

In Pursuit of a New Theatre: The Case of the Malvern Festival

This article considers the impact of the not-for-profit motive promoted by radical campaigners of the New Theatre movement on accounts of British theatre history. Using the Malvern Festival (1929-1949) as a case study of similar ventures associated with the New Theatre movement, this article explores the ways in which influential figures involved with these projects have distorted narratives of theatre through their emphasis on the not-for-profit/commercial binary opposition. The correspondence between key collaborators in the Festival — Bernard Shaw, Sir Barry Jackson and the lessee of the Malvern Theatre, Roy Limbert — discussed in this article reveals the flaws in such narratives, contradicting previous accounts of the Festival. These letters reveal that Shaw and Jackson failed to adhere to their own condemnations of profitmaking as they struggled to reconcile this outlook with the reality of the Malvern Festival and more broadly the material conditions of theatre.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw; twentieth century; new theatre; Malvern Festival; Barry Jackson

This article focuses on the development of the Malvern Festival (1929-1949), one of the many initiatives of the New Theatre movement. The aim of the article is to problematise a binary that has skewed accounts of theatre history, namely artistic value in theatre as opposite to commercial success, by examining the policies established by key figures in the Festival. The article analyses previously unpublished and unexplored correspondence between three figures collaborating in the Festival: Bernard Shaw and the director and founder of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Sir Barry Jackson, two high profile agents in the promotion of modernism in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British theatre, and an obscure commercial theatre manager and lessee of the Malvern theatre, Roy Limbert. The article reveals the flaws in this binary logic narrative developed by proponents of modernist initiatives and perpetuated by theatre historians. It also highlights how tensions between the 'artistic' and the 'commercial' (as revealed in the correspondence) underpin questions with which theatre scholars and practitioners continue to struggle, including target audiences, the function of theatre and the ever pressing concerns about funding.

Modernism in the context of this article is used to refer to models of aesthetically and politically avant-garde theatre emerging at the end of the nineteenth century

influenced by theatrical developments in the continent. In this article, the term refers specifically to the work of early modernists and proponents of the New Theatre movement like Shaw, William Archer and Harley Granville Barker who in their attempts for experimentation and innovation waged a fierce campaign against commercial theatres, proposing to establish radical alternatives to West End plays and practices, including the long run and star system. Financial risk posed a consistent obstacle in the way of those hoping to stage new and unconventional plays. The middle-class elite supporting this movement pursued public funding as a remedy, justifying their requests through an emphasis on the moral, educational and spiritual functions of drama – enlightened goals, which they argued, commercialism compromised. For instance, when appealing for donations to fund the building of a national theatre, Shaw drew comparisons between theatre and public libraries to argue that the impetus to reform was antithesis to the commercial instinct:

To continue [...] a boundless endowment of libraries and charities whilst leaving the theatre to prostitute itself further and further on the plea that “they who live to please must please to live” is really to abandon the most potent factor in the formation of our national conscience and character to the survivors in a competition in which the most scrupulous go to the wall (British Library, 1909).

Using the Malvern Festival as a case study, this article exposes how ideological bias can skew the historical record from a more equitable perspective on the theatre of the period; in fact, in their own involvement with theatre, supporters of the not-for-profit motive blurred boundaries between ‘artistic’ and ‘commercial’ interests and often privately participated in the pursuit of profitmaking that they publicly condemned. The article also sheds light on a lesser-known aspect of Shaw’s life and career, revealing an example of a broader series of mutually beneficial experimental collaborations between this playwright and regional theatres.

The New Theatre movement began in London with a number of short-lived ventures including the Independent Theatre (1891-1898) and the Vedrenne-Barker seasons at the Royal Court (1904-1907). Without the burden of the heavy costs associated with West End management and with the support of wealthy benefactors such as Annie Horniman and Barry Jackson, the regional repertory movement continued the work that had begun in the capital with companies appearing in Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Glasgow, staging experimental work that often featured Shaw’s plays (Jackson, 1984, 33-34). Prior to the Festival in Malvern, Shaw had collaborated extensively with the Birmingham Rep; Jackson mounted ambitious productions of Shaw’s plays including in 1923, the British premiere of *Back to Methuselah*, a cycle play that begins in the garden of Eden in B.C. 4004 and ends in 31,920 A.D. in an act titled ‘As Far as Thought Can Reach’. This monumental and critically acclaimed production, staged over four nights and one matinee, reached the Royal Court in 1924, offering Shaw an unexpected London premiere of a difficult play enabled by Jackson as the then lessee of the Court. Shaw, who had been directly involved with many of the unsuccessful ventures in the capital and was at this time struggling to find venues in London for his more experimental later plays, unsurprisingly approached the idea of continuing his relationship with the Birmingham

Rep as part of the Malvern Festival, in Jackson's words, 'with something more than the customary twinkling enthusiasm' (as quoted in Conolly, 2002, 35).

