

Obituary

Ewan MacColl

EWAN MACCOLL, who died on 22 October 1989, was a man of many talents, and all of us who are committed to the propagation of an oppositional culture and to popular performance owe him a great deal. In the early 'thirties he began his work with the Red Megaphones of Salford, an agit-prop street theatre. Through his involvement in radio documentaries which were being pioneered in Manchester at that time, he met Joan Littlewood, and together they assembled a number of companies, culminating in the formation of Theatre Workshop after the end of the Second World War.

In the 'fifties, Ewan MacColl split from Theatre Workshop and concentrated his energies on song-writing and singing. His theatrical experience, his understanding of the documentary form, and his love and study of the ballad tradition and its close relationship to the vernacular language came together in his work on the 'radio ballads' with Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger – sound collages which not only revolutionized the radio documentary form but which heavily influenced the theatre documentaries which followed.

In the mid- and late-'sixties, his work stayed mainly in the area of the folk-song revival, but he found time, with Seeger and Parker, to run a series of satirical, political revues at Christmas-time in the Merlin's Cave pub in north London. In this work he was again ahead of the field, and in the forefront of oppositional popular culture.

Behind MacColl's work was a formidable scholarship and a commitment to what he described as the 'craftsmanship' approach. His grasp of the techniques of popular performance – and in particular the use of language throughout all ages – was devastating to the dilettante, as was his ability seemingly to reduce the creative act to the level of practical technique. The tape-recorder and the microphone, he thus insisted, were instruments, not simply technical tools: you had to know how to use them in

order to capture experience or to express your thoughts and feelings through them.

The same attitude informed the use of the body and the human voice. The singer or actor should consider their physical facilities as an instrument through which a 'tune' was played. Performance was not an egotistic exhibition, but rather an anonymous enabling of the voices and experiences of past tradition to be articulated afresh. The body was an instrument which must be understood, trained, and tuned to as near perfection as possible to enable this to happen.

There seemed no obstacle which he considered insurmountable: everything was a matter of understanding what was needed, learning the skill, and then doing it. This combination of infinite vision and range of reference with the laconic, undemonstrative style in which he expressed it did not always endear him to people, and working with him was both a daunting and exhilarating experience.

Fortunately, in the last years of his life he set down his experience of the Red Megaphones in the book *Left Theatres*. But his work with Theatre Workshop as a dramatist remains to be critically assessed. With Peggy Seeger, he has left us a treasury of folk tales, humour, and social history collected on tape from the Stewarts of Blairgowrie. His songs and the recordings of his singing remain to delight us.

We in *New Theatre Quarterly* have many reasons to regret his passing. We have lost a friend and a mentor. Many years ago we recorded a long interview with him, for the old *Theatre Quarterly*, on the early days of Theatre Workshop, of which a first instalment appeared in TQ 9 (1973). The unpublished transcript of the second tape begins with a typical MacColl laconic bombshell:

By this time we'd met Chico [Marx] frequently and

we used to have long talks about the commedia dell'arte with him. ... Chico used to come fairly frequently and play at the Prince of Wales, and then he'd come over to Felixstowe, if we were playing there, and spend the Sunday talking. ...

At the end of the interview, as time was running out, Ewan strayed into an area not on the agenda. Drawing on the work he had done on actuality for the radio ballads, he began to lay out a theory of theatrical language, relating the structure of the vernacular to Laban's movement studies and the effects of social change upon the drama.

What most writers that I have read in the last three or four years do, is to start from a pre-conceived notion of what language is, of how men and women express ideas and how they express emotion. This concept they usually arrive at during the very earliest period of their decision to become a writer, around seventeen or eighteen. They start off with a single concept of what language is, and that lasts them through their life. Very rarely do they say, 'Does this concept bear any relation to the truth?' Generally speaking it doesn't. What they have opted for is a private code, and if you can get a small, or even a large, group of people to understand your code, then you become a practising literary gent. You become a writer. But the fact is that language, and concepts of language, are constantly changing, with each new generation. ...

On the tape he went on to suggest an interactive

process by which a writer might study the formulation of sentences and phrases, the use of metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech, in the society around him or her. Without discounting the development of craftsmanship and the particular viewpoint of the writer, this process of study and reflection would make the creation of drama, and consequently theatre, communal.

By the time the tape runs out, he seemed close to formulating a theoretical analysis of the use of language in the great popular periods of the theatre, and pointing the way towards restoring that dimension to a theatre like ours, doomed in an atomized society to search for some form or content with which to attract and politicize the mass popular audience, whether in the wider or narrower sense of 'politicize'. We tried on a number of occasions to persuade him to elaborate on these ideas, but he was either ill or he chose to spend the times between illness on his own work or singing.

Ewan MacColl never lost his belief in the power of communal action to effect political change. He gave time, energy, and talent unstintingly to supporting the cause of the oppressed. This was the nourishing source of his art, and, by extension, all art for him. A great talent and a wealth of experience and understanding has been taken from us: but he has left us clues and signposts to the directions we might take to continue the work.

CLIVE BARKER