significant funds for the International Brigade.



Programmes for early club mass declamations relating to the Spanish Civil War, 1936 – 1937.

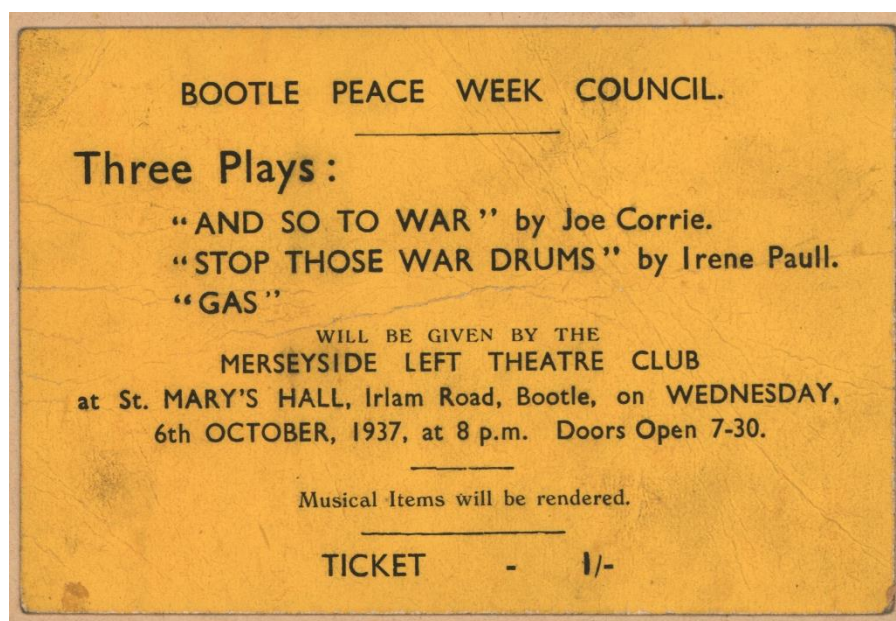
To ensure the repertory remained responsive to current events in the war, Edgar Criddle continued writing original scripts including *Before Guernica* and *Insurgent's Aid Committee* - the latter work specifically designed to challenge the British-backed Non-Intervention Committee. Criddle, born in Wallasey and son of a local sugar refinery owner, became the club's founding playwright, utilising his university education in the production of topical scripts. He also provided guidance in acting to less experienced members, by running a six-week acting course focusing on Stanislavsky performance techniques in May 1939. Together with his wife and fellow club member Renee, they also hosted several outdoor dress rehearsals in their garden following club socials at Formby beach.

What began as a small group of 12 enthusiasts in early 1937 grew to over 70 active members by 1939. They were from all walks of life – teachers, dockers, activists, electricians, carpenters, clerks and unemployed – but together they became a collective, working towards an important political purpose through their performances. To foster greater unity and cooperation among its members, the club arranged more frequent social activities which included organising dances and regular Sunday rambles on the Wirral from early 1938.



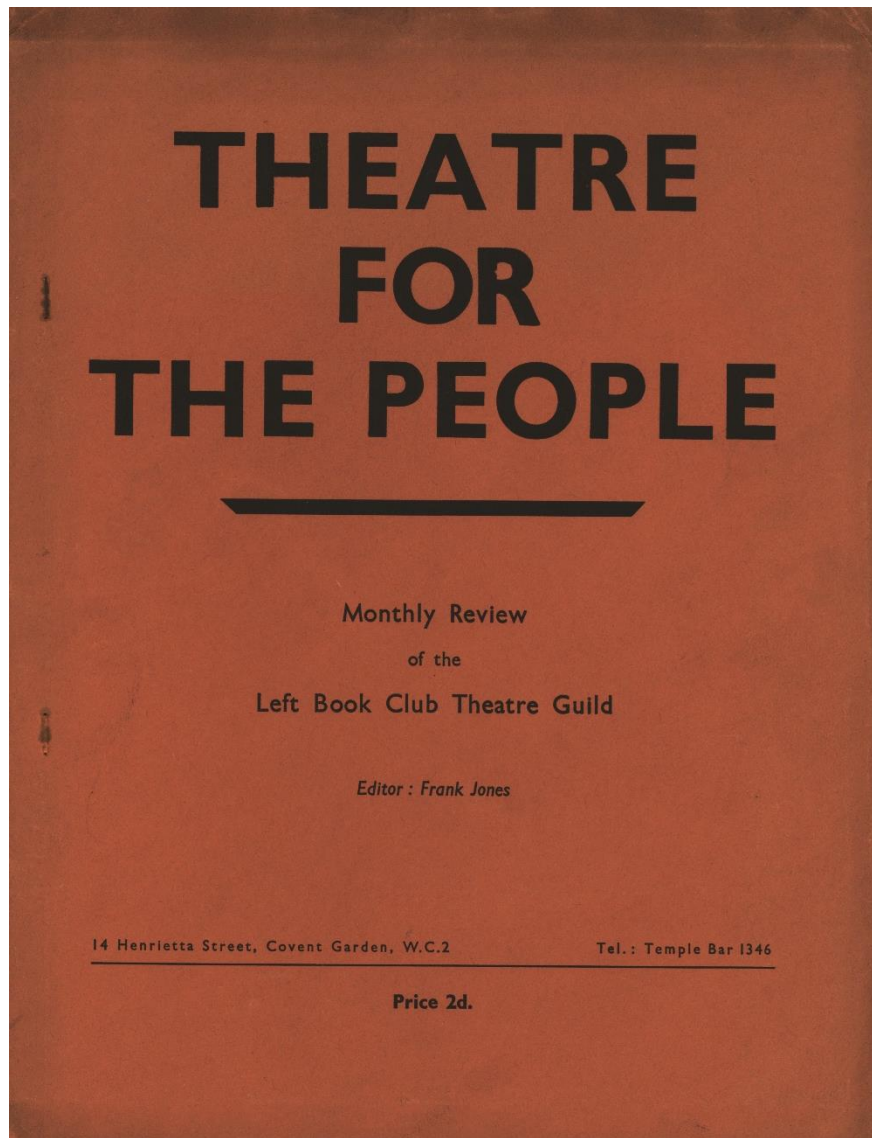
Early photograph of club members on a ramble on the Wirral, c 1940s.

Seeking to further mobilise local people in the anti-war movement, the club introduced another programme of agit-prop plays including *And so to War* by Joe Corrie and *Stop those War Drums* by Irene Paull. The latter was a powerful mass declamation which included actors running from the audience onto the stage in response to questions from the cast with exclamations like “Raise your fists and shout to the warmakers...Stop!”. A beating drum rising in a crescendo in time with calls from both the audience and the stage to protest against war sent a clear message to spectators and a call for the government to take action. They performed this programme for Bootle Peace Week in October 1937, but controversy followed in the papers including accusations of self-interest through the promotion of left-wing ideas.

