



The John Godber Company and Theatre Royal Wakefield have been co-producing work since 2011. Below, to accompany our 2016 production of *Shafted!* John Godber talks about his personal relationship to the piece, including how and why it differs stylistically to other Godber productions. You will find this useful if you are studying the OCR 'A' Level Performance Studies curriculum (where Godber is a featured artist) or if you have a general interest in the performing arts or the work of Godber.

***Shafted!* By John Godber**

Practitioners and style

Shafted! covers thirty years in the lives of Dot and Harry, a miner and his wife, and it is performed by two actors. Act One goes forward in time, and Act Two goes backwards in time, so in a way the play meets in the middle. Often when writers are covering such a wide historical span they will try and use direct audience address to indicate the different years, enabling the audience to know which year they are in. In *Shafted!* I took the decision to present the play in a series of filmic realistic scenes, and to have no direct audience address, unlike in my more famous plays, *Bouncers*, *Teechers* and *Shakers* etc. This means that each scene has to set a mood, place and tone very quickly.

I was influenced by the writings of the German theatre especially Buchner and Brecht, but the German plays of the 1970's/80's and in particular by a play called *Stallerhof*, which was written by Franz Xavier Kroetz, have influenced my style here. *Stallerhof* is presented in a series of very short, realistic, and often brutal scenes. I became aware of this and other German writing, whilst studying for an MA in Theatre Arts at Leeds University before going on to read for a Ph.D. at Leeds too, under the tutelage of German theatre expert Professor Michael Pattison.

Further influences on *Shafted!* are Edward Bond's seminal play, *Saved*; here again the play is presented as a series of realistic scenes, which when viewed together create a depressingly realistic view of working class life in Britain. In plays of this nature the audience are voyeurs watching "real life" described to them on stage. In a way this is a style contradictory to *Bouncers*, *Teechers* and *Shakers*.

In order to help the audience follow the time-line of the play I've employed a slide show, or captions, to inform the audience what location the play is in, and which year. It is clear and simple: Upton 1985. This lends an almost documentary realism and authenticity to the play. This authenticity is very important, and is why I and my real life wife, Jane Thornton, decided to portray the characters on-stage. We wanted to create a real relationship on stage, and I wanted Harry to look like he could have actually worked at a mine.

I've also taken a theatrical leap by using just one stage image, i.e. the garden gate, and suggesting that in Upton and or Wakefield, the garden gate remains the same. The gate can remain onstage and represent different gates in different locations, just by changing the caption before each scene starts.

Since *Shafted!* is realistic, it demands very fast costume changes, and unlike my more famous plays there is no multiple role playing. So whilst the actors may age, and then get younger, they are never asked to play other characters.

It is widely known that I have been influenced by Bertolt Brecht, but there is little evidence – apart from the use of captions – of Brecht's influence on this play, except perhaps that Brecht was known as a hugely political playwright, director and theatre practitioner.

Set/Costumes/Music

In all of my work things appear deceptively simple. Four hand bags in *Bouncers*, just a rugby ball and weights in *Up N Under*, and so is the case with *Shafted!* A garden gate in Act One and nothing but a few odd personal props in Act Two.

The music throughout the play is locked in time, even though the play comes right up to 2016, each scene is punctuated with music from 1984/5, it is as if the characters remember that period of time so clearly, since it was to have a massive effect on their lives.

Costumes of the period reflect the changing fashions and also the ageing of the characters. As with the acting this level of authenticity is very important when attempting to stay true to the play and the period.

Whilst essentially the stage is an empty space – referencing Brook's essays of the same title – there are other iconic elements which dress the set, add to the atmosphere without detracting from the purity of the "empty space". Hanging above the action are a number of miners lamps, and at each side of the stage there are

flats with brickwork suggestive of council houses or mine work's buildings. These icons don't get in the way of the action, but try to help define and dress the stage picture.

The back wall in many theatre's will be kept bare to give the suggestion that this is unquestionably a piece of theatre, but it is theatre without any illusions, any fancy tricks or where the audience aren't expected to work. In fact reading the captions and following the short scenes means the audience has to stay tuned in to the story throughout the play.

Politics

As the son of a miner, and the first person in his family to go to University it is not surprising that my plays are full of politics, and generally, the politics of the left.

After the Miners' Strike, when many pits were closed and the media circus went away from the mining communities, people like Dot and Harry were left without work and they had to restart their lives. It wasn't easy, since there was no work in the mining areas, and what work there was, was low paid and insecure, becoming in time zero hours contracts, where employees can be dismissed very easily; leaving them with no power, and little dignity.

Whilst it is easy to see the effect of greenhouse gases on the global climate now, and by burning coal we are certainly polluting the atmosphere, at one time coal drove the whole of the British economy, and it was critical during both World Wars. At one time there were over a million miners in Britain, now there are none! The last four hundred or so men were made redundant at Christmas 2015.

Margaret Thatcher wanted to break the strength of the unions, and by confronting the miners she knew that if she won, the unions would never be as strong in Britain ever again, she believed in the power of market forces; and that policy has been encouraged by successive Conservative governments.

If industry wanted to buy coal cheaply, they could buy foreign coal; sometimes in the deeper mines, British coal was difficult to mine and therefore expensive. However, economics and people's lives do not always sit comfortably side by side. It was one thing closing the mines for economic reasons, but what about the people who no longer had any work?

Apart from each man accepting redundancy money, what did she think these men were going to do? And what did she think was going to happen to the large housing estates that had been built up around the mines?

When a large industry is wiped out, whole communities are also wiped out, the corner shops, the swimming baths, the local clubs, football teams, bingo halls. Even holiday destinations like Bridlington and Scarborough, Filey and Hornsea were affected by the closure of the mines. Where would these miners now be able to afford to go on holiday?

It has been said that the miners received good redundancy pay, but even if they did, how could they live on that money for the rest of their lives? When so many men were made redundant it meant there was a real danger of low morale, and often the sons and daughters of the miners – and some of the miners themselves – became involved with various levels of drug abuse. The social fall out of the strike, marriage split ups, drug abuse, alcoholism, homelessness, lack of self-esteem and loss of pride are all themes which are touched on in this play.

My family was directly affected by the Miners' Strike of 1984/5. My father was pro-Scargill and my uncle and aunt were anti-Scargill, both sides of the family didn't speak for some time after, and when they did they never spoke about the strike.

Some might ask why I haven't written about the strike before now. In 1984 I started to run Hull Truck Theatre Company as Artistic Director and I didn't feel comfortable writing about the strike in Hull, a City which had already had its fair share of industrial hardships; although I had written about mining in three plays; *Happy Jack*, *September in the Rain*, and the multiple award-winning *Salt of the Earth*.

There have been a number of films and plays/musicals written about the miners' strike, from *Brassed Off* to *Billy Elliot*, but I think that only I have written about how the strike has had a lasting effect on the people involved with it and on the places it took place, and in *Shafted!* I describe this effect over the last thirty years.

My view is that whilst there has been much compensation and healing of the hurt in the mining villages since the strike, there is a generation who cannot forget how their lives were ruined forever when the mines were closed. It may even be that the North in general is still trying to get over the lasting human cost of the miners' strike!

John Godber
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