Jackson established the Festival in association with the lessee of the Malvern Theatre, Limbert, in 1929. The Festival continued for ten seasons as an annual event until the outbreak of war in 1939, and then returned for one final season in 1949. The Festival was initially dedicated to the works of Shaw with the repertoire of the first season featuring four plays including the English premiere of *The Apple Cart*, a political extravaganza that offers a dystopian image of England's future to comment on some of the political issues of the time. During its twelve seasons, the Festival presented two world premieres – *Geneva* (1938) and *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939) — and four British premieres of Shaw's plays — *The Apple Cart* (1929), *Too True to be Good* (1932), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1935) and *Buoyant Billions* (1949). In addition to its dramatic productions, the Festival featured other activities such as talks, exhibitions, and balls, and attracted an impressive list of visitors and speakers including the academic and critic, Allardyce Nicoll and the film director and producer, Gabriel Pascal as well as actors like Cedric Hardwicke and Stephen Murray.

The Festival did not remain an event dedicated to Shaw. Jackson changed the direction of the Festival, much to the dismay of Limbert, and since 1931 the Festival presented what Jackson identified as 'A Survey of English Drama'. In these later seasons, the Festival included seven plays that covered a period of four hundred years, with an emphasis on lesser-known classics. For instance, in 1932, the Festival included John Heywood's *The Play of the Weather* (1533), Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) in place of better known Early Modern plays by Shakespeare or Marlowe; it also featured the British premiere of Shaw's *Too True to be Good*, a play in which the playwright laments the long lasting effects of WWI and continues deconstructing the well-made play, concluding the first act with a microbe 'made of a luminous jelly' (Shaw, 1952, 1131) announcing that *Too True to be Good* 'is now virtually over; but the characters will discuss it at great length for two acts more' (1141). Although Jackson returned to a less commercially risky approach in 1935, a series of disagreements between Jackson, Limbert, and the Malvern Council, as revealed through the correspondence, ultimately led to Jackson's departure in 1937. The Festival continued for a further two seasons managed by Limbert in association with Hardwicke before a hiatus during the war and one final season in 1949. During this time, Limbert dispensed with Jackson's emphasis on lesser-known classics, instead presenting new plays by living playwrights like James Bridie, Lord Dunsany and J. B. Priestley. These productions did not present the West End long runs Limbert anticipated and without the financial support of Jackson and the prestige associated with his company, the Festival idea was finally abandoned in 1949.

Initially, the co-managers of the Festival may appear to readers as polar opposites in their attitudes towards theatre, and indeed previous critics have framed their relationship in this way. Jackson was a wealthy theatre impresario who used the money he inherited from his father, the founder of the Maypole Dairies, George Jackson, to fund his passion for the stage. Jackson financed the building of the first purpose-built playhouse for a repertory company in 1913, establishing a theatre that was experimental and innovative in terms of both artistic decisions as well as the building's architectural design.¹ Jackson's company presented pioneering work that in addition to Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, also included controversial modern dress productions of Shakespeare's plays: *Cymbeline* (Birmingham, 1923), *Hamlet* (London and Birmingham, 1925). Between 1919 and 1935, London witnessed at least one production by Jackson each year; 'the playbills of the Court

and Kingsway were monopolised by his name' (Rowell, 1984, 55). These productions 'attracted national and international prestige' and by 1925 Jackson was awarded a knighthood for his services to theatre as his companies performed in Birmingham and London and toured across the country (Cochrane, 2003, 90).

Limbert, on the other hand, had very few theatrical credentials. In addition to managing the Malvern Theatre, he was also the director of a 'chain of theatres and picture houses in Sussex and elsewhere'. Limbert hired the playhouse in Malvern to rent to other theatre managers; in 1929 alongside the Birmingham Rep, theatre companies such as the Stratford-Upon-Avon Festival Company also visited the theatre (*Malvern Gazette*, August 23, 1929). Cochrane indicates that this form of managing playhouses was common in the early twentieth century as 'building ownership or long-term leasehold passed out of the hands of creative artists to business interests which profited from subleasing theatres to short-term producing managements' (2011, 54). This description of an individual with mainly business interests and limited experience managing a playhouse seems applicable to Limbert prior to his management of the Malvern Theatre.ⁱⁱ The correspondence, however, demonstrates that Limbert strived for a much more active role in the artistic decisions made at the Festival than Cochrane's description of such business managers suggests.

Jackson's many unflattering references to the role of the 'businessman' in early twentieth-century English theatre foreshadow the tension that was to erupt in his later working partnership with Limbert. Some years prior to the Festival, in December 1922, Jackson expressed such criticism clearly:

The businessman was not in the theatre for very long before he discovered what type of play brought him the biggest success. The public was on his side since he created directly for their tastes, the actor's natural desire to appeal in great roles was easily overcome, and as for the author, well it was not even necessary to put his name in the advertisement.