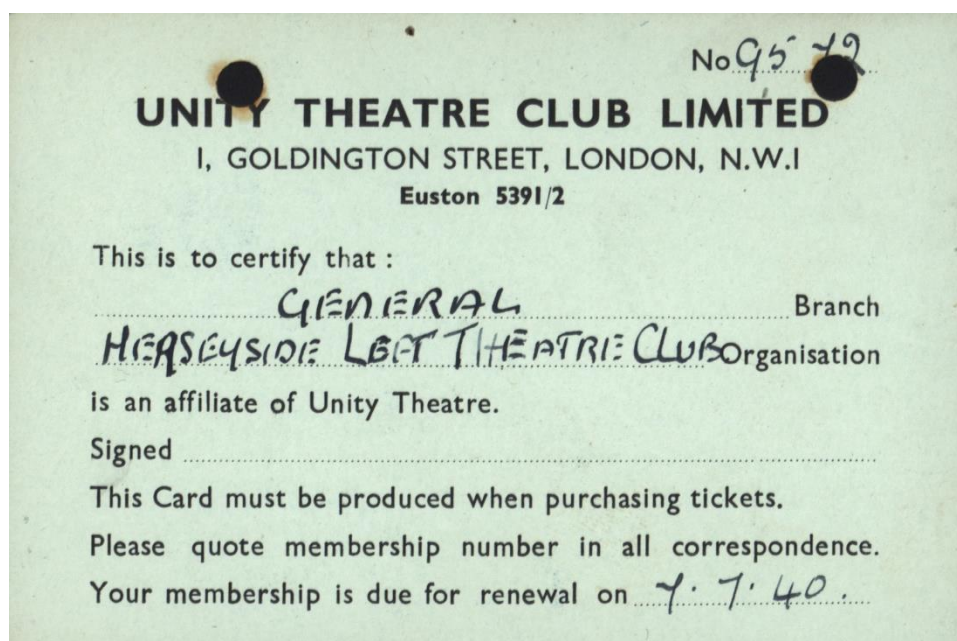


Ticket for Bootle Peace Week,

The club's activities to raise awareness of important political issues among working people was part of a broader, collaborative movement across Britain. Established in alignment with the Left Book Club's 1936 mandate for unity against fascism, the Merseyside Left Theatre Club drew additional inspiration from London's Unity Theatre. These two organisations then joined together to establish a national movement through the Left Book Club Theatre Guild, to which around 250 left-wing theatres were affiliated by 1939. Merseyside quickly became a revered branch in this guild, often providing advice and lending scripts to newly established clubs. From the very beginning then Merseyside Unity's roots were deeply embedded in activism and driving social change, always putting politics at the heart of their performances.



Monthly Review of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild, 1939.

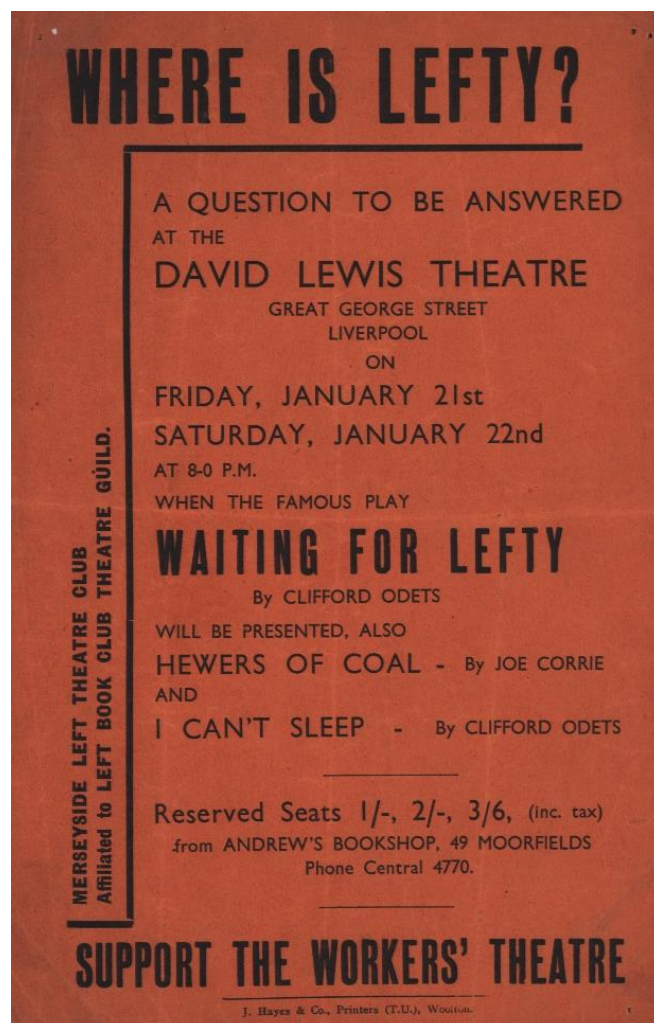


Membership card for the Unity Theatre Society Ltd in London, c late 1930s.

Early plays: anti-war, capitalism and censorship

The club's transition from mass declamations on the streets of Liverpool to its first full-length programme of plays in January 1938 marked a significant milestone in its early history. The theatre selected prominent works relating to the struggles of the working class including *Waiting for Lefty* and *I Can't Sleep* by American playwright Clifford Odets, and *Hewers of Coal* by Scottish miner turned playwright Joe Corrie.

Waiting for Lefty was the club's leading play presented at the David Lewis theatre over two nights in front of very enthusiastic audiences. Set in a New York taxi driver's trade union hall, the play focuses on the question of strike action against corrupt union officials during the Great Depression, ending with a call to action. In true Unity style, the play featured exclamations from actors seated among spectators and encouraged engagement from the audience in a call for strike action. It was a roaring success, particularly thanks to the knowledge and performance of club member and labour activist, George Garrett, who spent time working with the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) in America.



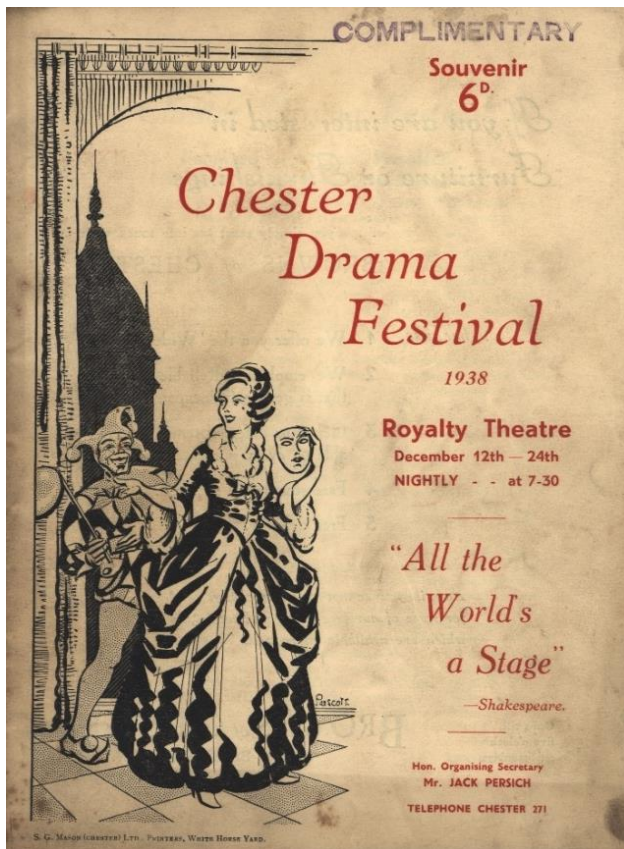
Handbill for a programme including *Waiting for Lefty*, *Hewers of Coal*, and *I Can't Sleep*, 1938.



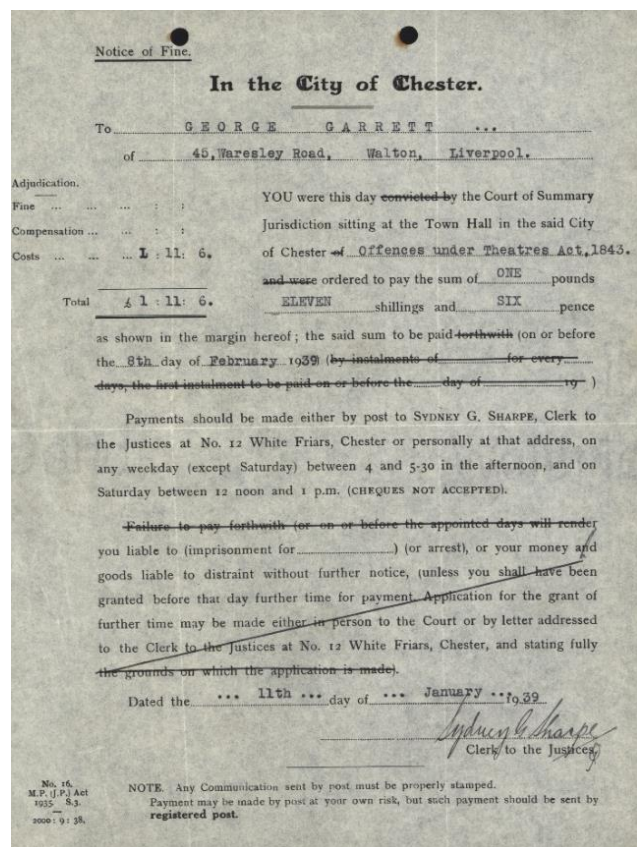
Photograph of actors rehearsing *I Can't Sleep* at a trade union hall, c 1938.

Following some comments about the severity of these three plays, the theatre chose next a more humorous addition to their repertory in the political satire *Where's that Bomb?* written by London taxi driver Herbert Hodge. The secretary Jerry Dawson went on to describe the play as the “first genuinely proletarian production in its field”. The plot focuses on a critique of the capitalist system through the protagonist Joe Dexter's dream about a rebellion launched by characters in his poems against Money Power. Together with *Waiting for Lefty* and *I Can't Sleep* the plays were a powerful triple-bill, but their repeat performance at the Chester Festival brought great controversy to the club and the Left Theatre Movement.

In December 1938, the club took their programme to the more traditional Chester Drama Festival, offering something very theatrically different and drawing in new audiences from trade unions and local labour parties. However, the night ended in unexpectedly when, following a politically charged speech given by the club secretary about the theatre's ideology, the curtain was abruptly lowered mid-way through their performance of *Waiting for Lefty*. The news made headlines across the country, and the ten actors were later fined in court when authorities ruled the play unlawful under the Theatres Act 1843. It became evident that a line in the script hadn't been approved by the Lord Chamberlain, who up until 1968 had the power to ban plays that were deemed politically or morally unacceptable. This event did cause harm to the theatre movement but ultimately led to better organisation and examination of scripts by the Left Book Club Theatre Guild prior to issuing to regional groups.



Programme for the Chester Drama Festival, 1938,



Notice of fine issued to George Garrett, 1939.

On the eve of the Second World War, Merseyside Left Theatre Club turned its focus again to plays in defence of peace including Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* which they performed at the David Lewis Theatre in early 1939. This intensely emotional protest about the futility of war and lost futures triggered emotional responses from an audience still reeling from the news of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia on 15 March. After the outbreak of war, the club didn't cease its activities, instead continuing to bring important political messages to local people insisting "progressive drama must not be a war casualty". This was asserted through the anti-fascist play *Till the Day I Die* written by Clifford Odets concerning underground resistance in Nazi Germany. The script was initially heavily censored by the Lord Chamberlain in March 1939 in accordance with the British government's policy of appeasement but was later licenced in its original format allowing the club to stage the city's first wartime amateur production in November 1939 (with an early start to allow audience to leave before blackout).

In fact, despite the difficulties of wartime, the theatre managed to produce its most ambitious production *The Dog Beneath the Skin* written by Auden and Isherwood in 1940. In a letter of encouragement to the club Dame Sybil Thorndike wrote "I am glad you are doing *The Dog Beneath the Skin*. I congratulate you on your enterprise – do the best plays always, however ambitious the attempt – and something exciting is sure to happen".

Involving 14 scene changes and over 100 costumes it was their most spectacular production to date. Its success was thanks to the commitment of its members in promotion, ticket sales, and performances at a time when membership was reduced due to conscription. Further excellent wartime plays included the mass declamation *Requiem* by Ernst Toller, and a second comedy from Herbert Hodge in *Strike Me Red*.

In these early years Merseyside Left Theatre presented plays never before seen by Liverpool audiences. It acted boldly in bringing contemporary British and American theatre to local people and bore the consequences, demonstrating its steadfastness to working-class theatre.

MERSEYSIDE LEFT THEATRE CLUB
61 Eversley Street, Liverpool, 8
present
By Public Request
"BURY THE DEAD"
by IRWIN SHAW
and
"WHERE'S THAT BOMB"
by HERBERT HODGE

- The Dramatic Critic of the Liverpool Weekly Post said of our earlier performance of "Bury the Dead" — "With this production, the Merseyside Left Theatre Club has leaped into the front rank of the season's amateur achievement."
- Do not miss this fine programme - - this outstanding anti-war play and Herbert Hodge's robust comedy.

DAVID LEWIS THEATRE
on Monday, April 24th
at 7-30 p.m.

TICKETS
6d (unreserved), 1/-, 1/6, 2/- (reserved)

Tickets may be obtained from, and vouchers exchanged at Crane & Son Ltd., Hanover Street, or at the theatre on the night of the performance.

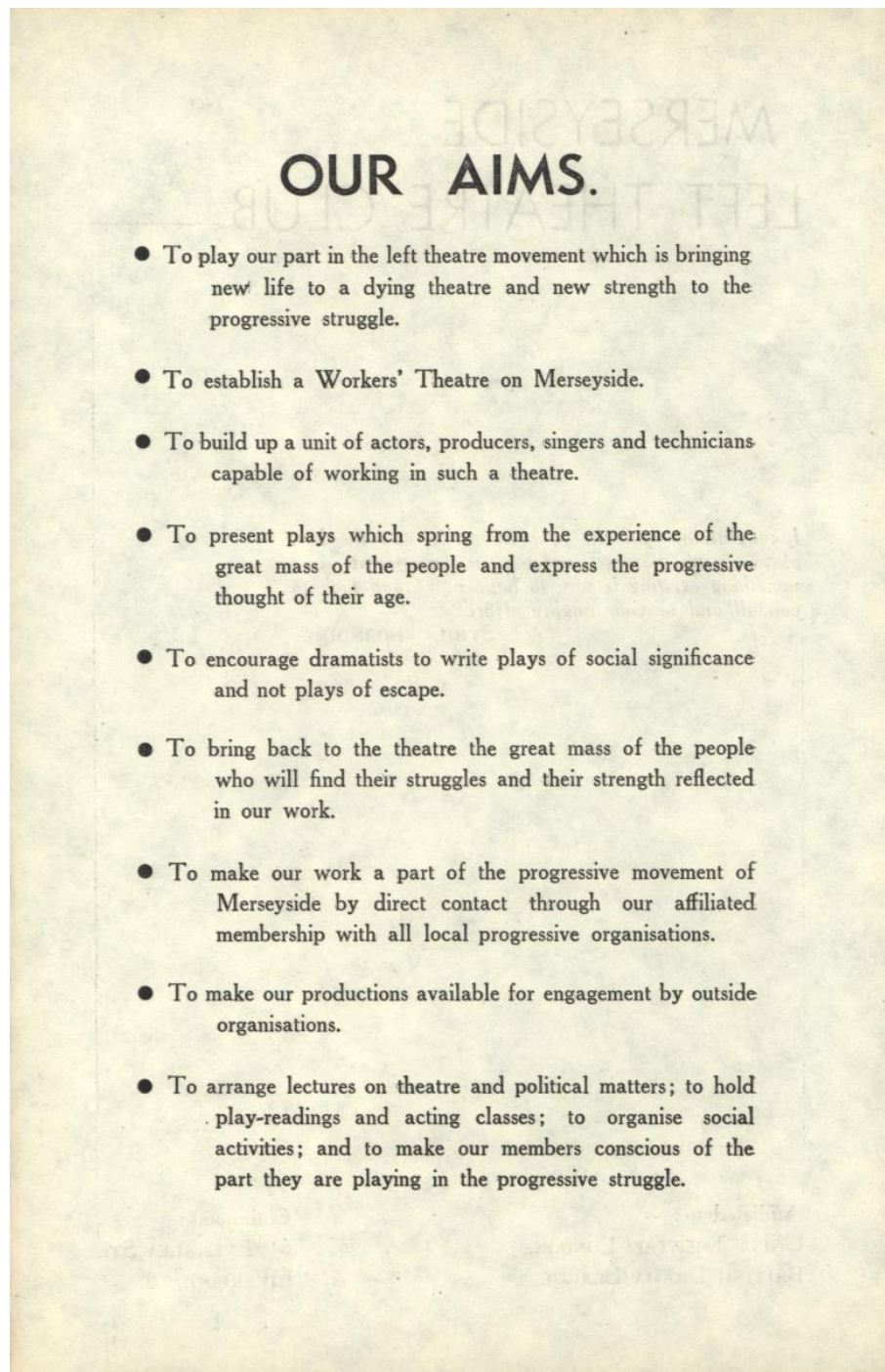
TRAMS 1, 3, 20, 21, 26, 27, 45 PASS THE DOOR

Printed by Majestic Commercial Printers (T.U.), 204 London Rd., L'pool, 3. Royal 2620

Handbill for *Bury the Dead*, 1939.