Jackson reiterated these views — with Limbert now as focus — following the failure of the joint endeavour. In a 1948 letter to Shaw recalling the Festival's establishment, Jackson described how Limbert had first been startled at the proposition, but agreed once Jackson reassured him that 'he would receive a very adequate rental and rehearsal cut to allow him to use his Super Talkie machinery' and with the condition that 'all printing carried the phrase, "in association with"' (Conolly, 2002, 173).

The Malvern Festival has received scant critical attention in the past. The limited scholarship that exists, however, offers vivid examples of this encroachment of modernist ideals on accounts of twentieth-century theatre history; these accounts emphasise the value in pursuing aesthetically and politically radical work and position this pursuit in opposition to commercial interests. Critics presented narratives of Jackson and Limbert's nine years co-managing the Festival as a time in which — in accordance with Jackson's evaluation — the Festival struggled between a model emphasizing financial profit and another insisting on the artistic quality of the productions with the latter presented as the superior model. Thomas C. Kemp, dramatic editor for *The Birmingham Post*, whose history of the Birmingham Rep begins with a foreword penned by Jackson, criticizes Limbert as a businessman with little interest in theatre of ostensible 'real' artistic value. In a review of

the Festival published in 1943 Kemp wrote: 'Mr. Limbert has announced that he intends to revive the Festival. Is Malvern to become a shop window for London, or is it to be a discriminating selection from the tested as well as the tried?' (1943, 37). Similarly, Vivian Elliot uses interviews with a number of performers of the Festival including Eileen Beldon and Murray to present a glorified account of the years in which Jackson was involved. Although Elliot discusses the financial struggles of the Festival, she identifies the first few seasons as an 'artistic' and 'social' success largely due to Jackson's policies (1983, 212).

The correspondence below undermines these wholly laudatory evaluations, challenging the existing narrative about the Festival. What follows highlights the contradictions between the not-for-profit-motive publicly advocated by Shaw and Jackson with the nature of their involvement with the venture and the reality of the Malvern Festival. I use the letters firstly to reveal the conflicting models pursued by Jackson and Limbert through a focus on two key points of tension: the target audience and repertoire of the Festival. I then consider how the disagreements immediately preceding Jackson's departure in 1937 reflected differing viewpoints on theatre as well as a wider struggle for control, refuting the views proposed in earlier scholarship on the Festival. I conclude by exploring the Festival's final years to analyse Shaw's interventions in these debates; he, like Jackson, emphasised the artistic achievements of the Festival over its monetary worth despite growing concerns in Malvern regarding the Festival's financial sustainability.

These conflicts in perceptions and narratives around the Malvern Festival are significant as they have broader implications for theatre historiography; they highlight the persistence of a problematic binary in accounts of theatre history. In *New Readings in Theatre History*, Jackie Bratton complicates binary assumptions that emphasize 'commercialised entertainment is the Other of the art of theatre' to argue that this thinking 'interacts significantly with the historiography of theatre' (2003, 8). Cochrane traces the origins of this binary logic to the 'modernist intervention' which began to gather momentum from the 1880s onwards; radical campaigners like Archer, Barker and Shaw emphasised theatre as a medium for social reform, seeking drama that was 'intellectually and/or aesthetically avant-garde'. In Cochrane's view, accounts of twentieth-century theatre history since produced follow these 'modernist ideals'. This approach impacts theatre historiography in two ways: 'Not only does this skew the narrative away from the experience of community audiences, but it also fails to acknowledge the material circumstances that control the lives of the majority of jobbing theatre-workers and artists' (2011, 54).

Events in Malvern support Bratton and Cochrane's arguments. First, they demonstrate the ways in which Shaw and Jackson — and early proponents of modernism more broadly — constructed this binary logic narrative, framing their theatrical endeavours as pursuing purely artistic interests. Second, the letters undermine these public stances; they reveal the inadequacies of this binary logic in sustaining long-term theatrical initiatives or reflecting the nature of the involvement of those perpetuating this narrative.

Audience

Jackson and Limbert often clashed over their differing viewpoints on the target audience of the Festival. In a letter dated 22 October 1934, Limbert recommended extending the duration of the Festival from four to six weeks — a suggestion that Jackson did not consider seriously. Limbert wrote to Jackson's General Manager, Cyril Phillips (Sir Barry

Jackson Archive):

I feel this will not be the view of Sir Barry as, when in the course of conversation this morning, I ventured the opinion that the surprise of last year's festival was the success of the fourth week, he, in reply rather gave me the impression that he felt the success of that extra week was in the nature of perhaps chance or a fluke.