Serving the Labour Movement

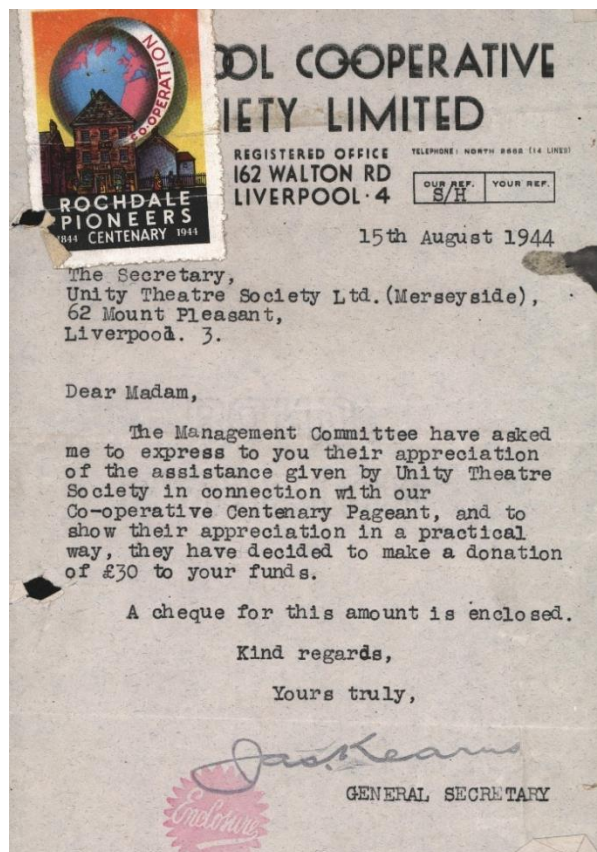
In 1939, Merseyside Left Theatre firmly set out its aims in a club prospectus, with a prominent focus on establishing themselves as the local Workers' Theatre to present plays which reflected the lives of ordinary men and women. Over the next four decades they became a vital pillar in the work of the Liverpool Labour movement, contributing significantly to education on working class history and driving social change through bringing topical theatre directly to the people.



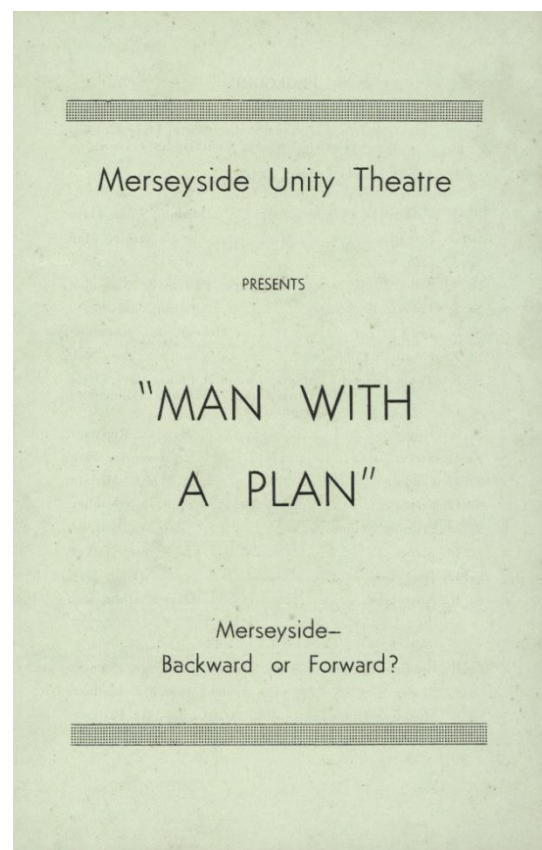
Merseyside Left Theatre Club aims published in 1939.

The theatre's early commitment to the labour cause was established during the war years. Its first collaboration was with the Liverpool Cooperative Society in staging its *Cooperative Centenary Pageant* at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1944. While not a Merseyside Unity Theatre production, many members performed in the pageant choir, for which they received a generous donation to further harness their capabilities in meeting the demands for left theatre in Liverpool.

In the wake of the Second World War, the theatre pivoted toward the urgent task of social reconstruction. The club's first full-length production was *They Came to a City* by J. B. Priestly, a play set in a socialist utopia, which they performed at Kirkby Hostels in May 1945. Next came *Man with a Plan* in 1946, an entertaining and valuable piece of original writing by Merseyside Unity in favour of social planning following Labour's general election victory under Clement Attlee. Set in Merseyside, the documentary spanned the period from the Depression to peacetime. It drew directly on the professional struggles of the club's own members, with Mr. Planner appearing from the audience to provide a solution to workers' problems. For example, in one exchange with an Irish docker, Mr. Planner explains the government's efforts to end casual labour through the 1946 Dock Workers Regulation of Employment Act. The play ends with the question "Which is it to be Merseyside – Backward or Forward?" directing a clear message at the audience to support the social reforms of the new government.

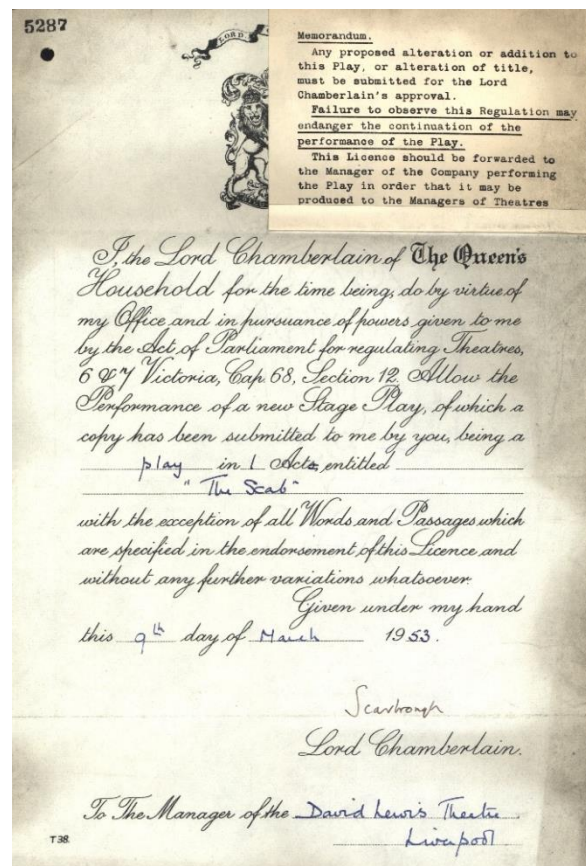


Letter of appreciation from the Liverpool Cooperative Society Ltd, 1944.



Programme for *Man with a Plan*, 1946.

Merseyside Unity functioned as more than just a theatre club; it existed as a service to the people and specifically the labour movement through the establishment of an affiliation scheme. Its secretary was extremely proactive in contacting local trade unions, councils, political parties and cooperative guilds, offering the theatre's services at reduced rates for block bookings. It actively encouraged branches to request performances of topical plays at their public meetings, strikes, or social events, and held film screenings including *Power in the Land* for the local Electrical Trades Union and Czech film *New Warriors Will Arise* for Lancashire mining lodges. One of these topical plays was *The Scab* written by early club member and local writer Frank Shaw. Set during General Strike of 1926, the one-act comedy focused on the impact of the strike on a Liverpool docker's family and was the first time Shaw's writing was produced on stage.



Handbill and Lord Chamberlain licence certificate for *The Scab*, 1953.