I do NOT agree.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Malvern Festival operated on a 'true' repertory system; several productions rotated over the span of three weeks. In line with the logic underpinning the long-run system in the West End, Limbert aimed to exploit the success of the productions, arguing that satisfying public demand for the plays justified extending the duration of the Festival. Limbert's desire to prolong the Festival also reflected his interest in attracting a more general public in addition to the 'regular festival pilgrims'. In the same letter, he stated: 'All through I fought for that extra week — as you know — being confident that the impetus of the early weeks with their regular Malvern Festival pilgrims bring forth a new and more general public for such later weeks as remain in the season'. Jackson, who in his words had scheduled the Festival in the theatrical 'off-season' in order to attract American audiences, consistently rejected such proposals (*Observer*, January 27, 1929). Through Phillips, he dismissed a request in 1930 to bring the Festival date forward by insisting that later in the month would be 'useless for overseas visitors', confirming that he was fully satisfied with the 'regular Malvern Festival pilgrims' (29 October 1930).

Limbert's interest in attracting a 'new' and 'more general public' to the Festival was also reflected in his marketing plans, over which he clashed with Jackson. Limbert regularly experienced difficulties in making announcements for the Festival and publishing publicity material. In December 1934, for example, he insisted on the significance of making early announcements regarding the plans for the 1935 season, warning: 'Meanwhile, quite a number of people, seeing no announcements concerning the Festival, are coming to the conclusion there is not going to be one'. Limbert's struggle with Jackson and representatives of the Birmingham Rep regarding marketing resulted in a letter to Phillips (5 June 1935) where Limbert called for 'a policy of publicity'. For Limbert, publicity was crucial as the Festival had suffered a reduction in bookings, and he feared that the Festival was failing to attract new visitors: 'My real worry, as I have told you, is that the bookings we are receiving are, in the main, only from old patrons — there is little new blood'. Jackson's rejection of 'flamboyant publicity' was also a feature of his management of the Birmingham Rep in which he maintained a 'defiantly austere artistic policy' that preceded all other concerns (Kemp, 1943, 73).

Jackson, as with many others associated with the 'Modernist project', 'favoured an intellectual elite' as the target audience for his ventures (Bratton, 2003, 68). He considered a visit to the Malvern Festival a pilgrimage; as with the Festivals in Bayreuth and Salzburg on which Jackson modelled his venture, the Malvern Festival also 'demanded travel' and possessed 'high art appeal' (Kennedy, 2000, 4). The adverts for the Festival reflected this confluence between economic and cultural capital amongst the audience. This promotional material described the audience as 'town dwellers' (*Manchester Guardian*, June 10, 1932) and referred to Malvern as a 'haven for all tired people' (*Manchester*

Guardian, June 19, 1929). The Malvern Festival appealed to an international metropolitan elite who could afford travelling to Malvern for a quasi-religious experience of spiritual cleansing facilitated through a diet of intellectual drama performed amidst a rural setting.

This pursuit of an economically and socially distinct target audience coupled with Jackson's emphasis on innovation in the Festival's offerings presented the two — high public interest and the artistic value of the productions — as in conflict. This echoed earlier criticisms of the long-run system in which the likes of Shaw and Barker presented the lengthy runs of a production due to popular appeal as the opposite to experimentation. Through these elitist and exclusionary attitudes masqueraded as idealism, these individuals disregarded and in some ways aimed to conceal the material conditions of theatre. They were, however, acutely aware of such circumstances, as reflected in the concerns around the reduction in bookings in Malvern of which Jackson had been firmly warned.

Repertoire

Alongside their disagreements over the Festival's target audience, Limbert and Jackson also clashed over its repertoire. For Limbert, one of the most significant attractions of the Festival was its connection to Shaw; a Shaw premiere was sure to guarantee press interest. On 6 December 1934, and thus following the three seasons in which Jackson presented a range of lesser-known plays and only one play by Shaw, *Too True to be Good*, Limbert expressed his delight to Phillips at the prospect of the Festival including three Shaw plays: a production of *Fanny's First Play*, the English premiere of *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* and the world premiere of *The Millionairess*. He insisted, 'here we stand on safe ground'. Limbert's emphasis on Shaw as a major contributor to the Festival is also evident in an accompanying film festival that Limbert organized in 1931 and opened with Shaw's first talkie, *How he Lied to her Husband*. The next year saw the premiere of a full-length talkie of *Arms and the Man*. Following Jackson's departure in 1937, Limbert once again attempted to revive the Festival's connection to Shaw that had gradually faded over the previous seasons. During Limbert's time in management, a number of Shavian plays were staged as part of the Festival: *Saint Joan* (1938), world premieres of *Geneva* (1938) and *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939), a play which reappeared in the final 1949 season alongside *The Apple Cart* and the English premiere of *Buoyant Billions*.

Jackson and Limbert also disagreed on the Festival's emphasis on classical plays. In 1938, Limbert presented a repertoire solely composed of new plays with the intention of then transferring the productions to the West End. In the *Festival Book* for the 1938 season, Limbert outlined a change in direction for the Festival:

Our fare this year will stand comparison with anything presented on previous occasions, but — above and beyond that — it constitutes a further landmark in the history of the Festival by its inclusion of five entirely new works.