One of the theatre's most significant achievements over five decades of performances was its presentation of original documentary *One Hundred Years Hard* in 1948 for the centenary of the Liverpool Trades Council. A chronicle about a century of working class struggles on Merseyside, the theatre spent extensive time researching, writing, and rehearsing the 28-scene play to mark the occasion and celebrate the Liverpool pioneers of socialism. Some of the most noteworthy scenes included a court scene following the National Unemployed

Workers Committee protest at the Walker Art Gallery in 1921 in which George Garrett played the role of himself. This was followed by a scene about the 1922 Hunger March from Liverpool to London, where demands were made for “Work or Maintenance” due to the mass unemployment of ex-servicemen after the First World War. The documentary was an enormous success, and in a letter to the theatre Bessie Braddock MP highlighted the political influence that could be wielded from using the stage as an avenue for propaganda. She wrote:

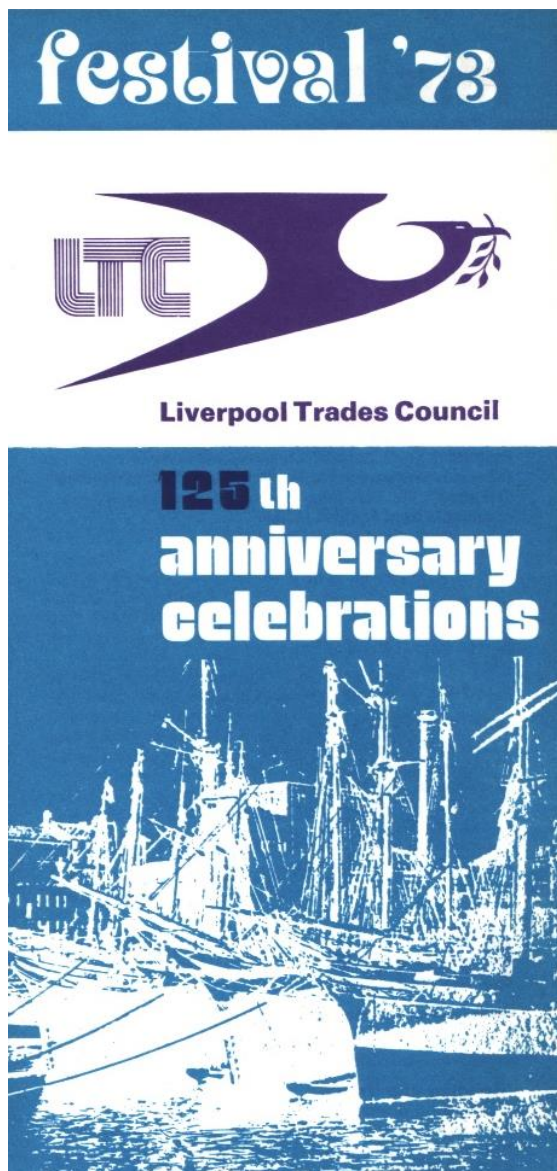
We in Liverpool have been fortunate in having the services of Unity Theatre at our disposal. The portrayal of the growth of the Labour and Trades Union movement in *One Hundred Years Hard* was an effort which reached the highest standard. Every courage should be given to this enthusiastic group of pioneers who are making history in the sphere of the stage.



Photograph of George Garrett in the Hunger March scene in *One Hundred Years Hard*, 1948.

By the early 1950s, the theatre had become the ‘go-to’ creative partner for large scale trade union commemorations. In 1951, it was commissioned for the centenary celebrations of the Liverpool Committee of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, performing an original documentary *The Engineers* written by Edgar Criddle which featured important events in the union’s history, including the Quittance Paper strikes of 1845. Another significant production for the Merseyside Area of the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives was of course *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell, which featured in its cast Stan Thorne who later became a Labour MP in 1974. The renowned scene *The Great Money Trick* depicting the capitalist exploitation of workers was kept in the club’s repertory for years to come, including at the invitation of former club Chairman Eric Heffer MP following a commemoration to the author at Walton Cemetery in 1977.

Later performances in the 1970s were *Make That Future Now*, a chronicle on labour history for the 125th anniversary of the Liverpool Trades Council in 1973, and *May Day Miscellany* in 1978 about the origins and traditions of International Workers' Day. The longevity and success of Merseyside Unity in serving the labour movement were made clear in a statement by Eric Heffer in *Left Theatre*, writing that the club's activities were just as important as major rallies, strikes and protests to Liverpool's labour history.



Programme for the 125th anniversary festival for the Liverpool Trades Council, 1973.



Programme for Liverpool's May Day Festival, 1978.

International Plays

Alongside their focus on local and national stories, Merseyside Unity Theatre always kept one eye firmly on the wider world. From the outset, they saw themselves as part of an international movement—bringing global voices and ideas to Liverpool audiences, often for the very first time. Over the years, they staged a remarkable range of plays from across Europe and beyond, many of them English premieres and works that audiences in the city might never otherwise have had the chance to see.

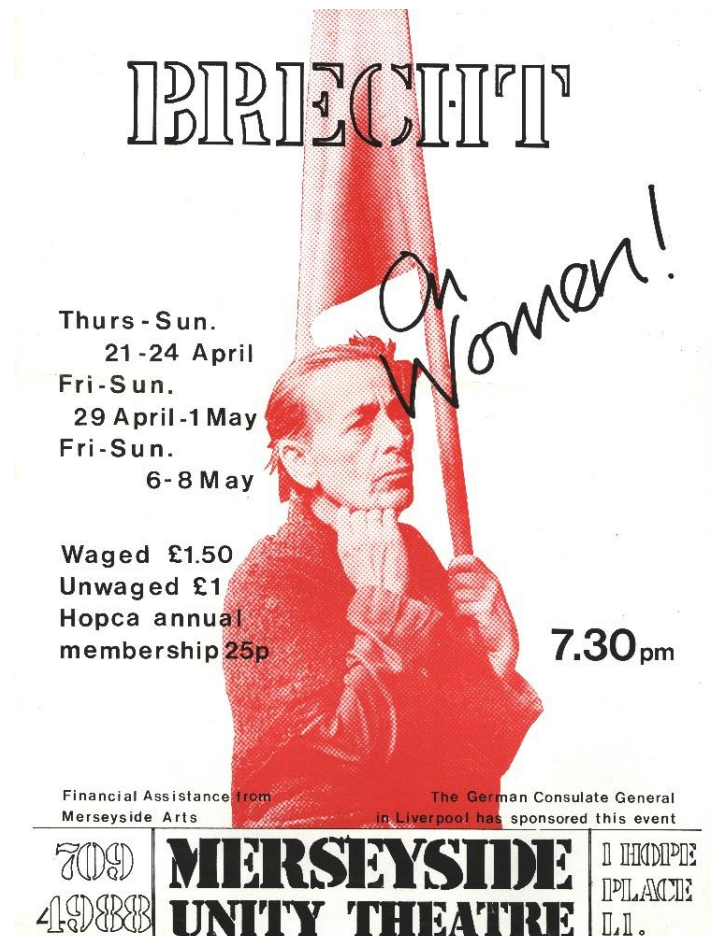
This internationalist outlook runs right through their history. Early on, performances included mass declamations by Jack Lindsay about China and the Soviet Union, and it continues later with productions such as David Evans' *Beneath Olympus* (1979), centred on the Sharpeville Massacre. Unity members were always looking outward, connecting what was happening in Liverpool to events unfolding across the world.

One of their most important international influences was Bertolt Brecht. Unity became passionate champions of his work, drawn to his sharp understanding of how society shapes—and distorts—the lives of ordinary people. As early as 1940, and only just beaten to the title of first English Brecht performance by London Unity, they staged *The Informer*. This tense, compact play tells of a couple living in fear that their son, a member of the Hitler Youth, might betray his father's anti-Nazi views.

Unity returned to Brecht again and again over the decades, building up a rich relationship with his work. Productions included *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1959), *The Exception and the Rule* (1961), *Mother Courage* (1964), *The Life of Galileo* (1967), *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1974), *The Mother* (1974), and *The Measures Taken* (1976). In 1977, marking both Unity's 40th anniversary and the 40th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, they paired *I Am Spain*—a collage of projections, poetry and documents—with *Senora Carrar's Rifles*. At Hope Place, their first full season concluded with *Days of the Commune* (1980), while 1983 saw *Brecht on Women*, a show devised by members of Unity that imaginatively brought audiences into the world of the Berliner Ensemble.



Photograph from *Mother Courage*, 1964.