Hitherto while programmes have been Shavian, or chronological, or modern,

they have never contained more than two plays not performed anywhere else (11).

This season of the Festival included world premieres of plays by contemporary writers such as Priestley (*Music at Night*), Lord Dunsany (*Alexander*), and Bridie (*The Last Trump*) in addition to Shaw's *Geneva*. The following season in 1939, the Festival included five new plays alongside the world premiere of Shaw's *In Good King Charles's Golden Days: What They Say* (Bridie), *The Professor from Peking* (H. I. Hsuing), *Old Master* (Alexander Knox), *Big Ben* (Evadne Price & Ruby Miller) and *Dead Heat* (Robert Vansittart). In a letter to Shaw dated 19 June 1948, Jackson heavily criticized Limbert's focus on the West End as he claimed that the possibility of presenting a venture composed solely of new plays marked the end for the Festival: 'Directly I heard that Malvern — perhaps on Bridie's suggestion for he had proposed to me a festival devoted to six original plays — was to be turned into a shop-window for the possible exploitation of at least one play in the West End, I knew that the end was in sight' (Conolly, 2002, 187).

While there was some validity to Jackson's criticism — none of the plays included succeeded in making an impression outside of Malvern — this narrative, which presents Jackson's motivations as purely artistic and in conflict with Limbert's financial interests, conceals significant aspects of Jackson's involvement with the Festival. At the heart of such disagreements was also a struggle for control as Jackson attempted to retain the Festival's connection to the Birmingham Rep, an association through which he could gain significant financial returns. Thus, the Festival's repertoire was directly connected to Jackson's theatrical endeavours in Birmingham and London. Jackson's playhouses were interconnected and often plays from one theatre would reach others. Jackson criticised Limbert, who as a co-producer of the Festival, considered transferring Malvern productions to London playhouses; however, Jackson himself was happy and willing to use the reception of plays in Malvern as a barometer for their likely success elsewhere, transferring plays between Malvern, Birmingham and London. For instance, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* by Rudolf Besier, premiered in the second season in 1930, and was then transferred to Birmingham before reaching Jackson's Queen's Theatre in London for an extended run. Shaw's *The Apple Cart*, the attraction of the 1929 season, was also performed in Birmingham before beginning its long run at the Queen's, which lasted for 285 performances, on 17 September 1929 (Conolly, 2002, 45). Although some of the premieres at Malvern reached Birmingham and London, Birmingham became the primary location for new plays to open before transferring to other theatres: J. C. Trewin argues that 'Malvern joined London as another outlier for the Birmingham Repertory' (1963, 100).

A comparison of the repertoire of Malvern and the Birmingham Rep supports Trewin's statement: plays such as *On the Rocks* (Shaw), *Like the Clandestine Marriage* (David Garrick and George Colman), *Jane Eyre* (Helen Jerome), *The Brontes of Haworth Parsonage* (John Davison), and *Lady Precious Stream* (S. I. Hsiung) had all been performed in the spring of 1936 in Birmingham before reaching Malvern that summer. Although Jackson criticised Limbert's emphasis on the West End, he also benefitted from the exchange and transfer of plays between the regions and London. Jackson's own engagement with theatre in the capital demonstrates, as I have argued elsewhere, that London provided a cultural, creative and economic hub that could not be entirely ignored by the theatre maker (2018, 50). Thus, despite Jackson's claims to the contrary, assertions which previous scholars of the Festival have emphasized, the aims and policies pursued by the co-managers were not clearly distinguishable.

A Struggle for Control

This struggle for control intensified following the 1935 season and finally led to Jackson ceasing his association in 1937; a study of these conflicts further undermines Jackson's reflections that are the foundations to existing narratives explaining the development of the Festival. Throughout his time as co-manager, Jackson complained about the various inadequacies of the theatre as a venue. Although these complaints are substantiated by the Ministry of Health's ultimatum in 1947 that the town must refurbish the theatre or cancel plans for any future festivals, the correspondence demonstrates that Jackson often used his concerns with this building to justify his requests for autonomous control of the venture (*Malvern Gazette*, October 11, 1947). As Jackson was required to rent the playhouse in Malvern, his situation in managing the Festival was significantly different to his position at the Birmingham Rep where he owned the theatre and had ultimate control and influence in all decisions made. Underpinning Jackson's apprehensions about issues with the playhouse in Malvern, including the lack of ventilation or accommodation for scenery was a wish to increase his authority over the Festival and in turn curb Limbert's influence.