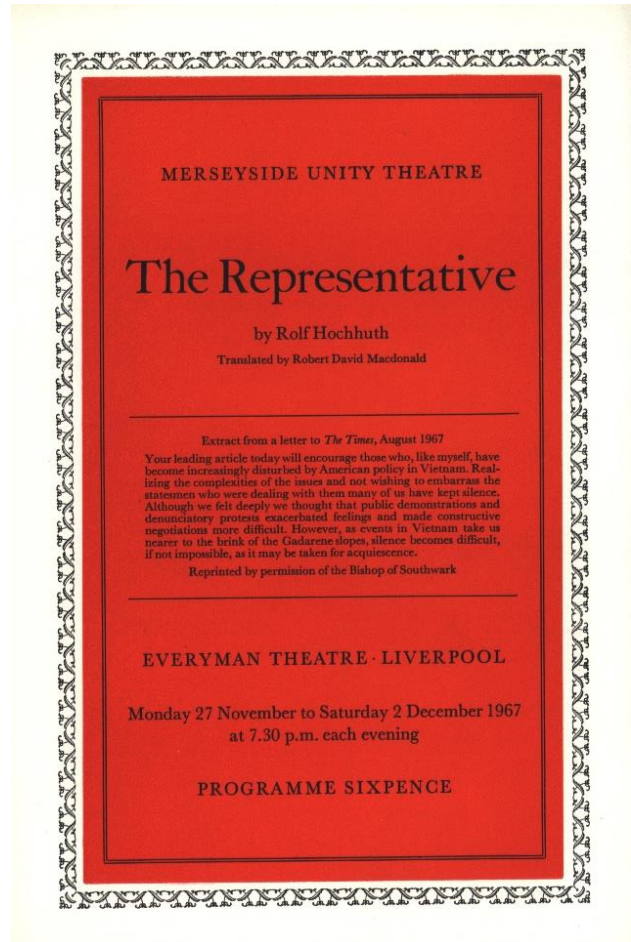


Selection of posters created by Merseyside Unity for its Brecht productions, 1960s – 1980s.

European theatre more broadly was also central to Unity's programme. They presented classics by writers such as Ibsen, Büchner, Giraudoux, Lorca and Strindberg, alongside more contemporary work. Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* (1962) arrived in Liverpool just a year after its London debut—and a year before it controversially reached the stage of the Liverpool Playhouse—offering a stark warning about the dangers of ignoring what is happening right in front of us.



Poster for *The Fire Raisers*, 1962.

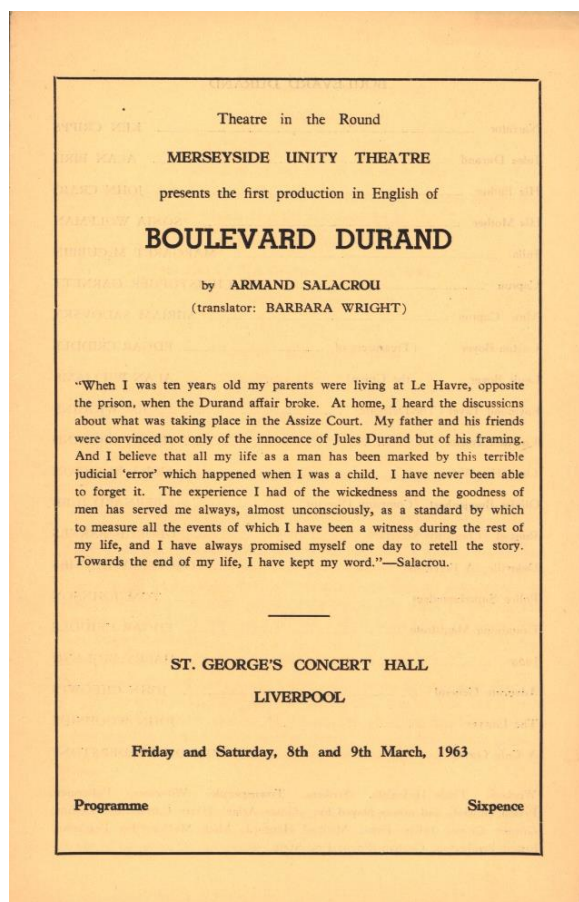


Programme for the *Representative*, 1967.

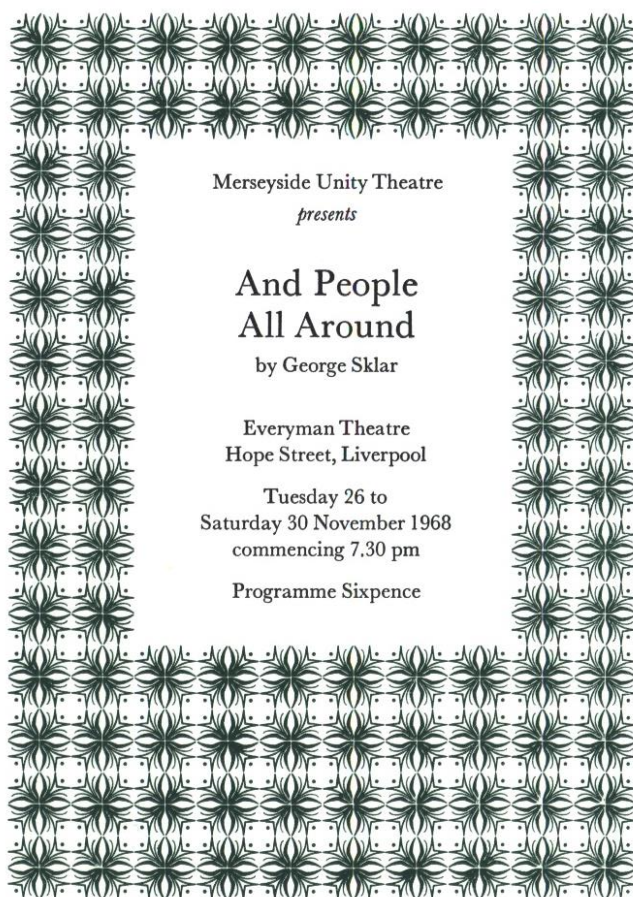
The late 1960s saw particularly powerful engagements with recent history. In 1967, Unity staged Hochhuth's controversial *The Representative*, which accused Pope Pius XII of failing to take action to oppose the Holocaust. The production sparked lively debate, including a special "Late Night Line Up" discussion organised at the Everyman Theatre where the show was being performed featuring a multi-faith panel. The following month, they presented a reading of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*, a reconstruction of the war crimes trials—cutting the play to an hour and a half, as the company noted they did not wish to dwell too heavily on its horrors.

Unity also brought major international stories to Liverpool through English premieres. Armand Salacrou's *Boulevard Durand* (1963) tells the true story of a French trade unionist wrongly accused of murder during a strike in 1910. Although eventually released after an international outcry, Durand's ordeal left lasting scars, and he spent the rest of his life in an asylum. In 1968, they staged George Sklar's *And People All Around*, based on the murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in the United States. For Unity, this felt urgently contemporary, coming in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination earlier that year and at a time when they saw rampant Powellism closer to home.

Taken together, these productions reveal a company deeply engaged with the world beyond Liverpool—curious, politically aware, and committed to sharing international stories that resonated locally.



Programme for *Boulevard Durand*, 1963.



Programme for *And People All Around*, 1968.

Music, Film and Education

Some of the lesser-known achievements of Merseyside Unity Theatre were their contributions to the local socialist movement through music, film and education. The club's activities in these areas, particularly the Sunday University, saw the committee use the arts as a pedagogical tool to encourage members and audiences to engage more deeply with national and international politics through the study of literature, film, and drama.

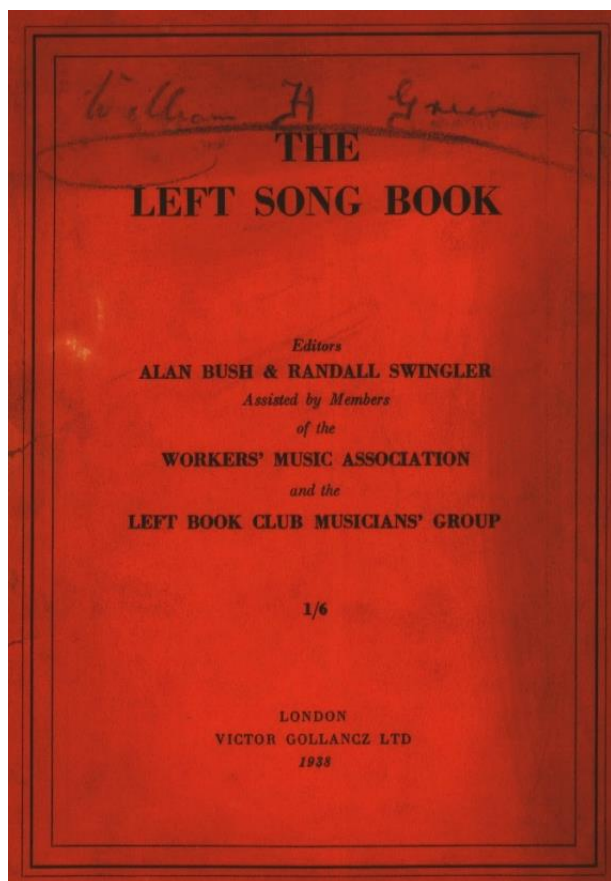
At the heart of the theatre's labour activism was the Left Theatre Choir. Established in early 1939 shortly after the club's foundation, the singing group quickly became a cornerstone of its political activities, with rehearsals taking place every Sunday at the 61 Eversley Street club rooms. The choir's performances were soon recognised as one of the most valued contributions to the local labour movement, and already by the 1940s the group was regularly requested at all major regional political rallies - most notably the annual May Day parades - earning formal commendation in correspondence from the Liverpool Trades Council.



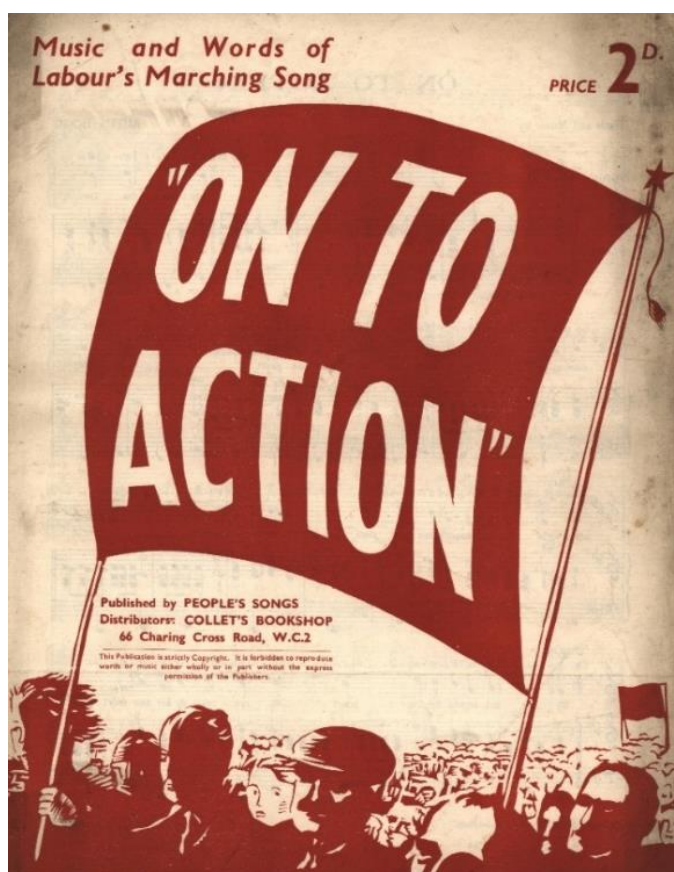
Merseyside Unity Theatre Choir on Labour Party March, c 1940s.

The choir's initial repertoire began to take shape in 1939 when labour activist George Garrett held an early lecture for members on Songs of Revolt from his own IWW songbook. Following this, the theatre went on to develop an impressive collection of labour songbooks and scores for use in the choir's engagements. Most notably *The Left Song Book*, published in 1938 by the Left Book Club and Workers Music Association, contained an informative selection of traditional and topical workers' songs from across Britain and Europe that became important education for club members.

Through the choir's activities many singers became first acquainted with the writings of Bertolt Brecht, the International Brigade, and other influential socialist writers and composers including Randall Swingler, Alan Bush, and William Morris. Though the singers were largely untrained, the group instead placed emphasis on singing with passion, and the power of collective voice to unite audiences in a common cause.



The Left Song Book, 1938.



On to Action sheet music, c 1940s.

One of the most significant music events in the club's early history was their support in organising an open-air performance given by American singer and activist Paul Robeson in May 1949. Robeson wanted to sing directly to the people of Liverpool, and with the help of Merseyside Unity Theatre he succeeded by drawing in a crowd of over 10,000 people to his performance on top of an air raid shelter on Lord Street. Subsequently, he requested that the theatre perform in a programme at St. George's Hall the next day, to which they brought their song scena *Free and Equal* about race relations in Liverpool. The song scena format became a signature method of their storytelling, in which music was used to drive the momentum of their theatrical narratives. Other song scenas included *Atomic Blues* written in 1947 in the shadow of the atomic bomb, and *I Never Died* written in 1950 about renewing hope in the organisation of a factory strike through characters singing the labour song *I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night*.



Merseyside Unity Theatre members with Paul Robeson, 1949.

Expanding its scope beyond the Left Theatre Choir, the committee also incorporated film screenings into its regular programme of activities. The club brought international cinema to new audiences, screening films from across Europe, the Soviet Union, America and China, at venues ranging from the David Lewis Theatre to the Philharmonic Hall. The selected films were inherently political, designed primarily to strengthen the political consciousness of members and audiences. In addition to this ideological objective, the committee also sought to improve peoples' understanding of other cultures by showcasing both established classics and contemporary cinema from the Eastern Bloc.

However, after 7 years of successful screenings often to capacity audiences, the club faced a ban on its use of the Philharmonic Hall by the Liverpool City Council in 1953. It was a key example of McCarthyism on Merseyside, and in response the club demanded its freedom to cultural expression through circulating a petition and organising a protest meeting with speakers from the local Trades Council, Labour and Cooperative parties. It garnered support from the National Council on Civil Liberties and local MPs Harold Wilson and Bessie Braddock, following which it eventually won the right to resume screenings.

Staying true to its original aims set out in 1939, the club also focused on arranging lectures, play readings and variety of practical classes. Coined the "Sunday University" by its driving force, Jerry Dawson, the initiative hosted guest speakers on literature, politics and theatre for the next few decades, aiming to enrich members' knowledge for their performances. The catalogue of speakers was remarkably diverse, ranging from professional actors and academics to historians and playwrights. Notable sessions included the actor Harry Ross on the Stanislavsky technique and historian Edward Thompson on the socialism of William Morris.

Dramatists in Residence

In the years following the Second World War, Merseyside Unity found itself in the unusual position of having not one but two resident dramatists—both named Leonard. Over the next fifteen years, Leonard Peck and Leonard Irwin brought eight original plays to the stage. Their work tackled urgent and often controversial subjects, from American military bases and McCarthyism in England to the lingering shadow of Fascism in post-war Germany. While their writing remained within the theatrical styles of the time, they nonetheless explored themes that few English playwrights were addressing. Looking back in 1971, Dawson reflected in a letter to Peck that they had simply been “too early in the field” to reap the recognition later enjoyed by writers like Osborne and Wesker.

Leonard Peck arrived in Liverpool during the first year of the war, already having written *Means Test Trifle* for the Left Book Club Theatre Guild. His early work *Green and Pleasant Land*—about the Chartists—was read by Merseyside Unity but deemed too ambitious to stage. His first full production, *The Townshends* (1948), offered a critical look at the so-called “good old days” of 1913 following a family struggling to overcome the degrading effects of poverty. This was followed by *The Invisible Law* (1949), a drama set in the workplace that examined victimisation in industry. At its centre is Bob Kempton, labelled a trouble-maker for challenging management, and Davies, a principled General Manager who refuses to blacklist him, setting up a powerful clash between conscience and authority in which Davies, with his unshakeable beliefs ‘scorns the slings and arrows of threat and abuse.’

Peck soon expanded his focus beyond Britain. *The Traitors* (1952) explored the uneasy fate of former resistance fighters in Eastern Europe, now viewed with suspicion by new regimes. In *The Shadow of the Swastika* (1954), a gripping political thriller, he tackled the threat of neo-Nazism in post-war Germany. The play’s programme emphasised just how topical it felt:

When we gave it our first reading towards the end of last season, we realised that the play would still be topical after the summer break. But we did not see how opportune the play would be. The French rejection of E.D.C., the attempted ban on the publication of Lord Russell of Liverpool’s book, *The Scourge of the Swastika*, the arrogance of Adenauer and the insolence of Dulles, the dithering of Eden, the debates within the labour movement have all contributed to make this the most topical play we have ever produced.