The most vivid example of Jackson's unhappiness with Limbert, and the rates charged for the theatre is demonstrated in Jackson's letter to the Malvern District Council on 16 December 1936. In this letter, in which Jackson identified 'the financial aspect' and the 'comfort of the audience' (which included 'accommodation for scenery, properties and personnel connected with the stage') as obstacles to the success of the Festival, he also made indirect references to Limbert and his role. Firstly, Jackson insisted that although the Festival was bringing income to the town, he had suffered a loss of £800, and 'unless some very material readjustments of finance can be agreed upon, I do not propose to incur such a risk again'. Furthermore, Jackson also referred to the state of the playhouse and its potential as a 'theatre for a dramatic festival of world-wide repute'. With this in mind, Jackson criticised the playhouse's lack of accommodation in addition to the comfort of the audience for which 'equally drastic improvements are essential'. Jackson's complaints about the building continued in 1936 as he eventually declared it insufficient and beyond repair for his purpose. Jackson ended his letter by once again drawing attention to his financial loss and the gain of others from the Festival:

In conclusion, the Festival having become more or less established, largely through the efforts of myself and my staff, I feel that those who have benefited materially during the past years should be able to overcome what are insuperable difficulties in the way of my future participation.

Here, Jackson was referring to the residents of Malvern whom he believed had gained from the income brought by the Festival. Jackson's comments also indicate that Limbert as the lessee of the theatre had made a profit while Jackson had incurred a loss.

Jackson's assertion that only Limbert and the people of Malvern gained from the Festival is highly contestable for a number of reasons. Firstly, as discussed earlier, Jackson often transported all scenery, costumes, and props used in the performances at Malvern

when transferring complete productions to other theatre venues in Birmingham and London. This is a point to which a member of the Malvern Council referred in 1948 when insisting that Jackson had made a profit of £50,000 after transferring *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* to London (*Malvern Gazette*, April 17, 1948). This correspondence demonstrates that Limbert was also affected when the Festival suffered a financial loss as he wrote to Jackson on 6 December 1934: 'Last week at Malvern was a success artistically, but financially — well the total receipts amounted to 88.15.7., which put me square on the company's and the Author's fees — but left me a little cold where orchestra, theatre rent rates, light, heats, staff, front of house, stage staff, etc. ad nauseam were concerned!!'. Finally, there is evidence that the Festival offered little potential for financial benefit to Malvern. Indeed, since its establishment in 1928, the Malvern Theatre and its ability to produce tangible profit for the town had been a topic of much heated debate. The Malvern Council purchased the Assembly Halls and adjoining Gardens in Malvern for £17,000 each in 1927 in order to pave the way for the construction of a new playhouse to rent to theatre managers. The Council then commissioned drastic changes to be made to the Assembly Halls: the auditorium floor was raked, a circle was added, and the proscenium arch was widened. Furthermore, a stage tower was erected and a new entrance for the public was built (Morice, 1978). The Council's decision to establish a new theatre, however, was met with strong local opposition in Malvern as many questioned the money spent on the project, leading to a public inquiry in which the Council was accused of profligacy. This local opposition extended to the Festival; many in Malvern questioned the financial benefits of the venture for the town. The correspondent for the *Malvern Gazette* referred to these sentiments when reporting on the first season, writing that Malvern was selected as the location for such a festival by a 'small group of people' and that the Festival was 'thrust upon Malvern whether it wanted it or not' (*Malvern Gazette*, September 6, 1929).

Jackson's insistence that financial loss was a major factor contributing to his uncertain future in Malvern is further undermined by events in 1936. Amid rising personal disputes and financial difficulties due to the losses incurred in the 1936 season, a 1937 season of the Festival appeared uncertain. Limbert and Jackson both presented possible solutions for remedying the situation. Limbert offered a guarantee of £500 towards the 1937 season, an offer Jackson firmly rejected in a letter to W. J. C. Kendall on 19 November 1936: 'If Limbert guarantees £500 towards next year's working he naturally wants some control over the expenditure, and admitting this, there is no reason why all individuals who it is proposed should augment this guarantee should not also wish to have some control'. Jackson's decision to reject Limbert's contribution towards the Festival expenses reflects his reluctance in allowing any extension of Limbert's control over this venture. Instead, Jackson proposed that the Council 'approach the lessee and rent the theatre', which would effectively halt any direct dealings between the Festival and Limbert as Jackson would then rent the theatre from the Council. It is unclear how this would reduce the cost of the Festival but Jackson insisted:

I assure you that the questions raised have had my careful thought and I see no way other than a drastic re-arrangement of terms with a fixed rental of the theatre, leaving me unhampered as to its conduct. If the Festival is to be continued, I must be given a greater rather than a more complicated control.

Jackson's reasoning behind this solution rather undermines his previous claims of experiencing a loss in Malvern and suggests that underlying such claims was in fact a

stronger desire for autonomous control over the Festival, with financial concerns at times merely used as an excuse. In a letter to Shaw on 13 March 1939, which immediately followed his abandonment of the Festival, Jackson offered his perhaps most vivid expression of such demands:

Through circumstances over which I had no control my daemon has been able to go his way with a loose rein. In consequence I should have imagined that those drawing some sort of income from the stage would have argued in this wise:- Here is a hare brained individual who only materialises once in many generations; let us be thankful he has happened in ours; let us exert every power to avoid awakening him from his dreams; although he is doing things for us today he may be able to accomplish even more tomorrow and as we are always wealthier through his sleep walkings it behoves us to be wary how we tread (Conolly, 2002 102).