His final play for Merseyside Unity, *The Big Screen* (1958), drew more directly on personal experience. Peck himself had been suspended from his Civil Service job after refusing to answer questions about his political views. The play reflects these anxieties through the story of Arthur Allen, whose involvement in invasive security checks linked to his H-bomb research leads to devastating consequences—including a suicide and the breakdown of his marriage...



Photograph from *The Shadow of the Swastika*, 1954.



Handbill for *The Big Screen*, written under the pseudonym Leonard Brain, 1958.

Alongside Peck, Leonard Irwin brought a distinctive topical voice. His first play, *The Land of the Living*, travelled widely after its Liverpool reading—reaching Manchester Library Theatre, being broadcast on the BBC, and earning him an Atlantic Award.

Merseyside Unity premiered his next three works. *The Circling Dove* (1950) is set in an overstretched hospital and vividly captures the pressures facing the early NHS. At its heart is an exhausted matron pushed to the limit—until a visiting Colonel's demand for military beds in the event of a new war forces her to take a stand. What unfolds is a story of resistance. The Colonel, acting under government orders, will brook no opposition and demands her resignation. News spills out – there is protest by patients and the Colonel, fearing secret plans will become public is forced to withdraw, deciding the hospital is no longer suitable. When the play reached London audiences that June, its themes felt strikingly real—especially as news of the Korean War broke, bringing its warnings uncomfortably close to home.



Portrait photograph of Leonard Irwin, c 1950s.



Programme for *The Circling Dove*, 1950.

In contrast, *The Wages of Eve* (1952) takes a lighter tone while addressing a serious issue: equal pay. Eve Tattersall has been chargehand in a Burnesworth factory for 15 months and now she wants a man's pay for a man's work. Inevitably, plenty of arguments are raised against her, both in the factory and at home, and while there is no neat and victorious ending for Eve, her fight is, as she says at the end of the play, a start.

Irwin's final Merseyside play, *Enter Guests Armed* (1955), turns to the growing tensions between Britain and the United States in the post-war years - tensions developing from who America would allow into the country and from the presence of US bases in the English countryside. When the daughter of a Labour Alderman (in the running for the mayoralty of a small provincial town) gets engaged to a US Air Force Corporal and wants to move to America, the Americans start to investigate her background, fearful of importing people who are 'politically infected'. At the same time, the Alderman's mother is refusing to move out of her cottage, blocking the route for the new runway for the American base. Called on to make a pro-American speech to show that he is not a political problem, the Alderman wakes up to his forgotten, youthful radicalism and refuses.

Together, Peck and Irwin created a body of work that was bold, politically engaged, and ahead of its time—bringing questions to local stages and giving Merseyside Unity a distinctive and ambitious voice in post-war British theatre.



Photograph from *Enter Guests Armed*, 1955.



Photograph from *The Shadow of the Swastika*, 1954.

Re-imagining Classics

One of the original aims of Merseyside Unity was to reconnect people with the cultural achievements of the past — not as distant history, but as a living inheritance for everyone. Early on, the company focused on agit-prop theatre and new writing, but after the war there was space to turn back to the classics and explore them afresh.

From the Greeks — *Women of Troy* (1957) and *Lysistrata* (1959) — through to the dark intrigue of Webster's Jacobean tragedies, lesser-known Restoration comedies, and the more modern "classics" of George Bernard Shaw, Unity brought a remarkable range of works to Liverpool audiences.

The opening up of Calderstones Park for performances — rooted in the wartime 'Holidays at Home' scheme — and the building of the Garden Theatre in 1947 created new opportunities to share theatre more widely. Shakespeare played a central role here for the Unity, with productions including *As You Like It* (1945), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1952), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1953), *A Winter's Tale* (1954) and *King John* (1957).

There was also room for ambition. To mark the centenary of Shaw's birth, Unity staged *Man and Superman* (1956), but sensibly decided that even the most enthusiastic summer audience might struggle with the full five-hour version. Instead, they presented a shorter version at Calderstones, before opening the next club theatre season with the famous third act, *Don Juan in Hell*.



Poster for Open Air Theatre in Calderstones Park 1956 featuring a performance of *Man and Superman* by Merseyside Unity, and costume designs for *Love's Labour's Lost*, 1952.



Photograph of the stage at Calderstones Park during a performance of *Man and Superman*, 1956.

Unity didn't just stage classics — they reshaped them. The company often looked for contemporary relevance, sometimes creating their own adaptations to make those connections sharper. In 1948, they presented their own version of Molière's *The Miser*. They also reworked *Volpone* as *The Fox Trap*, a production that proved especially popular. It was chosen for the inaugural Theatre in the Round Festival in Scarborough (1960), alongside another Unity favourite, Shaw's anti-war play *O'Flaherty V.C.*

That same year, *The Fox Trap* brought further recognition when it won a prize at the British Drama League's annual festival, leading to an invitation to perform at the Mülheim Biennial Festival in Germany. Meanwhile, their adaptation of *Mak and the Shepherds* — from a Wakefield medieval mystery play — also found success, winning the Gertrude Usher Award in the first round of the British Drama League festival and reaching the divisional final in 1957.

Of course, not everyone was convinced. By the 1970s, some critics felt that Unity's polished productions of the classics risked feeling out of step, particularly as Alan Dossor's Everyman Theatre was gaining attention for bold, contemporary political work.

Still, these productions show how Unity continually balanced past and present — bringing classic theatre into new settings, new forms, and new conversations with its audiences.

Places and Spaces

From the very beginning, Merseyside Unity wasn't tied to a theatre or a building — and, initially, that was the point. In fact, when they celebrated their 21st birthday with *Working Majority*, they proudly pointed out that they'd performed pretty much anywhere you can imagine: a platform, a meeting room, a lawn, a cart-top, even a street corner. Rather than waiting for audiences to come to them, Unity took theatre to where people already were.

Of course, they also used more traditional venues for bigger shows, regularly appearing at the David Lewis Theatre, St George's Concert Room, the Neptune Theatre, and later the Everyman. During the war, they performed in factory canteens and garrison theatres, including Fort Crosby. These unusual settings sometimes created unexpected — and memorable — moments: *The Good Person of Setzuan* played out alongside the grand Greek statues in St George's Concert Hall, while *The Great Money Trick* unfolded in front of a ruched satin curtain.



Photograph from a performance of *The Great Money Trick*, 1977.

During the war years, Unity took a big step towards creating a space of their own. They moved into the first floor of a crumbling Georgian house on Mount Pleasant, transforming it — with a lot of hard work from members (including Eric Heffer) — into a small but lively theatre. With donated tip-up seats, a modest 12-by-9-foot stage, and space for around 70 seated (plus another 20 standing), it quickly became a hub. Over time they added dressing rooms, a workshop, and even a refreshment room.

This wasn't just a theatre — it became a real community space. Saturday nights turned into a "Unity habit" with weekly performances, while Sundays brought lectures, play-readings, and performance anthologies. There were films, socials, and plenty of tea.

The space was described as a “left centre”, somewhere people could gather informally after meetings in other places. It even doubled as a meeting place for other groups and at one point, dockers used it as a strike base.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. Over time, concerns grew that having their own venue risked cutting them off from the wider Labour movement, and by 1959 things had reached a tipping point. With audiences shrinking and debts rising, Unity made the difficult decision to give up the space and return to their more nomadic roots.

Still, the idea of a permanent home never quite went away. Unity continued to campaign for an Arts Centre for the city, linking up with initiatives like Sam Wanamaker's New Shakespeare Club in 1957 at the Pigalle Theatre. They later welcomed the opening of the Everyman in 1964, performing there regularly until it closed for redevelopment in the mid-1970s.

By the late 1970s, a new opportunity emerged: a building on Hope Place, once a synagogue and later a photographer's studio. After years of searching, Unity finally had a place to call home again. They opened the Unity Theatre in June 1980 with a two-week festival — a fitting celebration for a company that had spent decades turning all kinds of places into spaces for theatre.



Photograph of the theatre at 1 Hope Place, c 1980.