Of course, Jackson's relentless willingness to accept financial risk was extraordinary and he often fronted the bill; for instance, the Birmingham Rep's *Back to Methuselah* resulted in a loss of £2,500 but Jackson transferred this production to London regardless (Holroyd, 1998, 510). As Jackson's dealings with the Malvern Festival demonstrate, however, this is not a complete and accurate picture of his activities. Jackson's assertion that he pursued purely selfless interests in his involvement with the Malvern Festival was a fabrication.

These conflicts in Malvern ultimately resulted in Jackson's departure from the Festival in 1937. In a letter dated 9 June 1937, Limbert wrote of his 'regret' at Jackson's decision to not use the Malvern Theatre. He continued by expressing his desire to 'record in writing' his offer 'to consider the question of alteration and/or reconstruction to the present Malvern Theatre', to which Jackson had replied by insisting that 'he did not consider it possible to make such alterations to the Malvern Theatre as would commend its suitability to him for future Malvern Festivals that he might be interested in'.^{iv} Limbert's decision to meet Jackson's conditions for refurbishing the theatre had arrived too late, as by then Jackson had decided against continuing his cooperation with Limbert and was no longer willing to consider terms for a new deal.

The struggles in Malvern reveal a series of tensions between 'enablement and control' that echo some of the consequences of state funding emerging in the late 1940s through the Arts Council of Great Britain. The endeavours of proponents of the New Theatre to secure state subsidy was finally producing results but with some unexpected repercussions. The recipients of funding were now more capable of 'autonomy and independence' in some respects but they were also simultaneously tied 'ever more closely to the central benefactor' (Cochrane, 2011, 146). Radical campaigners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presented funding — from the state or wealthy benefactors — as the only way of liberating theatre from the dictates of the box office. As their own involvement with theatre demonstrates, funding could present equally challenging limitations, supposedly liberating those involved from one set of expectations but binding them tightly to others. This correspondence shows that Jackson was often unwilling to negotiate with Limbert and the Malvern Council as he felt that his financial support of the initiative must guarantee him complete control of the Festival. Such an

arrangement left little possibility for compromise and a resolving of the tensions that ensued.

A Post-War Festival

The years following Jackson's departure are a time in which Shaw intervened in these debates partly pursuing — as with Jackson's involvement with the Festival — personal benefits. Despite Limbert's changes in policy, the Festival continued to struggle to attract sufficient public interest and the prospect of a revival of the Festival following the end of the war in 1945 was met with resistance in Malvern both from local residents and members of the Malvern Council. In comparison with some of Jackson's lesser-known classics, Shaw's work provided a financially safer option; however, Shaw's later plays were also far from becoming box office hits. This is the case beyond Malvern: Conolly notes, in November 1948 the authorities in Stratford refused to allow Limbert to produce *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* at the Memorial Theatre, insisting that they did not believe Shaw could attract audiences and thus preferred 'lighter plays' in the theatrical off-season (Conolly, 2002, 189). In a time when Shaw struggled to see his works staged and as the prospect of public funding seemed unlikely, Shaw attempted to mediate between Jackson and Limbert in order to secure the revival of the Festival. On 16 June 1948, Shaw wrote to Jackson: 'What would suit me best personally would be you putting down the £13,000 to repair the Malvern theatre, and resume the Festival there' (Conolly, 2002, 185). Jackson refused Shaw's many requests, based on his experiences with the Malvern Council and Limbert, replying three days later: 'Nothing but complete demolition and re-building will ever make the place worthy of the seed we sowed together. Even if this gigantic task were achieved, the question of control would arise and this would be attended with all the thorns and dangers [...] which appear to be part and parcel of the job' (Conolly, 2002, 186).

Shaw also participated in growing debates in Malvern around the economic benefits of the Festival. In these interventions, he emphasised — in accordance with the narrative thus far outlined — the artistic achievements of the venture over its monetary worth, concealing his own personal motivations. The Malvern Council was understandably concerned about the financial consequences of the revival of the Festival for the town in the post-war era. The situation for supporters of the Festival was complicated by the Ministry of Health's demand that refurbishments valued at £25,000 be made to the theatre ahead of any potential future Festival seasons. Once again the value of the Festival to the everyday lives of the people of Malvern was at the forefront of the debates. In 1947 a member of the council, G. T. Baldwin, insisted that seventy per cent of the town were against the Festival and that 'in this time of national emergency better use should be found for timber, steel and labour' (*Malvern Gazette*, November 8, 1947). Shaw directly entered such debates when he wrote in 1948 condemning the position of the people of Malvern in a similar tone to his previous comments on audiences in London: 'Are the citizens going to throw it away just to appease those ratepayers who are too small-minded to appreciate its value, as they do that of American cinema films and hares?' (*Malvern Gazette*, April 3, 1948).

The attitudes of Shaw and Jackson towards the local community of Malvern reflect their disregard for another significant element required for the long-term sustainability of a theatrical venture. Events in Malvern demonstrate the importance of the establishment of strong ties between theatres and their local communities and bodies. Many commercial managers in this period were aware of this as they endeavoured to 'nurture good relations with the community that supplied the paying audiences' (Cochrane, 2011, 64).

Contrastingly, Jackson and Shaw ignored and alienated the local population in Malvern by seeking a visiting elite as their audiences, and responding to concerns around the Festival's finances by emphasising the aesthetic qualities of the productions to the very people that were ironically excluded from the performances. Not only did this policy not make financial sense, it also ignored a key aspect of a theatre's function. As reflected in the work of many local theatres today, a playhouse is more than just a symbol of civic pride, it also serves a social purpose to engage with and respond to local concerns.

In a letter to Shaw written on 6 April 1948, Jackson insisted that the Malvern Festival had resulted in 'the association of two individuals by nature as remote from each other as Uranus and Earth' (Conolly, 2002, 173). The involvement of both Jackson and Shaw with the Festival, however, indicates many similarities between these two individuals and Limbert. Jackson denied any financial gains made through his management of the Festival, but it is undeniable that the possibility of transferring complete productions from Malvern to Birmingham and later London presented a lucrative financial proposition. Similarly, for Shaw, the Festival also presented opportunities for personal gain as it provided a platform for the performance of his later plays at a time in which Shaw was struggling to stage his works. In accordance with his views as expressed in the 1890s that 'as a prudent man, I always make friends with able desperadoes, knowing that they will seize the citadel when the present garrison retires', Shaw found it worthwhile to work with both Jackson and Limbert for the opportunities that they could offer in providing venues for his plays (Shaw, 1932, 19-20). Jackson and Shaw's emphasis on their involvement with the Festival as purely based on a selfless interest in theatre, as the correspondence demonstrates, at times fails to correlate with the reality of the Malvern Festival. Their rejection of monetary interest in theatre was unrealistic both for its failure to sustain the Festival and because Shaw and Jackson were also pursuing financial profits despite their denunciation of the figure of the opportunistic businessman in theatre.

The failures of Jackson and Shaw, and more broadly the proponents of the New Theatre, to privately adhere to their public condemnations of the pursuit of profitmaking in theatre reflects the significance of the very material conditions of theatre they attempted to disregard. As Cary M. Mazer argues, proponents of the New Theatre followed a fundamentally flawed model that disregarded the status of theatre production as a 'form of industrial production', pursuing what they wanted theatre to be rather than what it was (2004, 210). It is not surprising then that the Malvern Festival became entangled with the same debates and financial difficulties encountered in similar ventures earlier in the century. Despite the revival of the Festival in 1949 following the Council's agreement to undertake the necessary refurbishments, by 1950, both models of funding the theatre — either through the Malvern Council or a private benefactor — had failed. The Malvern Council was no longer prepared to offer a guarantee fund to the Festival and Shaw's efforts in securing Jackson's financial assistance had failed to produce any results. Their decision marked another disappointment in the establishment of a New Theatre.

Despite the many failures of those involved with the Malvern Festival to resolve some of these conflicts and continue the venture as an annual event, the Festival can be viewed to have influenced future initiatives. The Malvern Festival anticipated the post-war Festival boom in Britain that includes one of the world's most well-known festivals today, the *Edinburgh* Festival. It also possesses a direct descendent in the Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada; established in 1962 on the Malvern model, it continues to present plays by Shaw and his contemporaries. Moreover, regardless of the setbacks detailed above, the

collective work of regional theatres would gradually weaken the West End's monopoly of British theatre and in many ways revolutionize the country's theatrical landscape. These achievements and the writings of influential figures like Shaw and Jackson have resulted in historical accounts of experimental ventures of this period that present narratives of success and progress. Events in Malvern, as reflected in the correspondence analysed, offer a more complicated picture: alongside these noteworthy achievements in staging experimental and innovative work, they also reveal a series of failures – failures that require acknowledging in order to offer a fuller picture of the period.

ⁱ In addition to inventive lighting and scenic capabilities, the playhouse only seated 464 people to provide a then uncommonly intimate theatre experience.

ⁱⁱ In a brief biography of Limbert, the Festival book for the 1929 season emphasised the co-founder's achievements in the military; before his involvement with theatre, he served with the Bedfordshire Regiment between 1914 and 1919.

ⁱⁱⁱ All the correspondence used is taken from the same location unless stated otherwise: The Barry Jackson Archive. The Library of Birmingham. MS 978, Box 23. Last names only will be employed after first reference.

^{iv} This letter is addressed to Norton – a first name is not given.

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